

To Speak of God:
Transcendence, Simplicity,
and Aquinas' Doctrine of Analogy

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The problem of theological language arises when we ask whether there is any meaningful connection between God and our statements about Him.¹ Traditionally, theists face a dilemma when accounting for statements about God. On the one hand, God is said to be transcendent over all of creation. Consequently, it would seem that things predicated about God cannot possibly have the same meaning as when predicated about creatures. Thus, when speaking of the 'goodness' of creatures and the 'goodness' of God it seems that we cannot mean the same thing. On the other hand, if this line of thought is pushed to the limit, then it seems that all of our statements about God are merely metaphorical or even potentially meaningless. Thomas Aquinas called this the problem of naming God, and he developed his theory of analogical predication to meet it. In the first part of this paper I attempt to explicate a few critical features of Aquinas' theory of analogical predication. In the second, I discuss an objection to his theory which arises in virtue of his commitment to the doctrine of divine simplicity, and then attempt to show how he is able to handle this objection.

As Aquinas acknowledges in the *Summa*, there are several different ways in which one might speak of or 'name' God.' Some theologians have responded to the problem of religious language by adopting the *via negativa*. According to this method, because our language inevitably fails to capture the essence of a transcendent being, we

¹ Throughout this paper I employ the traditional capitalized masculine pronoun when referring to God.

cannot properly affirm anything of God. Rather, we can only appropriately *deny* certain predicates or properties of God. But this presents an immediate worry: if we are only to ascribe meaning to negative theological predications, what status is to be accorded to traditional positive religious predications? Some answered this question by suggesting we interpret all positive statements about God as expressing negative propositions. Thus, one should interpret the statement “God is good” or “God is simple” as denying that evil or complexity are appropriately predicated of God. But beyond this such statements say nothing positively substantial. Aquinas ultimately rejects such strongly apophatic accounts of theological language and attempts to develop a *tertium quid* according to which positive ascriptions about God can express (at least in part) intelligible aspects of the divine nature.

Aquinas’ understanding of language is fundamentally teleological. Thus, all of language is directed toward a certain end. According to Aquinas this end is the expression of truth. He believes that the proper function of language is to make truth known by means of making known our concepts.² He follows Aristotle in the *De Interpretatione* when he asserts that words are conventional signs of concepts, and concepts are the likenesses of things.³ Thus, while the immediate signification of a word is a concept, its ultimate signification is a thing. He maintains that “words relate to the things signified through the medium of the intellectual conception.”⁴ Insofar as we can know a thing, we can name it. Although Aquinas acknowledges that we cannot know God in His essence, he believes we do obtain some knowledge of God through His creatures, and that, insofar as we can do this, we can name God. However, when we

² *ST* IIaIIae, q. 110, a. 1

³ *ST* I Q 13, a1

⁴ *ST* Ia, q. 13, a. 1

name God we do not do so in the same way that we name creatures. According to Aquinas language functions differently and is to be interpreted differently when applied to creatures than when applied to God. However, this does not mean that all language applied to God is therefore metaphorical or meaningless. Rather, when we name God we do so by analogy.

But this only sharpens the question: if when we name God our language is not functioning in the same manner as when we name creatures, then in what manner is it functioning? Aquinas distinguishes three theses of predication: univocal, equivocal, and analogical. Understanding the distinctions between these three theses requires that we keep in mind Aquinas' general understanding of how language works. Again, for Aquinas words signify concepts and concepts signify things. Words are conventional signs. As such they could have been other than they are. There is nothing in the nature of things that necessitates us to link the symbol "Blue Gill" with that scaled, gilled, creature we find swimming around in the local lake. Concepts, on the other hand, are natural signs of things, such that they are tied to the nature of the things that they represent. If two terms are univocal, they signify the exact same concept.⁵ Thus, the same term is applied to different subjects according to exactly the same meaning in each case. For example, when I predicate 'man' of Socrates and Plato, I signify the same concept in each case. When applied to religious language, the univocal thesis holds that perfections ascribed to God signify the same concepts as when they are ascribed to creatures. However, Aquinas maintains that God's essence is greater than everything we understand about Him, as well as everything we can signify in a word.⁶ Therefore, he rejects the univocal thesis.

