

GROSSETESTE ON BEING

Robert Grosseteste is rarely mentioned as playing a role in medieval controversies over the nature of being. Yet it is to remarks on being in his commentary on the *Posterior Analytics* (*In PAn*) that John Buridan and William of Ockham appeal in support of their attacks on the distinction between being and essence. As it turns out, this commentary is not the only place in which Grosseteste considers being. There are brief discussions also in his commentary on the *Physics* (*In Phys*) and in his treatise *De veritate*.¹ They indicate that he had a definite, albeit sketchily articulated, theory of being, one with similarities, as noted below, to a theory later to be proposed by Henry of Ghent.

Grosseteste's brief account of being in these works treats being in its metaphysical, semantic, and epistemological aspects. The central claims Grosseteste makes are: (1) that for a creature to be is simply for it to depend on the first being or, in more theological terms, to be upheld by the eternal Word (Grosseteste's gloss on *Hebrews* 1: 3: "bearing all things by the word of his power"); (2) that the expression "a being" is said equivocally of God and creatures "according to prior and posterior"; and (3) that if it is to be truly known that a creature is, the mind must see that it depends on the first being.

It is plausible, and I think correct, to take Grosseteste to mean by "being" ("esse") existence, and thus to be providing an account of existence and of language about and knowledge of existence. I shall accordingly speak of existence and an existent (*ens*) in what follows. But, even given this brief summary of Grosseteste's views, it is not hard to see that if he is providing a theory of existence, the semantic and epistemological aspects of this theory appear to have a counterintuitive consequence. Thus Buridan objects that if the concept of existence as applied to creatures is that of depending on God, as Grosseteste's theory might suggest, we cannot account for the fact that children, who have no grasp of creatures' dependence on God, know that roses exist.² The same concern is also raised by Grosseteste's statement in *De veritate* that for it to be truly known that a creature exists, one must see that it depends on the first existent, God.

In order to defend the interpretation of Grosseteste as concerned to offer a theory of existence against this line of objection, I shall argue that he is offering a theoretical conception of existence arrived at through philosophical inquiry, not

an account of the ordinary meaning of the terms “exists” and “existent.” I shall argue that according to Grosseteste there is a vague general concept or meaning employed by common folk when they use the terms “exists” or “existent” of both God and creatures, one involving no reference to God. His claim that “existent” is equivocal is not a claim about the ordinary meaning of the term at all, but is about the different theoretical accounts of being to be given in the case of God and creatures. And his claim that knowledge of the being of creatures requires seeing their dependence on God is concerned with a kind of explanatory knowledge that involves these theoretical accounts, not with knowledge in a broader sense of the term according to which common folk may truly be said to know that roses exist without any awareness of a relation roses stand in to God.

2. The Metaphysical Dimension

Like other medieval thinkers, Grosseteste posits a sharp distinction between God’s existence and the existence of creatures. He makes this point in his treatise *On the Ten Commandments* when he considers the uniqueness of God. This uniqueness is expressed in the statement “I am God” in *Exodus* 20: 2 by use of the personal pronoun “I” and by use of the verb “am.” Regarding the use of “am” Grosseteste writes:

When he says “I am God,” the verb “am” is used substantially and signifies that which through itself and substantially and necessarily exists and in comparison with which other things do not exist. Hence Jerome says <in a letter> to Pope Damasus: “It is the one nature of God alone that truly exists. For that which subsists has no other source but is its own. Other created things may seem to exist, but they do not, since at some time they did not exist . . . God alone, who is eternal, that is, who has no beginning, truly is named ‘essence’.” And therefore it is also said to Moses from the bush: “I am who am,” and further “He who is sent me.” Regarding this same existence Augustine also says in *On John*: “Since you see that all these things are mutable, what is it that exists except that which transcends all things that exist in such a way that they do not exist?” But that which in this way immutably and substantially and through itself necessarily exists, is simple and one alone and can have no equal, as is fully proved elsewhere by several thinkers.³

This passage expresses a number of features of the way God exists. These features — eternity, immutability, substantiality, necessity, and per-seity — cannot possibly be true of any other thing and therefore entail God’s uniqueness. Thus alone of all things God has no beginning and is therefore eternal. He alone is immutable, susceptible to no kind of genuine change. He alone exists substantially, to exist being his very substance.⁴ He alone exists necessarily, since he cannot but exist, and through himself (*per se*), because he is his own source, as it were, of existence.

The “several thinkers” (“*pluribus*”) to whom Grosseteste refers at the end of

the passage just quoted are almost certainly thinkers from the Islamic world, for we find very similar ideas to those presented in this passage in Avicenna's *Prima philosophia* and Algazel's *Metaphysica*, an outline of Avicenna's metaphysics.⁵

The distinctive features of God's existence are such that we might not even wish to apply the verb "exists" to creatures at all. The quotations Grosseteste makes from Jerome and Augustine express this reluctance. They think that the mutability of creatures suggests that we withhold the verb "exists" of them and wish to reserve the use of this verb, at least in a strict sense, to something that of itself is immutable. In this passage Grosseteste is not quite prepared to assert with them that creatures do not exist outright, but suggests that "in comparison with God" they do not. Even so, the idea that creatures are in some sense essentially mutable, and that as a consequence *in some sense* do not exist, made a deep impression on his thought.

This is brought out most clearly in *De veritate*. In this work Grosseteste develops an analogy between the existence of creatures and the shape of water. He writes:

Water in itself is fluid and of itself has no determinate shape but is always shaped by the shape of its container. Hence this water cannot be known and seen by the mind to be cubic unless it is known and seen that the shape of its container is cubic, and unless its shaping is viewed in connection with the shape that shapes, contains and in its shaping supports the water, which of itself is fluid and as such, if it were left to itself, would fall away from this shaping. In the same way, every creature of itself, if it were left to itself, would slip back into nothing, as it is from nothing. Since then <a creature> of itself does not exist but considered solely in itself is found to be liable to slip into non-existence, where or how will it be seen that it exists, if not in connection with that which supports it so that it does not flow into non-existence and in viewing that it is supported by that? So this, it seems, is for a creature to exist: that it is upheld by the eternal Word.⁶

Grosseteste is here claiming that water of itself lacks a shape. By this he means that its shape is a purely relational feature of it. Thus, if we take some actual portion of water and consider it in itself as unrelated to other things, we will not be able to attribute a shape to it, since its having a shape is nothing more than its being contained by what intrinsically has a shape. Likewise, a creature's existence is a purely relational feature of the creature: if we take a creature and consider it in itself as unrelated to any other things, we will not be able to attribute existence to it, since its existing is nothing more than its being dependent on what exists in itself, God.

Grosseteste on Being
Neil Lewis

What is true of a creature considered in this manner as unrelated anything else, is what is true of it as it is of itself. And of itself, Grosseteste claims, a creature is apt to slip into non-existence, and thus may be said to flow rather than exist.⁷ Since of themselves creatures are apt to slip into non-existence, to see that a creature exists, one must see that it is supported by that which upholds it so that it does not slip into non-existence. This being so, Grosseteste thinks it is most plausible to identify a creature's existing with its being so upheld.

Grosseteste repeats the claim that of themselves creatures do not exist in *In Phys*, where he writes of what truly exists as "standing." Considering the Parmenidean doctrine that all things are one, he says that one *correct* interpretation of this doctrine is "that only one thing is truly and substantially an existent; the rest, as they are of themselves, flow rather than exist, and stand only by participating in the existence of what stands, and of themselves they would flow, even into nothingness."⁸

Grosseteste's reference to creatures as participating in God's existence introduces a Platonic tone into his discussion, but more often he speaks of their depending on or being upheld by God, and explains their existing as their so depending. What exactly is this dependence? It is clearly not the creature's dependence on God *for its existence*. To think this would be to miss the whole point of the theory. Creatures do not depend on God for their existence, as if existence were something they *get* from God. For if existence were something a creature received from God, then considered in itself a creature would have existence, just as if water actually received a shape — a certain non-relational property — from its container, considered in itself it would have a shape. Its container might well play a role in the causal story of how it managed to get that property, but its possession of that property, once it is received, would involve no relation to the container. Likewise, if God gave creatures existence, so that it were, as it were, a property they possessed, considered in themselves they would have existence, although God would play a causal role in the account of how they managed to get and retain that property. But Grosseteste's point is that all this talk of existence as something a creature has or receives is misguided, since it can be replaced simply by talk of the creature, God and a relation of dependence between them. For a creature to have existence just is for it to depend on God — period! It does not depend on God for its existence. As for this relation of dependence, Grosseteste says little about its nature, but Buridan plausibly takes him to have in mind a causal dependence, so that for a creature to exist is for it to be created and conserved by God.⁹

Given this conception of the relation of dependence as a relation of being created and conserved, Grosseteste's theory is similar to a theory Henry of Ghent proposes in his tenth *Quodlibet*. According to Henry:¹⁰

the being of a creature is not something really and absolutely other than the very essence of the creature and added to it so that it may actually be.

