

## THE DOCTRINE OF ANALOGY

Conflicts about the nature of God are often due to divergent views concerning the nature of religious language. Theologians and Philosophers have debated the issue of religious language for centuries, but many times the debate centers on peripheral issues rather than focusing on the underlying philosophical commitments about the nature of religious language. These commitments must be given attention if we desire to have meaningful and productive dialogue with those who have contrary views. It will be the project of this paper to evaluate which particular view of religious language has the most plausibility.

The three views offered in this paper are as follows:

1. Talk of God is Equivocal.
2. Talk of God is Univocal.
3. Talk of God is Analogical.

To speak of God equivocally is to say that our statements are not informative of the nature of God. To speak of Him univocally is to say that we can speak of God exactly as He is. And finally, to speak of God analogically is to say that our statements are in some ways similar and in other ways dissimilar to God.

The dilemma that the theist faces is this: If our language is inadequate for the task of communicating truths about God, then all of our attempts to speak of Him are in vain. If on the other hand, we speak of God in the same way that we speak of men, we are bound to speak of Him as if He were merely an exalted man.

In this paper I will proceed as follows: (1) I will explore how two different criteria lead to the conclusion that all “God-Talk” is equivocal; (2) I will then offer the “openness

view of God” as an example of implied univocal God-talk; (3) I will evaluate these claims; (4) And finally I will offer the doctrine of analogy as an adequate solution to the problem of God-talk.

### **Arguments for Equivocal God-Talk**

Various philosophers and theologians have had different reasons for either explicitly or implicitly denying meaningful discourse about God. In this paper I would like to offer two different vantage points that lead to the conclusion that our propositions about God are not informative of who He is.

The first method that renders God-Talk useless is called verification analysis. In his book, *Language, Logic, and God* Frederick Ferre describes how the verification principle renders theological discourse as impotent. According to Ferre, verificational analysis asserts:

Since analytic statements can deal with the truths of logic or ‘relations of ideas’ and synthetic statements are capable of asserting all possible ‘matters of fact’ (to use Hume’s classical distinction), verificational analysis concludes that within the synthetic-analytic dichotomy all logically important meaningfulness is included.<sup>1</sup>

While Ferre notes that verification analysis is too “narrow” a criterion for the determining of all meaningful statements, he does spend time showing how the verification principle eliminates meaningful talk about God. For our knowledge of God’s existence and attributes is not true analytically, nor are these claims empirically verifiable. Hence according to verification analysis, the statement “God exists” is meaningless.

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<sup>1</sup> Ferre, Frederick. *Language, Logic, and God*. (New York, NY: Harper & Brothers, 1961), 11.

Ferre argues that, given this method, evidence found within creation does not give us knowledge of God. For nothing in creation could count as evidence for something beyond nature, since that which is beyond nature is not empirically verifiable. “Miracles”, “mystical intuitions”, and “cosmic processes” would not count as evidence for God since “no meaningful statement can in principle be made about ‘the supernatural.’”<sup>2</sup>

In light of this rather pessimistic criterion, Ferre offers a possible variation of the verification principle. Ferre refers to an article in *Mind*, by David Cox, where Cox offers his revision to the verification principle in order to salvage both the principle and meaningful talk about God. According to Ferre, Cox believes:

The requirement that some sense-experience be relevant to any meaningful non-tautological statement must be modified to allow that “an ostensible statement of fact is significant if, and only if, it can, in principle, be verified by human experience.”<sup>3</sup>

In other words, Cox is trying to broaden the kinds of synthetic statements that can be meaningfully asserted. By removing the requirement of verification by sense-experience alone Cox believes that he has reopened the doors to meaningful talk about God. With this revision, theologians could conceivably put together interesting propositions with supernatural content. As long as your statements could “in principle” be verified, one could talk of God in a way that avoids total equivocity.