⁵ *ST Ia*, q.13, a.10

⁶ *Ibid*

The equivocal thesis, on the other hand, maintains that the words being predicated are associated with two wholly distinct concepts. Thus, the same term is applied to different subjects with different signification. While the conventional aspects of the signs remain the same, what they signify has nothing in common in regard to conceptual content or nature. For example, I use the word ‘bank’ to signify where I keep my money, as well as where I stand when I fish. When applied to religious language, the equivocal thesis holds that, although the same words may be used to signify the perfections of God and creatures, the concepts linked to those words share nothing whatever in common. According to the equivocal thesis, ‘wisdom’ said of Socrates has nothing whatever in common with ‘wisdom’ said of God. On this account, any terms we apply to God must inevitably fail to express anything true about God. Statements such as “God is wise” can no more address who or what God is than “God is pink” or “God is whoopee!” According to this understanding of religious language, there cannot possibly be any substantive content to our predications about God. In fact, according to Aquinas, for those who hold the equivocal thesis, nothing can be known or demonstrated about God at all.⁷ In its stead he defends the analogical thesis.

According to Aquinas, analogical predication occurs when the same term is applied to different subjects according to a meaning that is partly the same and partly different. This account of analogy is distinct from the way that analogy is commonly spoken of by most contemporary analytic philosophers. Most contemporary accounts of analogy hold that an analogue obtains between two distinct subjects only if there is one or more properties by which the subjects are different and at least one by which they are exactly the same. Thus, analogy obtains between two things in virtue of their having

⁷ *ST* Ia, q.13, a.5

some common property. Aquinas would reject this account of analogy as merely veiled univocity. Contrary to the contemporary way of characterizing analogy, which places the sameness and difference of the analogates in the subjects themselves, Aquinas' account places the sameness and difference into the *concepts* applied to the subjects. On his account, analogy does not require a common property identifiable in each subject. Rather, it requires some form of intrinsic similarity between the manner in which a concept applies to the different subjects. Consider, for example the 'strength' of steel and the 'strength' of an argument. The similarity between the 'strength' of each cannot be traced to some common property between steel and an argument, yet neither would we want to say that the term is here merely applied equivocally. There is something about the concept of 'strength' that allows it to be applicable to both analogates, such that the concept is flexible enough to take on a contour that holds some semblance of application to both subjects without resulting in equivocation.

Aquinas grounds his exposition of the analogical thesis in the philosophical principle that effects resemble their agent or efficient cause. Through this principle he ensures a connection (albeit remote) between certain predicates applied both to creatures and to God. Because God is the efficient cause of creation, insofar as an effect resembles its agent cause, God's creatures resemble Him. As pure act and the source of all being, God is the efficient cause of all creatures. In his discussion of the perfection of God, Aquinas states:

Being itself is the most perfect of all things, for it is compared to all things as act; for nothing has actuality except so far as it exists. Hence being itself is the actuality of all things, even of forms themselves. Therefore it is not compared to other things as the receiver is to the received, but rather as the received to the receiver. When therefore I speak of the being of man, or horse, or anything else,

being itself is considered as formal, and as something received, and not as that to which being belongs.⁸

Here we find that, according to Aquinas, God is ultimately distinguished from other creatures because God *is* being, while creatures only *have* being. And creatures only have being as long as God communicates it to them. When we say of Socrates that he is wise or good, we mean that Socrates has wisdom and that he has goodness. However, unlike Socrates, we can say of God that He *is* Wisdom, He *is* Goodness, and so forth.

The analogy between creatures and God obtains via a resemblance that follows from God's being their efficient cause. All created things preexist in God (virtually, by His power to create them) in a higher way. But this does not mean that they are somehow *formally* like Him. Here Aquinas' doctrine of analogy is distinguished from the univocal thesis. The likeness between God and creatures is not a univocal likeness, as in the way that a human child holds a likeness to her human parent. Rather, the likeness that creatures bear to God occurs *across* these lines of resemblance. This point can be elucidated by one of Aquinas' own favorite analogies, i.e. his analogy of the sun. The sun causes many effects that do not resemble a fiery ball in the heavens.⁹ It causes plants to grow and people to see. Thus, if we speak of a similarity between cause and effect in the case of the sun and its effects, it is a similarity not within the same order. Rather, here we have an analogous likeness. There is no formal likeness between the sun and plant growth, but nonetheless the plant and its growth are effects bearing a real relation to the sun. The likeness that obtains through this relation is a likeness of presence. Although the sun's energy transforms the plant, the plant's growth does not formally represent the sun.

⁸ *ST*, Ia q.4, a.1

⁹ Aquinas would not have thought of the sun as a fiery ball of gas, but as a quintessential body of the superlunary sphere. But this fact has no bearing on the way he employs the analogy.

In a similar way that the sun's presence is causally responsible for life on earth, God is the primary and ultimate presence responsible for the being and perfection of all things. The presence of His being is an ontological presence that stands prior to all being, and it is this presence (which is identical with God's self) through which God communicates existence and perfections to creatures.