Rather, a creature itself, its own essence, by which it is that which it is, has being not insofar as it is an essence in itself and considered absolutely, but as it is considered in order and relation to the divine essence . . . and the being of existence (*esse existentiae*) belongs to it insofar as in itself without anything absolute added it is an effect of the divine essence, either directly or through the mediation of a natural agent in the sense of an efficient cause.

It is clear that Henry is consciously rejecting a conception of a creature's existence as something "absolute" added to the creature. But whether Grosseteste himself consciously proposed his account of being in opposition to a conception of being as something added to a creature — as for example, Avicenna was commonly taken to hold¹¹ — is not at all clear. There is no discussion of such an alternative conception of existence in his writings or indeed of the metaphysical distinction of being and essence it is often associated with.¹² Nevertheless, the effect of his doctrine is similar to that of Henry's in its metaphysical parsimony, and it is this feature that attracted the nominalists' attention. Leaving aside for a moment the relation of dependence itself, the fact that a creature exists requires us to posit nothing over and above the creature itself and God, on whom it depends, and in particular, requires us to posit no corresponding metaphysical composition in the creature.

Grosseteste makes this last point explicitly in *In Pan*. Commenting on Aristotle's distinction at the start of book 2 of the *Posterior Analytics* between the four questions whether S is P, why S is P, whether S is and what S is, Grosseteste notes the point in the anonymous Latin translation he using that those who ask whether S is P are "positing into number" (*ponentes in numerum* (89b25)).¹³ He appears to take this to mean that the truth of "S is P" involves a multiplicity in the subject S. He puts this in terms of Aristotle's example, the question whether the sun is eclipsed:¹⁴

When we ask one thing of another, as for example whether the sun is eclipsed, this question posits into number. For the *ratio* and form of the thing made subject and the *ratio* and form of the thing predicated are two *rationes* and two forms ordered in the one subject, if the affirmation is true, or not ordered in the one subject, if the negation is true.

Thus, he seems to hold, the truth of the affirmation "The sun is eclipsed" requires a multiplicity of forms in the same subject, the sun.¹⁵ In contrast, the truth of affirmations of existence does not. Grosseteste writes:¹⁶

When we ask whether a thing exists, as for example whether God exists or whether a centaur exists, this question has no multiplicity of things in itself, because <in the case of God> to exist is said and understood of an

Grosseteste on Being
Neil Lewis

entirely simple thing without any multiplicity that accrues to it on account of the existence said of it. For to exist said of the first cause predicates only the utterly simple essence of the first cause, while said of other things it predicates only their ordering and dependence on the first existent, which in itself exists, and *this ordering and dependence multiplies nothing in the dependent essence*. For this reason, whether we ask whether it exists about the first existent or about a thing that depends on the first existent, this question does not posit into number.

This still leaves us to consider the relation of dependence. As the passage just quoted from *In PAn* indicates, Grosseteste does not think that this relation of dependence posits anything in the dependent essence or creature or in God upon whom it depends.

Grosseteste takes up the issue of relations in *De libero arbitrio* 8, where he is concerned with whether to posit eternal relations of God to creatures or the converse is consistent with the view that there is one eternal essence alone, God. He is accordingly concerned with the ontological commitments, as we might put it, involved in positing relations. His use of the term “essence” in this context is not explained, but it seems clear that for Grosseteste to posit X’s does not introduce any genuine addition to our ontology unless it introduces essences over and above those already admitted.

It is Grosseteste’s view that relations do not multiply essence over and above the essences of their extremities. By the essence of an extremity, Grosseteste would seem to mean that upon which a relation is founded or based. In some cases, relations between two things may be based on accidents of those things, as for example, relations of similarity may be founded on the colors of things. Colors are qualities, and Grosseteste thinks that qualities are essences, as are quantities. In this case, the claim that the relation of similarity does not multiply essence beyond that of the essences of its extremities means that it introduces nothing additional into our ontology over and above the things related and the non-relational accidents on which the relation is founded. The relation of the dependence of creatures on God, as the passage just quoted from *In PAn* indicates, introduces no essence into our ontology over and above the creature itself and God, since God and the creature are the extremities related and the relation is not founded on any accidental features of them.¹⁷

More particularly, in *De libero arbitrio* 8 Grosseteste develops an account of what is involved in predications of existence of relations. He holds that when we say a relation exists, we are considering the relation as the essence upon which it is precisely founded and that it is denominated as existing from the existence of that essence. So considered, the existence of a relation introduces no ontological commitment in addition to that of the essence on which it is founded. We can also consider relations as “the ordering of one term to the other.” Considered in this way, Grosseteste holds, the relation is neither the essence it is founded on nor is it

something other than it (*aliud*).¹⁸ Grosseteste intimates that it is improper to attribute existence to relations in this sense. It is not easy to understand these remarks. Possibly Grosseteste is trying to get across the ideas that as so considered, relations supervene on their extremes and yet are not to be identified with them, and that supervenient entities can only properly be said to exist if they are identified with what they supervene on. In any event, the import of his theory for the relation of dependence we are considering is clear. However it is considered, it introduces no additional items into our ontology — no additional essences — besides the creature itself and God.¹⁹

One further aspect of Grosseteste's metaphysical account of existence merits attention. According to Grosseteste, the dependence of creatures on the first existent involves an ordering, and thus creatures exist to a greater or lesser extent. Thus he writes in *In Phys*:²⁰

For a thing that begins, to exist is nothing other than to depend on eternal substantial existence or to be upheld by its Word, and *that which adheres more closely to it exists more and that which <adheres> less closely exists less.*

And in *In PAn*, in a passage quoted earlier, Grosseteste says that “to exist” said of creatures predicates not just their dependence on the first existent, but also *their ordering*, an apparent allusion to the same doctrine.

What does Grosseteste mean by this? There are two other references to degrees of existence in his writings from the 1220s. In *De libero arbitrio* he holds that accidents exist less than substances. This is because the categories are related “consequently or according to prior and posterior,” and thus “substance is more an existent than quantity.”²¹ He perhaps derived this idea of degrees of existence from Aristotle's *Metaphysics* 4.2, where it is held that while substances are *simpliciter*, for an accident to be is for it to be *of* a substance. A quality, for example, is not *simpliciter* but is the quality *of* a substance. Possibly, then, Grosseteste means in *In Phys* to extend this view and hold that in the Christian outlook, which includes God in addition to created substances, created substances themselves will not exist *simpliciter* but will exist in the sense that they depend on God, and their accidents will exist even less in that they are of such substances. We might well call this a matter of degrees of existence, the degrees corresponding to this ordering of dependence on God.

Even so, it would appear that this is not what Grosseteste has in mind in *In Phys* or *In PAn*. Rather, in the latter work — a work where Grosseteste expressly proposes his account of existence — he mentions an idea of degrees of existence that is closer in its content to the account of degrees of existence in *In Phys* which

is framed in terms of more or less close adherence to the first existent. The passage comes in the course of a discussion of universals. Thus Grosseteste writes:²²

a universal is not a mere figment but is something one in many, and it will be more an existent <than a particular is>, because it is more incorruptible than a particular, as it is farther away from the accidents of variable matter and nearer to the first existent (*enti primo*). But not any universal is more an existent than any particular, since the universals of natural things are existents less than each of the intelligences is.