Ferre however rejects this as a viable modification of verification analysis. He notes that Cox’s revision involves a “high degree of risk, subjectivity, patience, and

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 37.

uncertainty.”<sup>4</sup> According to Ferre, Cox’s revision reduces supernatural statements to mere propositions about one’s own experience. As Ferre writes,

First, “God exists” may be treated in the following manner: the rules governing the use of “God” will initially be given, stressing that the word is not “rightly to be used except in such phrases as ‘meeting God,’ or ‘encountering God,’ or ‘knowing God’”; then the empirical hypothesis, reflecting the fact that many human beings have had experiences which are like “personal encounter” but lacking the sense-experiences usually associated with such an encounter, may be stated: “Some men and women have had, and all may have, experiences called ‘meeting God.’” In this restatement lies all the empirical significance of the theistic claim that “God exists”; more is superfluous.<sup>5</sup>

The problem, however, is that if statements about God can be verified “in principle” without some kind of “intersubjective phenomena”, how can these statements claim an objective referent beyond the experience itself? The theist who is interested in talking about God is not interested in merely asserting facts about his experience. It would appear that Cox’s reformulation of the verification principle does not succeed in giving us proper warrant for making claims that theist’s wants to make. We are again left with a principle of verification that leads one to the conclusion that the finite, empirically oriented mind of man can not know anything about an infinite, eternal God, if indeed there is such a God.

There is a second approach to nullifying our cognitive knowledge of God. This second approach I will call the mystical approach. Both approaches understand “cognitive knowledge” to be in some sense “clear and distinct ideas” or at least items that can be conceptualized. While proponents of verificational analysis claim that one must remain agnostic concerning knowledge of God, the second approach or mystical

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 38-9.

approach posits a different kind of knowledge. The mystic bifurcates knowledge into categories like “man’s knowledge” and “God’s knowledge”.

Ruldoph Otto takes the ladder approach to knowing God whereby he effectively eliminates cognitive talk about God. While Otto, in his book *The Idea of the Holy*, often sounds like he is merely trying to emphasize a component of religious experience that is not dealt with by the “rational” approach, he in fact does view propositions about God as being ineffective at best.

Otto does not say that theological discourse serves no purpose, but he insists that real knowledge of God is beyond our talk of God. Real knowledge of God comes to us by way of mystical contact. Since Otto sees religious language as inadequate for the describing and defining of God, he posits a unique “numinous” category whereby we obtain our knowledge of God. This inexpressible aspect of our being that grasps that which is inexpressible about God can simply be called “X.” Otto states, “In other words our X cannot, strictly speaking, be taught, it can only be evoked, awakened in the mind; as everything that comes ‘of the spirit;’ must be awakened.”<sup>6</sup>

If one cannot get to God *via* normal human language, then one must get to God *via* feelings. This is the way in which Otto approaches the subject. One does not use syllogisms and the scientific method to come to truths about God; one simply adduces true knowledge of God *via* an encounter with the “*mysterium tremendum*.” When discussing the nature of these encounters, Otto attempts to make a sharp distinction between our experience of the Holy and all other kinds of experience. According to this mystical approach to God, man has various methods in understanding the world he lives

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<sup>6</sup> Otto, Rudolf. *The Idea of the Holy*. New York, NY: (Oxford University Press, reprint 1977), 7.

in, but a “nomin” element is seen as necessary for the sole purpose of being a contact point for the Inexpressible One.

This view ultimately leads to the conclusion that theology, as it is normally understood, has little or no importance in our understanding of God. Our concepts, which are derived from our natural experience, are adequate only for describing the natural. While Otto, in some way, tries to draw analogies from the natural to the supernatural, he admits that our concepts, when applied to the natural, do not have the same meaning when applied to the Holy. For example, the feeling of fear is natural, but it takes on a certain ineffable quality when one talks of their fear of the Holy. This ineffable quality is most adequately grasped by feeling.