According to Aquinas, everything that is external to the divine essence stands in relation to Him accidentally, as an effect stands to the potency of its cause. Thus, "all other things are in God as effects are in the power of their cause."¹⁰ This is not to suggest that creatures *belong* to God accidentally (much less substantially).¹¹ Rather, this is to point out that creatures resemble God as an effect resembles its agent or efficient cause. God is essentially good and has His perfection through Himself. Creatures are accidentally good and obtain their perfection not through themselves, but through the Creator.¹² Further, all of the perfections of creatures pre-exist in God in a more perfect and eminent way: "God is the supreme good absolutely, and not as existing in any genus or order of things. For Good is attributed to God inasmuch as all desired perfections flow from Him as from the first cause."¹³ Thus for Aquinas the goodness of creatures is tied to God through His being their efficient cause. This link via efficient causality provides the metaphysical basis of Aquinas' doctrine of analogy. God possesses His perfections infinitely and through Himself; creatures possess their perfections only finitely and

¹⁰ *ST Ia*, q.12, a.8

¹¹ Aquinas plainly rejects any such claim when he asserts that in God there are no accidents, and whatever belongs to God belongs to Him essentially (*ST Ia*, q.6, a.3).

¹² This is not to suggest that Aquinas denies the importance of individual agency in moving toward perfections of virtue. He is not here concerned with the realization of human moral perfection. His point here is much more fundamental: the fact that the creature has or is capable of attaining any perfection is ultimately attributable to God. For, if there were no God there would be no creatures, and if there were no creatures, there would be no creaturely perfections.

¹³ *ST Ia*, q.6, a.2

accidentally.¹⁴ “From the first being, essentially being, and good, everything can be called good and a being, since it participates in it by way of a certain assimilation, although it is far removed and defective.”¹⁵ Through this appeal to God as the efficient cause of creatures, Aquinas provides the basis for a sustained attempt to steer a *via media* between the univocal and equivocal theses of theological language.

Divine Simplicity and the Doctrine of Analogy

While there are many difficult and challenging questions one might raise for Aquinas’ analogical thesis, in what remains, I will confine my attention to only one. The question I wish to address arises in virtue of Aquinas’ commitment to the doctrine of divine simplicity (DDS), and the possible implications that this doctrine might have for the theory of analogy. According to DDS, God is the First Being who is absolutely simple, having neither potentiality nor parts.¹⁶ Unlike composite entities, which are posterior to their parts and dependent upon their parts for their existence, God is incapable of being partitioned. For, whatever can be partitioned is vulnerable to decomposition and hence to non-existence. This cannot be the case with God, who, according to Aquinas, exists necessarily as pure act. There are no parts in God and there is there is no ontological distinction between His essence, His existence, and His attributes. God is identical with His attributes and His attributes are identical with one another. These aspects of Aquinas’ doctrine of analogy engender what I refer to as the question of tautology.

¹⁴ *ST Ia*, q.6, a.3

¹⁵ *ST Ia*, q.6, a.4

¹⁶ *ST Ia*, q.6, a.3 & a.7

The question tautology pertains to how we ought to distinguish the propositional content of our different statements about God. Suppose that we wish to affirm that God is wise, powerful, and good. If God is absolutely simple then the various predicates we ascribe to Him do not pick out ontologically distinct features in the divine essence. On the other hand, it seems obvious *prima facie* that these predicates do not refer to the same thing. To what then do they refer? To simply state that they refer to our concepts is insufficient. For as I have pointed out, according to Aquinas the function of concepts is to signify things. However, if DDS is true it seems that God is identical with His attributes and His attributes are identical with one another. But if His attributes are identical, then there seems to be no distinction between the (at least ostensibly different) attributes of goodness, wisdom, and the like. Consequently it would seem that nothing different is expressed by “God is good” than is expressed by “God is powerful.” What is more given DDS, according to the transitivity of identity there would seem to be no difference between these traditional predications and the identity statement “God is God.” But if this is the case, then our predications about God are nothing but tautologies; all amount to identity statements which are themselves identical with one another. Thus, in the final analysis statements such as “God is good” or “God is wise” amount to nothing more than saying “God is God.” Obviously, such a conclusion creates a serious problem for theological language. If all of our statements about God amount to identity claims that are identical with one another, then the statement “God is wise” is not informative in a manner in which “God is good” is not. In what remains I attempt to dissolve this concern by showing that certain epistemological and linguistic aspects of Aquinas’ thought avails him of a response to the problem of tautology.