In this passage the things that exist more are those that are more incorruptible and farther away from the “accidents of variable matter” and as such are nearer to the first existent. In this passage we do not have an ordering of God, created substances, and accidents as we did in the passage from *De libero arbitrio*, but instead an ordering of items, including substances and universals, defined in terms of their nearness to or distance from the first existent in respect of incorruptibility, with the things that are more incorruptible and farther away from the “accidents of variable matter” being said to exist more and those that are less incorruptible being said to exist less.²³ The most existent of created things include some, but not all universals, and certain singular items, the intelligences or angels, to use a Christian term. However, the universals of natural things, and presumably the particular natural things themselves, are said to exist less. This talk of incorruptibility brings to mind Grosseteste’s idea that true existence is a kind of stasis or “standing” and is to be contrasted with flow. His view, as suggested in the passage quoted above, appears to be that while all creatures are in themselves liable to flow into non-existence, some approach nearer to or are more akin to God in the sense that when they exist they are less mutable in their characteristics or less susceptible of generation and corruption than other things. For this reason they may be said to exist more. The notion of degrees of existence expresses the different degrees to which created things are like the true existent itself in respect of immutability.

2. THE EQUIVOCITY OF ‘EXISTENT’

According to Grosseteste in *In Phys*, existent (*ens*) is said equivocally of the first existent, to whom existence is substantial, and of creatures, to which it is not. Although Aristotle speaks at the start of the *Categories* of things as said equivocally or not, and we find this usage from time to time in Grosseteste’s writings, it is clear from remarks in *In Phys* that when Grosseteste says an existent (*ens*) is said equivocally, he means that the words “an existent” (“*ens*”) are used equivocally or, as he also says, “*multipliciter*,” of God and creatures.²⁴

Like some other thinkers in his day,²⁵ in *In Phys* Grosseteste holds that a word is used of several things either univocally or else equivocally and does not distinguish an intermediate category, as for example Aquinas does with his doctrine of analogical uses. This is not to say, however, that Grosseteste does not recognize

the phenomenon other thinkers intend to capture by speaking of analogical uses. For his class of words used equivocally includes as a subset words used analogically. This is indicated not only by Grosseteste's argument in *In Phys* that "an existent" is used equivocally "according to before and after," a notion many thinkers referred to in terms of analogy, but also by his remark in *De libero arbitrio* that "an existent" said of substances and accidents is neither used univocally nor *purely* equivocally. Thus words other thinkers say are used analogically, Grosseteste says are used equivocally but not *purely* equivocally.

Grosseteste offers two arguments in *In Phys* for the claim that "an existent" is used equivocally. Limitations of space preclude discussion of both, and I shall consider what seems to be the more fundamental of them.²⁶ This argument is as follows:

Since only one eternal thing is necessary to exist substantially, and everything that begins to exist does not exist substantially, whatever begins to exist, exists to the extent that it depends on substantial eternal being. And for a thing that begins, to exist is nothing other than to depend on eternal substantial existence or to be upheld by its Word, and that which adheres more closely to it exists more and that which <adheres> less closely exists less. *Since, then, "an existent" is said only of one thing substantially and of other things in respect of a dependence on that one thing in respect of prior and posterior, it is clear that it is said equivocally.*²⁷

Grosseteste's conception of the equivocal uses of "an existent" might be thought to mean that speakers use this expression with different meanings or senses when they apply it to God and creatures, and that these different meanings bear certain systematic connections to one another, expressed by the phrase "according to prior and posterior," such that the meaning in which it applies to creatures is to be understood in terms of the meaning in which it applies to God. But if we interpret Grosseteste in this way, the argument just set out faces a number of objections. The first is that its conclusion would then appear to mean that part of the meaning of "an existent" as used of creatures is a reference to a dependence on God. Thus we will face Buridan's objection that speakers are able correctly to apply this expression "existent" without any conception of such a dependence on God. A second objection is that if this is what Grosseteste intends, the argument is tacitly appealing to the view that meaning and metaphysics are isomorphic. Thus, Grosseteste would be starting with a metaphysical account of what it is for a creature to exist and concluding, according to this interpretation of equivocality, with a thesis about what is meant when a speaker applies the term "an existent" to crea-

tures. Such a thesis of isomorphism is highly contentious, however.

A further problem arises if we think that Grosseteste is concerned to make a claim about the meanings with which the term “existent” is ordinarily used. For if we hold that when the meanings of a term are related as prior and posterior, we can only grasp the posterior meaning in terms of the prior, it would follow that in order to meaningfully use the word “existent” of creatures, one must *first* be able to use it meaningfully of God, and indeed, that one’s grasp of the meaning of it in the former case presupposes a grasp of it in its application to God. But this seems quite implausible; if anything our grasp of the meaning of terms applied to God seems to stem from their meaning as applied first to creatures.

Given these problems, it would be desirable to find a way to account for the argument Grosseteste gives for the equivocity of “existent” that allows us to avoid them.

The key to doing so is to reject the idea that Grosseteste is concerned to make a claim about the ordinary meaning or meanings of the term “existent.” It might be thought that surely this is his concern, since is not an equivocal term one that is used with different meanings? But this is in fact not something we can assume. In Grosseteste’s day the notions of equivocity and univocity are explained in terms of the notion of signification. A term is used univocally of several things if it is used of them with the same signification, and it is used equivocally — in the broad sense Grosseteste has in mind — if used of them with different significations, be these related or unrelated. However, the notion of what a term signifies admits different interpretations. For example, the term “dog” might be taken to signify the concrete particular dogs to which it applies, or it might be taken to signify the nature or essence or definition of a dog, or to signify a thought (*intellectus*) or concept of the dog in the mind, or a sense or meaning. Without further specification it is unclear *exactly* what is meant when it is said that a term is used equivocally, and in the case of Grosseteste, who provides only hints as to the semantic presuppositions of his discussion, we face considerable obscurity.

Yet there is some evidence that Grosseteste is thinking of a term’s being used equivocally according to prior and posterior in terms not of the ordinary meaning or meanings associated with the term, but rather in terms of the theoretical accounts to be given of what the term refers to in different applications — something akin to the natures or definitions involved. In other words, he is not concerned to make the point that ordinary speakers use the term “existent” with different but related meanings, but instead that a theoretical account of existence in the case of creatures will be different from, but related to, a theoretical account of existence in the case of God. So interpreted, the argument for the equivocity of “existent” given above is sound, assuming Grosseteste reaches this conclusion from a correct theoretical account of the existence of God and creatures. Moreover, if this is what he means, there is no reason to think that ordinary speakers must somehow first grasp the theoretical account of existence as it is used of

God in order to speak meaningfully of the existence of creatures. And there is no reason to think they cannot know that creatures exist without having a conception of the dependence of creatures on God. (I shall return to statements Grosseteste makes in his account of knowledge of existence that seem to contradict this claim in the last section of this paper.)

In Grosseteste's writings we can plausibly identify two influences at work in his understanding of equivocity: Algazel and Boethius. Grosseteste's account of equivocity appears to be an amalgam of these influences.

Algazel's influence is suggested by Grosseteste's brief discussion in *De libero arbitrio* of the predication of 'existent' across the categories. Grosseteste writes:

Those items that are related in some significante of a name by equality (*parilitatem*) are univocal. But there is no need that those items that can be related in some significante *per consequens* or according to prior and posterior be univocals, as the ten categories are related in respect of that which is "existent," since substance is more an existent than quantity.

