

ANALOGY IN THEISTIC DISCOURSE

“All the sentiments of the human mind, gratitude, resentment, love, friendship, approbation, blame, pity, emulation, envy, have a plain reference to the state and situation of man [...]. All our ideas, derived from the senses, are confessedly false and illusive; and cannot, therefore, be supposed to have place in a supreme intelligence [...]. Now as to the manner of thinking; how can we make any comparison between them, or suppose them anywise resembling? Our thought is fluctuating, uncertain, fleeting, successive, and compounded; and were we to remove these circumstances, we absolutely annihilate its essence, and it would, in such a case, be an abuse of terms to apply to it the name of thought or reason. [...] When we mention the supreme being, we ought to acknowledge, that their meaning, in that case, is totally incomprehensible; and that the infirmities of our nature do not permit us to reach any ideas, which in the least correspond to the ineffable sublimity of the divine attributes.”

(Hume: *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, end of Part III)

Related exam questions:

- Does the appeal to analogy provide a satisfactory basis for explaining the meaning of religious language? (2001/2)
- Is God a person? (2007/2)
- Could God be a mind without being a person? (2008/10)
- If words in their ordinary senses cannot be applied to God, can we talk about God at all? (2010/11)
- ‘No name is predicated of God and creatures univocally... names are predicated of God and creatures in an analogous sense.’ (AQUINAS) Discuss (2011/14)
- Do problems concerning talk about God cause difficulties for the possibility of talking with God? (2013/14)

Aristotle remarks somewhere in the *Metaphysics* that healthy people, healthy food, and healthy urine are clearly not healthy in the same sense, yet we don't have here cases of homonymy either. Calling healthy people and healthy urine both “healthy” is not like calling both a river bank and Barclays “a bank.” This is the problem of analogical predication. Sometimes, there is no univocity yet there isn't mere homonymy. The region between the two is the region of analogical predication.

Aristotle thought that words have a focal meaning (e.g. being of sound biological condition in the case of “healthy”), and analogical predication arises when we use the word to denote things related in various ways to the focal meaning. E.g. healthy food *produces* health, and healthy urine is a *sign* of health.

Here's Aquinas's take on the theological implications of this issue:

"Healthy" applied to animals comes into the definition of "healthy" applied to medicine, which is called healthy as being the cause of health in the animal; and also into the definition of "healthy" which is applied to urine, which is called healthy in so far as it is the sign of the animal's health. Thus all names applied metaphorically to God, are applied to creatures primarily rather than to God,

because when said of God they mean only similitudes to such creatures. For as "smiling" applied to a field means only that the field in the beauty of its flowering is like the beauty of the human smile by proportionate likeness, so the name of "lion" applied to God means only that God manifests strength in His works, as a lion in his. Thus it is clear that applied to God the signification of names can be defined only from what is said of creatures. But to other names not applied to God in a metaphorical sense, the same rule would apply if they were spoken of God as the cause only, as some have supposed. For when it is said, "God is good," it would then only mean "God is the cause of the creature's goodness"; thus the term good applied to God would include in its meaning the creature's goodness. Hence "good" would apply primarily to creatures rather than to God. But as was shown above (Article 2), these names are applied to God not as the cause only, but also essentially. For the words, "God is good," or "wise," signify not only that He is the cause of wisdom or goodness, but that these exist in Him in a more excellent way. Hence as regards what the name signifies, these names are applied primarily to God rather than to creatures, because these perfections flow from God to creatures; but as regards the imposition of the names, they are primarily applied by us to creatures which we know first. Hence they have a mode of signification which belongs to creatures, as said above (Article 3).

(Summa Theologica, Part I, Q13, article 6)

Recommended readings:

Swinburne: What we cannot know about God

This is a nice, very recent, introduction to the whole issue, defending the claim that we can say certain things about only through analogy, and, as a result, the nature of God is somewhat, but not wholly, inscrutable.

Alston: Functionalism and theological language

Argues that we can speak about God literally in various key respects (e.g. in terms of having intentions). Builds on the idea that mental states are functionally defined.

Soskice: Metaphor and Religious Language

Ch.3 is a very handy overview of theories of metaphor, and ch.6 looks at the role of metaphor in both science and religion, arguing that it can convey correct propositional information in both domains.