The first problem with the tautology objection is that what motivates it is an attempt to order speech in a manner that treats all sentences as working the same way. Aquinas does recognize that “God is His essence” but he would balk at treating sentences conveying God’s attributes as operating in precisely the same manner. According to Aquinas, sentences which predicate attributes of God, e.g. “God is wise”, are not operating identically with statements such as “God is His essence.” Attribute referents are not to be understood as asserting that God has attributes in the way that we do, but as confessions of the way our minds combine things from experience and refer them to their cause. Aquinas clarifies this point by distinguishing between the mode of signification of a name (*modus significandi*) and the thing that is signified by a name (*res significata*). If we attend closely to this distinction, we can ascertain the Thomistic response to the problem of tautology.

Aquinas observes that when we speak we speak according to our finite mode of knowledge which is attained through our experience of creatures, the perfections of which exist preeminently in God. As human beings we naturally understand things in a composite way, and consequently our manner of speech consistently implies composition. Simply put, our mode of understanding entails complexity. We must bear this in mind when analyzing theological language. Aquinas shows the importance of this point when he distinguishes between the function of concrete predicates and abstract nouns. An example of a concrete predicate is ‘wise’, whereas an example of an abstract noun is ‘wisdom.’ When we say “Socrates is wise”, we are attributing to Socrates the concrete predicate ‘wise’. What we mean is that Socrates is a wise thing, i.e. a thing having the property of wisdom. We are pointing out that wisdom is a property that

inheres in Socrates. Thus, when we predicate ‘wise’ of Socrates, our predication carries a connotation of complexity. We are not suggesting that Socrates is identical with wisdom, because Socrates is not a form. Rather, he is a substance in which the form of wisdom inheres. Wisdom does not belong to Socrates essentially, but accidentally. Aquinas sharply distinguishes creaturely predications such as “Socrates is wise” from divine predications such as “God is wise.” In the latter case, we are not signifying an accidental property, or something that inheres in God. Rather, we are signifying what is captured in the abstract noun ‘wisdom’. Thus, “God is wise” means not that “God has wisdom” or “God is a thing with wisdom” (as in the case of Socrates). For God is not a complex thing. ‘Wise’ or ‘wisdom’ when predicated of God signifies not a trope (individualized property) but rather Wisdom, viz. God Himself. The wisdom spoken of when we say that “God is wise” is not a wisdom of inherence. Rather, it belongs properly to His essence; it obtains in virtue of Godself.

Aquinas points out that a necessary condition for an affirmative proposition to be true is that the “predicate and subject signify in some way the same thing in reality, and different things according to reason.”¹⁷ Thus, in the case of the simple statement “Socrates is white” the copula is taken not to indicate identity, but sameness, which is broader than identity. The point here is that true statements require different concepts but the same things being signified.¹⁸ According to Aquinas, while the subjects of affirmative propositions function analogously to matter, the predicates of affirmative propositions function analogously to forms. Complexity is a distinguishing feature of material objects;

¹⁷ *ST* Ia, q.13, a.12

¹⁸ This principle applies even in the case of identity statements such as “Socrates is identical to Socrates.” The difference however is that in the case of identity statements, although due to repetition there is numerical distinction between the concepts (Socrates occurs twice), there is no distinction of kind between the concepts. For, Socrates *is* Socrates.

simplicity is a distinguishing feature of forms. If we were to understand the different predicates we attribute to God as referring to different features inhering in God, God would be not simple but complex. When applied to God terms such as ‘good’ and ‘goodness’ must be purified from the ordinary mode of signifying. This means removing from them all connotations of accidents and composition that are normally associated with our creaturely mode of signifying.

According to divine simplicity we recognize that God and His attributes are ontologically identical. However, it does not follow that these attributes are therefore indistinguishable. Their identity obtains in virtue of their ontology, their distinctness obtains in virtue of our conception of them. When applied to theological language, Aquinas’ principle that a predicate and subject must “signify in some way the same thing in reality, and different things according to reason”¹⁹ enables us to understand why there is an intelligible distinction between statements such as “God is good” and “God is wise.” Although ‘goodness’ and ‘wisdom’ here signify the same thing ontologically, the concepts we hold of ‘goodness’ and ‘wisdom’ are, as Aquinas would say, different according to reason. Our understanding of the concepts of goodness and wisdom derive from the different experiences we have of creatures, whose agent cause is God. The distinguishing features of our concepts enable us to distinguish the contents of the different attributes we ascribe to God without at the same time having to claim that the referent of these attributes differs ontologically. Although the predicates ‘wise’ and ‘good’ signify the same ontological referent—God—they do not signify the same thing in accordance with our experience. This means that the statement “God is good” is informative in a manner that the statement “God is wise” is not—and vice versa.

¹⁹ *ST* Ia, q. 13 a.12

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