Yet they are not univocal on account of such a relation to one another under the name "existent," and nor are they utterly equivocal.²⁸

In the Latin translation of Algazel's treatise on logic, we find the same uncommon noun "*parilitas*" used to describe one way a word signifies: "in one way, as the name 'house' signifies a house." Algazel contrasts this with signification according to consequence, "as the signification of the name 'house' contains the wall within itself insofar as it is a part"; and according to concomitance, as "roof" signifies the wall. Algazel then goes on to mention differences between univocal and equivocal words. "Animal" applied to human beings and horses is univocal, since animality is the same for all of them. Equivocal terms are those that apply to many diverse things, as "dog" applies to what is able to bark and to a star. Algazel also identifies a class of terms intermediate between these two. These are said to be "*convenientia*." He gives the example of "existence" ("*esse*") said of substance and accident. Unlike the case of "dog," which applies to things that do not agree "in any signification of 'dog'," "existence" is said of substance and accident "according to prior and posterior — first to substance, and then to accident through something else."²⁹

Grosseteste seems to have this text from Algazel in mind in *De libero arbitrio*.³⁰ Not only does he speak of things related in the significante of a name according to *parilitas*, but he holds that "existent" is said of substance and accident "according to prior and posterior." Unlike Algazel, however, Grosseteste treats uses of "existent" as equivocal, though not, as he says, "utterly" equivocal. In other words, he brings Algazel's category of intermediate terms used according to

Grosseteste on Being
Neil Lewis

prior and posterior into the class of terms used equivocally.

This broadening of Algazel's class of terms used equivocally to include what Algazel calls intermediate terms is perhaps the result of Boethius's influence. Without naming him, Grosseteste mentions in *In Phys* Boethius's distinction between rational and chance equivocals in his commentary on the *Categories*.³¹ Boethius gives the proper name "Alexander" as an example of chance equivocation, though he speaks not of the word's having different significations but different definitions. It is, he claims, merely a matter of chance that the word "Alexander" is used of both the father of Priam and of Alexander the Great. What Grosseteste calls rational equivocation, Boethius calls "deliberate" ("*a consilio*") equivocation. Boethius identifies four cases: those in which the different uses of a term are based on a similarity; those in which they are based on a proportion or comparison of two relations; those based on descent from one thing, as the use of "medicinal" to apply to a medical instrument descends from its use to apply to the art of medicine; and finally, those based on a relation to one thing, as the use of "healthy" to apply to food is based on its use to apply to health as an end. Grosseteste expressly mentions these last two cases in *In Phys*, though not the first two.

Ashworth has explored the history of the notion of equivocation in thirteenth-century logic and notes that both "healthy" ("*sanum*"), one of Boethius's deliberate equivocals, and "existent" ("*ens*") are treated by some authors as instances of what is said according to prior and posterior.³² Grosseteste, I think, also adopted this practice, amalgamating ideas in Algazel and Boethius. Thus, terms used of different things according to prior and posterior, such as "existent" ("*ens*"), which Algazel describes as *conveniens* and not as equivocal, are moved under the head of (rational) equivocals. Then from the idea that "existent" as said of items in the category of substance and items in other categories is equivocal, Grosseteste moves to the idea that it will likewise be equivocal when said of God and creatures, for in both cases it is said "according to prior and posterior," since it is said of creatures in terms of some kind of dependence on God.

Grosseteste's use of Algazel and Boethius suggests an answer to our question whether his account of the equivocality of "existent" is concerned with the meaning speakers attach to the word. Algazel says that "animal" is used univocally of horses and human beings because *animality* is the same for them. And Boethius speaks of differences in *definition* in the case of terms used equivocally. This suggests that for Grosseteste what renders a term equivocal as applied to several things, in the sense he is using this notion in *In Phys*, is that the natures or definitions of the particular things they signify differ. In cases of pure equivocation there will be no relation between the definitions or natures in question, or at least none that is intended. In cases of what we might call impure or rational equivocation, however, or what others might call analogy, there is some kind of relation, described in the case of "an existent" as according to prior and posterior.

If this is what Grosseteste has in mind, then it is by no means clear that the

equivocity of a term, as he understands it in *In Phys*, is to be explained in terms of different meanings with which a competent speaker uses that term. This is because it is by no means clear that the *ratio* or definition of the things to which a term applies constitutes the meaning with the term in question is used. Thus, we might, if we accept Grosseteste's metaphysical account of existence, indeed say that when "an existent" is used of God and creatures, the *ratio* or account of existence in the former case differs from that in the latter case, and that the latter *ratio* makes an essential reference to the former and is in this sense posterior. But it does not follow that the meaning a speaker attaches to these terms is different. Indeed, a speaker might have no idea of the *rationes* involved at all, any more than a competent speaker able to use the word "dog" need grasp the *ratio* or definition of a dog (after all, do you?).

That Grosseteste indeed thinks this is suggested in an interesting passage *In PAn*. Here Grosseteste holds that ambiguous names have a single intention in our intellect.³³ By an "ambiguous" name he would seem to mean not a purely equivocal name, but an impurely equivocal one, the sort that "existent" is. And by "intention" he would seem to mean a concept or meaning.

It is clear that a definition produces a certain vision of the substance. This is the 28th conclusion <of the *Posterior analytics*> and it follows from this that we must not look for a single definition of ambiguous names. For although *in some sense an ambiguous name has one intention*, it is a vague general intention in our intellect and it is not specified (*finitur*) by any definite composition superadded to it, and when <the name> is applied to different things it has different intentions as well as definitions. As an example of an ambiguous or equivocal term with a vague general intention, Grosseteste considers the word "similar":

For example, "similar" when applied to colors and shapes has one intention, though it is vague and indefinite in the intellect and it must be specified by a specific addition when it is applied to colors and by another addition when it is applied to shapes. Hence it has different definitions in these cases, as is clear in geometry, where shapes are described as similar, and in natural science, in which it is known what the similarity of natural qualities is.³⁴

When Grosseteste says that "similar" needs to be specified in some way by a specific addition when it is applied in different cases, it is probable that he means that we must specify in what respect items are similar — in respect of color or shape, and so forth. Grosseteste also holds that used in such different cases "similar" has different intentions. This might be taken to indicate that he thinks that generally terms he is calling equivocal or ambiguous have both a vague general meaning

and a range of different meanings with which they are used of different kinds of things. But if we consider the context of his discussion in this passage, namely the use of terms in a demonstrative science, we cannot immediately assume that his remarks here are intended to carry over to ordinary usage. In a demonstrative science it is important to disambiguate or specify the meaning of such terms in different cases, but this need not be so in ordinary usage, where the vague general meaning with no further specification may suffice.

No doubt “existent” and “similar” differ in certain respects. It makes little sense to think of something as existent in a respect and thus to think that the way the vague general concept associated with the term “existent” is to be rendered specific in specific cases is precisely the same as the way the vague general meaning of “similar” is to be. But Grosseteste uses “similar” as an example of the general point that ambiguous terms do have a vague general meaning, and it is this claim that is of central importance to us. For it indicates that the term “existent” too, being (impurely) equivocal, will have a vague general intention or meaning. And it is with this meaning that it is used by ordinary folk. The metaphysician, in contrast, is concerned to provide different accounts or definitions of existence in the case of God and creatures.³⁵ But that ordinary folk need not know what these definitions are.

Thus we can respond to Buridan’s concern by holding that what a competent speaker grasps in applying the term “existent” to creatures is not the account of a creature’s existence as its depending on God, but a general, vague concept of existence. If we allow that this grasp suffices for us to arrive at a kind of knowledge that things exist, we can then understand how young children and others can indeed correctly be said to know that roses exist. Grosseteste’s claim that “existent” is equivocal is not intended to bear on the ordinary meaning of the word, but rather concerns the different theoretical accounts of existence to be given in the case of God and creatures.

3. KNOWLEDGE OF EXISTENCE

It is in his treatise *De veritate* that Grosseteste touches on epistemological questions concerning existence. He makes two key claims about knowledge of existence. The first is that in order for it to be known truly that a creature exists, it must be seen to depend on the first existent or to be upheld by the eternal Word. The other claim is that in all created existence the first existence is seen in some way, though one may not know that this is what one is seeing. These claims too might seem to render problematic the claim that common folk have knowledge of existence, since it does not seem, for example, that they see God or roses’ being upheld by God when they know that roses exist.

Nevertheless, I believe that nothing Grosseteste says in *De veritate* commits us to the view that ordinary folk cannot know that creatures exist without seeing, in some problematic sense, their dependence on God. This is borne out, I suggest,

by a closer examination of what Grosseteste has to say.