### **Implied Univocal God-Talk**

It is more difficult to find modern philosophers and theologians who explicitly affirm that we ought to apply our terms univocally of God and man. There are, however, examples of theologies that imply or assume univocal God Talk. One such example is that of the “Open-Theist.” Open theists argue that their form of theism offers a more accurate view of God.

In offering his view, Boyd claims to be free of the “colored” glasses of classical theism. He asserts that his view of God is largely built on his method of Biblical interpretation. According to Boyd, classical theists are not doing justice to the text of Scripture because they assume a particular view of God prior to reading the text. This in turn causes the classical theist to interpret a great deal of Biblical passages anthropomorphically. Boyd writes,

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If we decide that the various accounts of God “changing his mind” are all figurative because we have already decided that God can’t really do such a thing, what truth do these accounts communicate? If God never changes his mind, saying he does so reveals nothing; it is simply incorrect. If God in truth never anticipates that something is going to happen that turns out not to happen, his telling us that he is sometimes surprised or disappointed (Jer. 3:6-7, 19; Isa. 5:1-7) tells us nothing true; it is simply misleading.<sup>7</sup>

Boyd continues,

All the evidence indicates that the verses signifying divine openness should be interpreted every bit as literally as the verses signifying the settledness of the future. Only a preconception of what God can and can’t be like would lead us to think otherwise.<sup>8</sup>

While Boyd tends to emphasize the fact that he is arguing from Scripture, he does not neglect to discuss what he would consider philosophical problems with classical theism. For example, he argues that God could not know future free acts. For Boyd, it would be a contradiction in terms to speak of God infallibly foreknowing future free acts. Free acts by definition are those acts that are not determined by something else, rather they are determined by the agent. An individual with free will actually has the ability, given two options, to choose either one.

Furthermore, Boyd questions how God could possibly know things that have not yet happened. Since the future does not yet exist, there is nothing for God to know. Since there is nothing of the future to know, a lack of infallible knowledge of the future is not a limitation on God’s part. Hence Boyd concludes that God does not have infallible knowledge of the future. While this view does not explicitly state that it speaks of God

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<sup>7</sup> Boyd, Gregory A., *God of the Possible*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), 119.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

univocally, it will be argued in the evaluation section that this view entails univocal God talk.

### **Evaluation of Equivocal and Univocal Language**

The first view, verification analysis, fails to be a meaningful criterion for meaningfulness. Frederick Ferre rejects of the verification principle for at least two reasons. First, on the grounds that the principle itself is self-stultifying. For it is neither an analytically true criterion nor is it empirically testable. Secondly, the definition of “fact” is too narrow. “Facts” for the purposes of the verification principle are simply those items of knowledge that are empirically verifiable. But to use this narrow definition of the word “fact” is to beg the question. The principle may be useful in recognizing empirically verifiable claims, but it illegitimately claims to have all meaningful statements under its domain. Ferre writes,

That theological discourse has been shown to be untenable when interpreted as pseudo-scientific explanation does not, it would appear, rule out the possibility of its functioning rationally and legitimately in some other way. Verificational analysis does not recognize any other way, but this may illustrate a shortcoming more in verificational analysis than in theological language.<sup>9</sup>

The second view, or mystical view, does not claim to be rational, but rather it claims supra-rationality. It claims that knowledge of God is not revealed in propositions about God, rather knowledge of God comes through a personal encounter with God. According to this view, language is inadequate to describe God.

If it is the case that language is inadequate to describe God, how can Otto write a 229-page book on our ideas of the Holy?<sup>10</sup> In his book he does not merely claim to be

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<sup>9</sup> Boyd, 45.

<sup>10</sup> In reference to Otto’s book *The Idea of the Holy*.

writing about our ideas. He must have some idea of what God is really like in order to formulate a position on how our talk applies to or does not apply to God.

