

Aquinas on religious language
Michael Lacewing

A paradox at the heart of Aquinas on analogy

1. Religious language (talk of God) is neither equivocal nor univocal.
2. Analogy of proportion: A word applied to God leans on its ordinary use for its intelligibility. So words don't express God's substance as it is in itself, but inadequately, as represented by creaturely perfections.
3. Analogy: the meaning of an analogous application of a term is governed by its primary application. But in the case of God, creaturely perfections pre-exist in a more perfect way in God. So these terms apply more properly to God than creatures. How so?
4. Analogy of attribution: God's wisdom is the cause and source of human wisdom; but if this is all we meant, we wouldn't be talking about God's substance, but his 'outpourings'.
5. So we can only say that words expressing perfections apply first to God and then to creatures – it's just that *we* apply them the other way around; what comes to be known first for us is not first in reality and what is first in reality is not first in our knowledge.
6. Objection: If the application to God is the primary meaning, then we fail not only to speak of God by analogy, but we fail to understand the application to creatures – because we don't understand the primary meaning of the term.
7. Possible response: 'wisdom' denotes a real property, the nature of which is beyond our current knowledge (cp. 'water' prior to chemical analysis). But then religious language would be *univocal* (picking out one and the same property).

What limits our understanding of religious language?

1. God is simple: all God's properties are his essence, and are really just one property.
2. If God is wisdom, then what does 'God is wisdom' really say?
3. If 'wisdom', 'goodness' etc. apply primarily to God, and in the case of God, such things are not distinct, then wisdom and goodness are not distinct.
4. Aquinas responds: the meaning of the word is our mental conception of what is meant – and in creatures, the perfections are many and various. But then how the term could possibly apply primarily to God?
5. Modern views: religious language is not assertoric.
6. McCabe: if we know what we are talking about, we aren't talking about God. This supports the idea that we don't apply perfections derivatively to God.
7. Ayer: if we don't know what we are talking about, we aren't talking about anything at all.

Reading

St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Part I, Ch. 13 (The Names of God)

A J Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*

Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*

Herbert McCabe, "Creation", *New Blackfriars* 61, 1980