He starts by introducing the analogy between the shape of water and existence of creatures. Grosseteste holds that it cannot be known (*sciri*) and truly seen (*conspici*) that this water is cubic, unless it is known and seen that the shape of its container is cubic and unless its shaping is viewed in connection with the figure that contains, shapes and in its shaping upholds the water, which in itself is liable to flow and would, if left to itself, lose this shaping. Grosseteste thinks the same is true of the existence of creatures. They do not exist of themselves, but considered in themselves are liable to slip into non-existence. Accordingly, they are seen to exist in connection with that which upholds them so that they do not flow into non-existence, and in seeing that they are upheld by this.³⁶

Grosseteste goes on to say that it is not known truly (*scitur vere*) that something created exists unless it is seen in the mind that it is upheld by the eternal Word. He then concludes his discussion with the remark: "So in all existence that is to adhere to the first existence, the first existence is in some way seen, although the one seeing <it> may not know that he sees the first existence. And posterior existence is only seen in its connection with the first existence, which upholds it."³⁷

Now it is noteworthy that Grosseteste seems to be making two incompatible claims here. For his claim that one sees mentally that a created thing is upheld by the eternal Word or God when one truly knows that it exists, appears to be incompatible with the claim that although the first existence, God, is seen in all created existence, one may not know that one is seeing it. After all, if one does not know that one is seeing it, how does one see that the created thing is upheld *by the eternal Word or by God?*

The solution to this puzzle, I suggest, is that Grosseteste is in fact making two different claims that he has not clearly distinguished. The first claim concerns the conditions required if one is to have a kind of explanatorily adequate knowledge of the existence of creatures. In this sense, for it to be truly known that a creature exists, one must indeed see it to be upheld by the eternal Word. The second claim bears instead on ordinary cognition of the existence of creatures, and means that *in some sense* the first existence is seen by the cognizer, although the cognizer may not realize that this is so. If I am right, neither claim requires that an ordinary person who knows, in a broad sense of 'know,' that a creature exists is aware of the creature's dependence on God. The first claim does not, since the ordinary person does not have the kind of explanatorily adequate knowledge this claim is concerned with. And the second does not, for although in some sense in what he sees he "sees" God's existence, this is not a fact of which he need be aware.

I shall now provide some reason to accept this interpretation. Let us start with the claim that for it to be known truly that a creature exists it must be seen to be

upheld by the eternal Word. What is most striking about this claim is the language Grosseteste uses: *scitur vere* — known truly. It is notable not just that Grosseteste uses the verb “*scire*” but also that he uses the adverb “*vere*.” This suggests that he has in mind a contrast with knowing in some weaker sense. Now, as Grosseteste remarks in *In PAn*, the term “to know” in its broadest sense means “a comprehension of truth.” Grosseteste defines more strict senses of “to know” in terms of the nature of the items known, and holds that knowledge in the strictest sense is “a comprehension of that which exists immutably through a comprehension of that from which it has immutable existence, this being through a comprehension of its cause, which is immutable in being and in causing.”³⁸ Thus knowledge in this strictest sense is not merely knowledge that a fact obtains but is a kind of knowledge in which one grasps an explanation, and an explanation of a very specific kind. Now it is certainly true that only a limited subset of items can be known in this strictest sense, and this would not include facts about the existence of contingent things in the world around us. Yet it seems plausible to think that in speaking of *truly knowing* a creature’s existence, Grosseteste means to suggest the idea of a kind of knowing that goes beyond merely knowing the fact of a creature’s existence to an understanding or explanation of its existence, this being a matter, given Grosseteste’s theory of existence, of knowing of the creature’s depending on God. Thus for someone to know in this sense that a creature exists, he will need to understand that the creature’s existence is a matter of a dependence on God and he will need to have cognition of this dependence on God. Grosseteste describes such cognition as a kind of seeing, and thinks that some kind of mental illumination is required for this kind of knowledge. But this is not the kind of knowledge involved when an ordinary person knows that roses exist.

Grosseteste’s other claim — that in all created existence the first existence is seen in some way, though one may not know that one sees it — appears to include the ordinary person’s cognition of created existence. This is indicated by a parallel claim Grosseteste makes regarding truth. He holds that “no truth is viewed except in the light of the supreme truth.”³⁹ He describes this by analogy with vision of colors. Those with weak eyes can only see colored bodies in the sunlight shed on them, but cannot look at the sunlight itself. Likewise, “the weak eyes of the mind only view true things themselves in the light of the supreme truth, but cannot look at the supreme truth in itself, but only as it is conjoined with and shed on the true things themselves.”⁴⁰ There is little doubt that Grosseteste intends this account to hold for all cognition of truth. From this Grosseteste draws the consequence that although it is the light of the supreme truth that is shed on true things, in seeing true things in that light one may be said to know *the supreme truth itself*, though one may not realize one is doing so: “So there is no one who knows any truth who does not, either knowingly or unknowingly, also in some manner know the supreme truth.” Those who know it knowingly are the pure of heart (*mundicordes*), but even those who are not pure of heart “do not entirely lack vision of it.”⁴¹ It would seem that Grosseteste is concerned to make a similar point about “seeing” created exist-

tence: whenever it is seen — that is, in all cognition of the existence of a creature — one sees, perhaps without realizing it, the first existence itself.

What does seeing the first existence amount to then? In his account of seeing the supreme truth, Grosseteste is speaking of vision in an extremely attenuated sense: it suffices to see the supreme truth, in the sense that one sees it without knowing that one does so, that someone see the true things rendered intelligible by its light. I believe Grosseteste is making a similar point about seeing the first existence. The supreme truth through its light renders things intelligible. The first existence through its support renders things existent. God, as the first existence, is thus intimately related to the created existence we see or cognize in the sense that he renders it existent, and likewise God as the supreme truth is intimately related to the created truth we cognize in the sense that he renders it intelligible. It is on the basis of the latter relation that Grosseteste speaks of all cognition of true things as a matter of seeing the supreme truth, though one may not know that one is doing so. Likewise, I believe it is on the basis of the relation of rendering creatures existent that Grosseteste speaks of all cognition of existence as a matter of seeing the first existence, though one may not realize one is doing so. But in neither case is he committed to the doctrine that God is as such present as an object of cognition. The sense in which the supreme truth or first existence is known or seen is extremely attenuated. This is not to say that a human being cannot see the first existence in some stronger sense. Grosseteste clearly thinks that the pure of heart see the supreme truth in itself and no doubt they also see the first existence as such. It is they who have the explanatorily adequate knowledge of existence that we mentioned above. This is a kind of knowledge for which a kind of mental vision not available to common folk is required. Indeed it would seem that this vision is had only by a few mystics and the blessed in heaven.⁴²

CONCLUSION

Taken at face value, Grosseteste presents an account of existence with the counterintuitive consequence that ordinary folk cannot know that ordinary things like roses exist — not, at least, unless we implausibly attribute to them a vision of the divine existence and its role in upholding creatures. This counterintuitive consequence is suggested both by his account of the equivocality of “existent” and his account of knowledge of existence. I hope to have shown above that upon closer examination it is by no means clear that his theory does have such a counterintuitive consequence. I do not think I have *proved* the interpretation offered above; I doubt that an interpretation could be proved one way or another. But I do think I have shown that a plausible interpretation of Grosseteste’s remarks can be given that does not have the counterintuitive consequence in question and that attributes

Grosseteste on Being
Neil Lewis

¹ *Commentarius in Posteriorum Analyticorum libros*, ed. P. Rossi (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 1981). *Roberti Grosseteste episcopi Lincolnienensis commentarius in viii libros Physicorum Aristotelis*, ed. R. C. Dales (Boulder: University of Colorado Press, 1963). *De veritate*, ed. L. Baur in *Die Philosophischen Werke des Robert Grosseteste, Bischofs von Lincoln* (Münster i. W: Aschendorffsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1912). These works were probably written in the 1220s, before Grosseteste was lecturer to the Oxford Franciscans or Bishop of Lincoln. They possibly stem from years lecturing in the secular schools at Oxford. Ockham takes up Grosseteste's views on being in *Summa logicae*, part 3, treatise 2, chapter 27, ed. P. Boehner, G. Gal and S. Brown, *Opera philosophica* 1, (St. Bonaventure NY: The Franciscan Institute, 1974). Ockham accepts the metaphysical aspects of Grosseteste's theory: "ista duo vocabula 'res' et 'esse' ideam et eadem significant sed unum nominaliter et aliud verbaliter . . . 'esse' significat ipsam rem, sed significat causam primam simplicem quando dicitur de ea, non significando ipsam ab alio dependere; quando autem praedicatur de aliis, significat ipsas res dependentes et ordinatas ad causam primam . . . Et haec est sententia Lincolnienensis" (p. 554). Buridan takes up Grosseteste's views in *In Metaphysicam Aristotelis Quaestiones argutissimae*, book 4, questions 8 and 9, (Paris 1588 (rightly 1518); photo reprint Frankfurt am Main: Minerva, 1964), fols. 18va-20ra.

² *In Metaphysicam* 4, 9, ed. Paris 1518, fol. 19vb: ". . . nos formamus illas rationes differentes, scilicet intelligendo rosam et intelligendo rosam esse absque hoc quod aliquid intelligamus de deo: immo pueri sciunt rosas esse absque eo quod percipiant aliquam habitudinem earum ad deum."

³ Robert Grosseteste, *De decem mandatis*, I.21, ed. R. C. Dales and E. B. King (Oxford: The British Academy, 1987), 17: "Preterea, hoc verbum sum, cum dicit Ego sum Deus, ponitur substancialiter et signat quod per se et substancialiter et necessario est, cuius comparacione alia non sunt. Unde Ieronimus Ad Damasum papam dicit: 'Una est Dei sola natura, que vere est. Id enim quod subsistit, non habet aliunde, sed suum est. Cetera que creata sunt, etiamsi viduerunt esse, non sunt; quia aliquando non fuerunt . . . Deus solus, qui eternus est, hoc est, qui exordium non habet, essencie nomen vere tenet.' Idcirco et ad Moysen de rubo loquitur: Ego sum qui sum. Et iterum: Qui est misit me'

De hoc eodem esse dicit etiam Augustinus Super Iohannem: 'Cum videatis omnia ista esse mutabilia, quid est quod est nisi quod transcendit omnia que sic sunt, ut non sint?' Quod autem sic immutabiliter et substancialiter et per se necessario est, sicut alibi et a pluribus perfecte probatur, simplex et unum solum est et nullam compar habere potest." I have made minor changes to the edition's punctuation.

⁴ Cf. *In Pan* I, 15, ed. Rossi, 224: "Omnia enim que substancialiter predicantur de aliquo recipiuntur in eius diffinitione."

⁵ Cf. Algazel, *Metaphysics*, part 1, treatise 2, ed. J. T. Muckle (Toronto: St. Michael's College, 1933), 54: "impossibile est esse duo, quorum utrumque sit necesse esse, sic ut necesse esse habeat comparem, quorum unumquodque sit per se sufficiens sibi nichilo egens nec ex alio pendens." Algazel's language is similar to Grosseteste's at the end of the passage quoted from *De decem mandatis*. See also Avicenna, *Liber de philosophia prima sive scientia divina V-X*, treatise 8, chapters 4-5, ed. S. van Riet (Louvain: E. Peeters, 1980). Grosseteste refers to the *Metaphysica* of both Algazel and Avicenna in his *Tabula*, ed. P. Rosemann, *Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Mediaevalis*, 130 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1995), 276.

⁶ *De veritate*, ed. Baur, 141: "aqua fluida in se ex se nullam habet determinatam figuram, sed figuratur semper figura continentis. Unde non potest sciri et mente conspici, hanc aquam esse quadratam, nisi cognito et conspecto, quod figura continentis eam quadrata est et nisi conspecta eius figuracione in coaptacione ad figuram continentem figurantem et in figuracione sua supportem aquam fluxibilem et per se, si sibi relinqueretur, ab hac figuracione labentem. Similiter omnis creatura ex se, si sibi relinqueretur, sicut est ex nihilo, sic relaberetur in nihilum. Cum igitur non ex se sit, sed in se solum consideratum, invenitur labile in non-esse: ubi vel quomodo videbitur, quod sit, nisi in coaptacione ad illud, quod supportat ipsam ne fluat in non-esse et in conspectione, quod hoc supportatur ab illo? Hoc est igitur, ut videtur, alicui creaturae esse, quod ab aeterno Verbo supportatur <supportari Baur>."

⁷ The example is not entirely apt: to slip into non-existence something must first have existence, and so if a creature considered in itself is apt to slip into non-existence, then of itself it does have existence after all. But the point Grosseteste seems concerned to make is basically this: Take an existing thing, say Socrates, and

now consider it as lacking relations to any thing. You will at once be forced to say that it does not exist, and this is the force of saying that of itself it is apt to slip into non-existence.

⁸ *In Phys.* 1, ed. Dales, 8: “unum solum est vere et substancialiter ens. Cetera pocius quantum est ex se fluunt quam sunt, nec stant nisi per participationem esse stantis; ex se autem fluent <‘aliter fluent’ Dales> etiam in nichil.” In this and other quotations from *In Phys* I have often altered Dales’ punctuation and made changes to the body of Dales’s text based on my own examination of the three manuscripts that contain *In Phys*. A new edition of this work is being prepared by Peter King and me.

⁹ Buridan, *In Metaphysicam* 4, 9: “in quantum res dependent a deo tanquam ab agente vel conservante sicut dicuntur esse.”

¹⁰ Henry of Ghent, *Quodlibet* X, 7, ed. R. Macken (Leuven: University Press, 1981), 151: “esse creaturae non est aliquid re absoluta aliud ab ipsa essentia creaturae, additum ei ut sit in effectu. Immo ipsa creatura essentia sua, qua est id quod est, habet esse non in quantum est essentia secundum se et absolute considerata, sed ut considerata est in ordine et comparatione ad divinam essentiam. . . in quantum autem ipsa in se ipsa absque omni absoluto addito est effectus divinae essentiae, vel immediate, vel mediante agente naturali secundum rationem causae efficientis, convenit ei esse existentiae.” For Henry’s account of existence and its relation to other theories of his day, see John Wippel, “The Relationship between Essence and Existence in Late-thirteenth Century Thought: Giles of Rome, Henry of Ghent, Godfrey of Fontaines, and James of Viterbo,” in *Philosophies of Existence Ancient and Medieval*, ed. Parviz Morewedge, New York 1982, 131-164. In note 21 Wippel indicates that James of Viterbo saw similarities between Henry’s theory and Grosseteste’s.

¹¹ Avicenna was often taken to hold that existence is an accident received by essence. This was suggested by passages such as the following (*Philosophia prima V-X*, treatise 5, chapter 2, ed. S. van Riet, 239): “Dicemus ergo quod naturae hominis, ex hoc quod est homo, accidit ut habeat esse.” For medieval interpretations of Avicenna along these lines see the references in Wippel, “The Relationship between Essence and Existence,” note 17.

¹² Indeed, I have found only one instance in his writings in which Grosseteste uses the pair “essence-existence” in anything like the sense involved in such debates. He holds in *De libero arbitrio* 17 (ed. Baur, *Die Philosophischen Werke*, 229) that “since for God existence and essence are the same, and his existence is for him in his freedom, then so too is his essence, and so all that he is consists in freedom” (“Item, cum idem sit Deo esse et essentia, et esse suum ei sit in sua libertate, ergo et essentia <‘ergo et essentia’ om. Baur>; et ita totum quod est in libertate consistit.”). Though Grosseteste intimates here that for creatures existence and essence are not the same, this does not mean that in a creature there is a composition of existence and essence or that existence is in any sense something added to a creature.

¹³ *Analytica Posteriora*, II, 1, ed. L. Minio-Paluello, *Aristoteles Latinus* IV, 2 (Bruges-Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1953), 53: “Quesita sunt equalia numero quot scimus. Querimus autem quatuor: quod, propter quid, an est, quid est. Etenim quando prius quidem hoc aut hoc querimus in numerum ponentes, sicut utrum deficit sol aut non, querimus.”

¹⁴ *In PA* II, 1, ed. Rossi, 291: “Sed cum queritur aliquid de aliquo, ut an sol deficiat, hec questio ponit in numerum, quia ratio et forma rei subiecte et ratio et forma rei predicate sunt rationes due et forme due ordinate in subiecto uno, si affirmatio sit vera, vel ordinate non in subiecto uno si negatio sit vera.”

¹⁵ The example — which is Aristotle’s — seems to fit poorly with Grosseteste’s account of positing into number, since the sun’s being eclipsed is simply a result of the interposition of the moon between it and the earth, and hence of relations purely external to the sun. Thus it is hard to see how the truth of the predication “The sun is eclipsed” would require any multiplicity in the subject. Indeed, commentators differ over the interpretation of the expression “positing into number.” Aquinas, for example (*Expositio libri Posteriorum*, *Opera Omnia* 1*, 2 (Rome: Commissio Leonina, 1989), 174), speaks of a question that posits into number as “quasi composita uel in numerum ponens, quia uidelicet queritur de compositione duorum.” A more recent commentator, Jonathan Barnes (*Aristotle’s Posterior Analytics*, tr. with notes (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 195), sees no

Grosseteste on Being
Neil Lewis

ontological significance in the phrase, and remarks that “this bizarre phrase must, it seems, either refer to the fact that ‘whether it is this or this’ mentions a number of alternatives, or else indicates that (1a) [i.e. ‘if S is P’] contains more than one term.” But it seems clear that medieval thinkers in addition to Grosseteste did see the expression as having ontological import. Thus Richard Rufus holds in his *Scriptum super Metaphysicam* 7 (written c. 1238) (Vatican. Bibl. Apost., Vat. Lat. 4538, fol. 61va-vb) that in a question that posits into number the subject and predicate are numerically two. I would like to thank Rega Wood for providing me access to a transcription of this material.

¹⁶ *In Pan* II, 1, ed. Rossi, 291: “Item cum queritur an res sit, ut an deus sit vel centaurus sit, hec questio non habet in se multipliciter rerum, quia de re penitus simplici dicitur esse et intelligitur esse absque omni multiplicitate que accidat ei propter esse dictum de ipso. Esse namque dictum de causa prima non predicatur nisi ipsam essentiam omnino simplicem cause prime; dictum vero de aliis non predicatur nisi ordinationem et dependentiam eorum ab ente primo, quod secundum se est, et hec ordinatio et dependentia nichil multiplicat in essentia dependente. Propter hoc sive queratur de ente primo sive de re dependente ab ente primo an sit, hec questio non ponit in numerum.”

¹⁷ *De libero arbitrio* 8, ed. Baur, 195: “Non habent igitur relationes essentiam aliam et divisam ab essentiis extrematum relatarum et comparatarum, sicut habent qualitates et quantitates essentias alias, quam sint essentiae subiectorum, sed ab essentia alterius extremitatis semper denominatur relatio ens vel esse.”

¹⁸ See *De libero arbitrio* 8, ed. Baur, 194: “Potest enim relatio uno modo dici illa essentia, supra quam fundatur praecipue ipsa relatio et a cuius essentiae esse suscipit ipsa relatio denominationem essendi, qua praedicatur de relatione, quod ipsa est. *Alio modo potest dici relatio pro ordine unius termini ad alium* <‘Alio . . . alium’ *om.* Baur>. Si itaque per nomen relationis subiciatur essentia a cuius essentiae esse et ipsa relatio <et . . . relatio] ipsa est relatio et Baur> denominatur ‘quod est,’ vere dicitur <vere dicitur] est vere dicere Baur> quod haec relatio est haec essentia. Si autem per nomen relationis subiciatur ipsa ordinatio unius ad aliud, tunc ipsa relatio nec est ipsa essentia nec aliud ab ipsa. Et propter hoc nulla sequitur ex talium relationum multitudine essentiarum multitudo vel multiplicatio.” I am preparing a new edition of this text and have made changes

to Baur’s text based on an examination of the manuscripts.

¹⁹ It might be objected to Grosseteste that if the existence of the dependence relation amounts to that of the creature it is founded on, an account of a creature’s existence in terms of this relation will be circular. Likewise, it might be objected that it will not do to explain a creature’s existence in terms of a relation, since a relation can only hold between items that exist, and so presupposes the existence of its relata. Grosseteste does not consider these problems, but Henry of Ghent considers the latter problem. He poses the objection (*Quodlibet* X, 7, ed. Macken, 152): “something does not exist because it has a relationship to something else; rather, the relation presupposes its existing” (“Ex eo quod aliquid habet respectum ad aliud, non existit, sed est ad aliquid quod praesupponit existere.”). Henry’s reply (154) is that the relation of dependence (i.e., the relations of being created and conserved) does not first require its relata to exist in order to exist: its existing just is the creature’s existing and the creature’s existing just is the relation’s existing. In other words, he thinks this problem only arises because we assume that the creature’s existing and the relation’s existing are distinct items. No doubt ordinary language suggests a difference: we say, for example, that only an existing thing can stand in a relation of dependence, which suggests the thing’s existence precedes that of the relation, but Henry would insist that these modes of speaking are misleading.

²⁰ *In Phys.* 1, ed. Dales, 7: “Et rem <‘res’ Dales> que incipit, esse nichil aliud est quam ab esse aeterno substantiali <‘general’ Dales> dependere vel a Verbo ipsius portari, magisque est quod ei propinquius adheret, minusque quod minus propinque.” I have altered Dales’s punctuation.

²¹ *De libero arbitrio* 16, ed. Baur, 218: “Sed non oportet, ut sint univoca, quae comparari possunt in aliquo signato per consequens sive secundum prius et posterius, ut comparantur decem praedicamenta respectu eius, quod est ens, quia substantia magis est ens, quam quantitas.”

²² *In Pan* I, 17, ed. Rossi, 245: “Ergo universale non est figmentum solum, sed est aliquid unum in multis, et quia incorruptibilis est particulari, cum sit magis remotum ab accidentibus materie variabilis et magis appropinquans enti primo erit magis ens; non tamen quodlibet universale est magis ens quolibet particulari, quia universalis rerum naturalium sunt minus entia

quam singularia intelligentiarum.”

²³ We find a somewhat similar sequence in Grosseteste’s work on confession, ed. S. Wenzel, “Robert Grosseteste’s Treatise on Confession, ‘Deus Est,’” *Franciscan Studies* 30 (1970), 219-293, at 240. Here Grosseteste outlines the order in the flow of things from God, speaking of the last items in the succession as having the “the least truth in existing”: “Sic igitur est omnium rerum ordo, ut semper magis remota minus de fonte verae existentiae hauriant propter elongationem ipsorum a verissimo. Verissime ergo existunt intelligentiae, deinde corpora caelestia, post haec corpora habentia contrarietatem et composita ex contrariis, deinde vegetabilia, et post haec sensibilia, quae inter haec omnia minimam habent veritatem existendo.” References to the divine ray suggest this work is later than the works we are considering, for Grosseteste only appears to have used the language of a divine ray after he came to work on the Dionysian corpus in the late 1230s. See J. McEvoy, “Robert Grosseteste’s Theory of Human Nature with the Text of his Conference ‘Ecclesia Sancta Celebrat,’” *Recherches de Théologie ancienne et médiévale* 47 (1980), 131-187, at 138.

²⁴ For example he writes in *In Phys* 1, ed. Dales, 12: “Parmenides peccavit falsum dicendo et non sillogizando. Falsum enim dixit dicendo ens dici <‘dividi’ Dales> univoce cum dicatur multipliciter. Non sillogizavit autem quia non omnis univoce dicta unum solum numero significat. Unde non sequitur quod si ens univoce dicatur unum solum numero sit ens. Non sequitur in quantum sillogistice <‘sillogistice’ Dales>. Sequitur tamen gracia termini. *Quia enim nichil relinquit extra se hic terminus ens, ideo si diceretur univoce unum solum esset ens.* Non enim invenirentur dicere quibus multiplicaretur ens” (my italics).

²⁵ See for example *Dialectica Monacensis*, ed. L. M. De Rijk, *Logica Modernorum*, vol. 2, part 2 (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1967), 559. De Rijk dates this work to the 12th century, but it could well be later.

²⁶ The other argument is in *In Phys*. 1, ed. Dales, 7: “Quod autem ens equivoce dicatur, ostendetur primo per impossibile. Si enim dicitur <‘dicatur’ Dales> univoce sequitur omnia esse unum simplicissimum, sicut posuerunt

quidam. Si enim univoce dicitur <‘dicatur’ Dales> non distrahitur in multitudinem nisi per diversas differencias quarum nulla est ens, sicut humanitas non distrahitur in multas humanitates, nisi per multas differencias quarum nulla est humanitas; ac impossibile est ens distrahi in multitudinem per id quod non est. Si enim nichil esset de quo non diceretur ens univoce, cum in intentione entis non differant encia, non esset reperire in quibus <‘quo’ Dales> diversificarentur encia.” This argument may stem from an argument Aristotle gives in *Metaphysics* 3.3, 998b for the doctrine that being is not a genus. Averroes comments on this argument in *In Met.* 3, text c. 10, and interprets Aristotle as holding that if being and one were genera, then they would have to be said equivocally. Grosseteste seems to be making a similar point: the only way being could be “broken up” into a multitude is if it is said equivocally.

²⁷ *In Phys*. 1, ed. Dales, 7: “Item cum unum solum eternum necesse sit substancialiter esse, omne autem quod incipit esse non substancialiter est, quicquid incipit esse in tantum est in quantum ab eterno esse substanciali dependet, et rem <‘res’ Dales> que incipit esse nichil aliud est quam ab esse eterno substanciali <‘generali’ Dales> dependere vel a Verbo ipsius portari; magisque est quod ei propinquius adheret, minusque quod minus propinque. Cum ergo esse de uno tantum dicatur substancialiter et de aliis secundum dependenciam ab illo uno secundum <‘sed’ Dales> prius et posterius, manifestum est quod dicitur equivoce.”

²⁸ *De lib. arb.* 16, ed. Baur, 218: “Quae autem comparantur in aliquo signato nominis per parilitatem, univoca sunt. Sed non oportet, ut sint univoca, quae comparari possunt in aliquo signato per consequens sive secundum prius et posterius, ut comparantur decem praedicamenta respectu eius, quod est ens, quia substantia magis est ens, quam quantitas. Nec tamen ista propter talem comparisonem ad invicem sub hoc nomine ‘ens’ univocantur, nec etiam penitus aequivocantur.”

²⁹ Algazel, *Logica Algazelis*, ed. Charles H. Lohr, *Traditio* 21 (1965), 223-290, at pp. 243-246. The notion of signification by *parilitas* is also found in Avicenna’s *Logica*, Opera (Venice, 1508; photo reprint Frankfurt am Main: Minerva, 1961), fol. 5r. However,

Grosseteste on Being
Neil Lewis

unlike Algazel, Avicenna does not discuss how “to exist” is said according to prior and posterior in his account of the types of signification, and this strongly suggests that Algazel, not Avicenna, is Grosseteste’s source.

³⁰ As noted above, there are also verbal parallels to Algazel’s *Metaphysica* in the passage from *De decem mandatis* quoted near the start of this paper.

³¹ *In Phys* 2, ed. Dales, 35: “Item ex usu sermocinandi penes quam est vis figuracionis vocabulorum, et ex modis equivocacionum que fiunt non casu sed ratione per dependenciam ab uno vel ad unum, inventa est multiplicitas sive ambiguitas huius nominis natura, et ubi magis proprie et ubi minus dicitur.” Boethius, *In Categoriis Aristotelis*, PL 64, col. 166. The distinction is also to be found in the *De decem categoriis*, a work spuriously attributed to Augustine (ed. L. Minio-Paluello, AL I.1-5, 136-137), but Grosseteste’s use, with Boethius, of the term “casu” rather than the term “fortuitu” used in corresponding material in *De decem categoriis* and his use of the term “equivoce” rather than the latter work’s “*omonyma*” indicate that Boethius is his source.

³² E. J. Ashworth, “Analogy and Equivocation in Thirteenth-Century Logic: Aquinas in Context,” *Mediaeval Studies* 54 (1992) 94-135, at 108. A good example of this usage is found in the *Dialectica Monacensis* mentioned above in note 25.

³³ This in *In PAn* I, 4 (ed. Rossi, 118) he notes that an “ambiguous universal is one said of its subordinates in different ways, for example according to before and after or according to stronger and weaker,” while in *In Phys* 1 (ed. Dales, 7) he speaks of a term being used equivocally according to before and after.

³⁴ *In PAn*, II, 4, ed. Rossi, 379-380: “Manifestum est itaque quod diffinitio facit certam visionem substantie, et hec est XXVIII conclusio, et ex hoc sequitur quod ambiguum nomen non est querenda diffinitio una. Licet enim nominis ambigui intentio sit aliquo modo una, ipsa tamen intentio universalis vaga est apud intellectum, et non finitur per compositionem aliquam certam superadditam et de diversis dictum intentiones habet diversas, et similiter diffinitiones, sicut simile dictum in coloribus et in figuris aliquo modo habet intentionem unam, vagam tamen et incertam apud intellectum, quam necesse est finiri per specialem adiectionem, cum dicitur in coloribus, et per aliam adiectionem in figuris unde et diffinitiones hinc inde, sicut patet in geometria, ubi

describuntur figure similes, et in scientia naturali, in qua cognoscitur quid sit similitudo qualitatum naturalium.”

³⁵ In *In PAn* II, 1 (ed. Rossi, 292) Grosseteste expressly takes the subject of metaphysics to be existence (*ens*), and we can take his remarks about the nature of existence in God and creatures as precisely the sort of specifications of the vague general notion of existence a metaphysician would make.

³⁶ *De veritate*, ed. Baur, 141.

³⁷ *De veritate*, ed. Baur, 141-142: “Nec scitur vere aliquid creatum esse, nisi in mente videatur ab aeterno Verbo supportari. Et ita in omni esse, quod est adhaerere esse primo, videtur aliquo modo esse primum, licet etiam nesciat videns se videre esse primum, nec videtur esse posterius, nisi in comparatione eius ad esse primum, quod supportat illud.”

³⁸ *In PAn*, I, 2, ed. Rossi, 99-100: “Est enim scientia communiter veritatis comprehensio, et sic sciuntur contingentia erratica . . . Cum autem veritas sit illud quod est et comprehensio veritatis sit comprehensio eius quod est, esse autem eius quod dependet ab alio non cognoscitur nisi per esse eius a quo dependet, manifestum est quod maxime proprie dicitur scire comprehensionem eius quod immutabiliter est per comprehensionem eius a quo illud habet esse inmutabile, et hoc est per comprehensionem cause inmutabilis in essendo et in causando.”

³⁹ *De veritate*, ed. Baur, 138: “Verum est igitur, sicut testatur Augustinus, quod nulla conspicitur veritas nisi in luce summae veritatis.”

⁴⁰ *De veritate*, ed. Baur, 138: “infirmi oculi mentis ipsas res veras non conspiciunt nisi in lumine summae veritatis; ipsam autem veritatem summam in se non possunt conspiciere, sed solum in conjunctione et superfusione quadam ipsis rebus veris.”

⁴¹ *De veritate*, ed. Baur, 138: “Nemo est igitur, qui verum aliquid novit, qui non aut scienter aut ignoranter etiam ipsam summam veritatem aliquo modo novit. Iam igitur patet, quomodo soli mundicordes summam vident veritatem et quomodo nec etiam immundi penitus eius visione frustrantur.”

⁴² I follow James McEvoy in this claim. See *The Philosophy of Robert Grosseteste*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 326.