Furthermore, if all we know about God is that inexpressible experience that we have when we encounter God, how is it that we know that this experience is of God? Otto appears to simply assume that a variety of experiences are experiences of the Ineffable One. In talking about the nature of our experience with the “*mysterium tremendum*” Otto describes such experiences in the following way:

It may burst in sudden eruption up from the depths of the soul with spasms and convulsions, or lead to the strangest excitements, to intoxicated frenzy, to transport, and to ecstasy. It has its wild and demonic forms and can sink to an almost grisly horror and shuddering. It has its crude, barbaric antecedents and early manifestations, and again it may be developed into something beautiful and pure and glorious.<sup>11</sup>

How does Otto know that all of these feelings come from the same source? And even if he could know this, how is it that he can meaningfully express anything about that source given the fact that this source is inexpressible? It would appear that Otto has no way of answering these questions. Since he has ruled out rational discourse about God, all of his attempts to justify that these experiences are genuine experiences of God become meaningless.

Otto’s mysticism bifurcates knowledge into two mutually exclusive categories. According to this kind of mysticism knowledge can be either “cognitive knowledge” or “knowledge of God.” This view places knowledge of God outside the category of cognitive knowledge by definition, thereby eliminating cognitive knowledge of God.

Finally, the open theism held by Gregory Boyd appears to imply univocal God talk. Boyd argues that God cannot know the future because the future is not something

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 13.

that can possibly be known. But implicit to his argument is not only a particular view of the nature of time, but a particular way of understanding the nature of God. In describing God, Boyd often makes reference to the examples of our common human experiences. For example, when he elaborates on the reasonableness of a future that is partly open and partly settled he writes,

The view that the future is partly open and partly settled is the view we all assume unconsciously every time we make a decision. For example, I am at the present time deliberating about whether or not I should travel to San Diego next month. In deliberating about this matter, I assume that it is *up to me* to decide when, where, and how I will travel. How could I honestly deliberate about this decision if I didn't believe this?<sup>12</sup>

Examples like this are not uncommon in his book “God of the Possible.” The problem with such an approach is that while it doesn't assume a classical view of God, it does assume that God must have experiences that are very much like ours. In fact, much of Boyd's argumentation seems to run, “in our common experience x is like this, so God must be very much like the x of our common experience.”

For example, in reference to God's knowing the future, Boyd asserts, “If God foreknows a future event, it must either be because he determined it or because it is an inevitable effect of past or present causes.”<sup>13</sup> But why would Boyd believe that these are the only two alternatives? While it is clear that these are the means of human ‘foreknowledge,’ it is not clear these are the means that an eternal God must use. It appears that Boyd believes this is true of God because it is true of human beings, but in doing this, he assumes that an eternal God must know things in the same way that

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<sup>12</sup> Boyd, 32.

<sup>13</sup> Boyd, 23.

temporal beings know them. But this conclusion only follows if God is temporal and finite.

This approach does not derive understanding of the nature of God in a vacuum. It presupposes that we predicate our statements univocally of both God and man. Since all of our experiences are of temporal and finite things, applying these terms univocally to God would make God finite and temporal. This of course leads to the denial of the God of classical theism.

According to a Thomistic understanding of analogy statements must be predicated according a things mode of being. Boyd, however, assumes a “literal” rendering of the text is more accurate in describing God because he fails to see that the doctrine of analogy deals with judgment or predication.

### **Doctrine of Analogy**

As we have seen above, univocal talk about God renders God as finite. Equivocal talk about God renders Him unknowable. Since it is self-defeating to claim that our statements cannot be applied to God, there must be some way of making truth claims about God that are meaningful. On the other hand, since the classical view of God understands that God is infinite, it is clear that our concepts of God are not adequate, in themselves, to describe God. The alternative to these two possibilities is the doctrine of analogy.

What, then, is analogy? Very generally “analogy is a kind of community, that is to say, a kind of unity-of-many.”<sup>14</sup> George Klubertanz goes on to explain analogy of being in his book “St. Thomas Aquinas on Analogy”,

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<sup>14</sup> Klubertanz, George. *St. Thomas Aquinas on Analogy*. (Chicago, IL: Loyola University Press, 1960), 112.

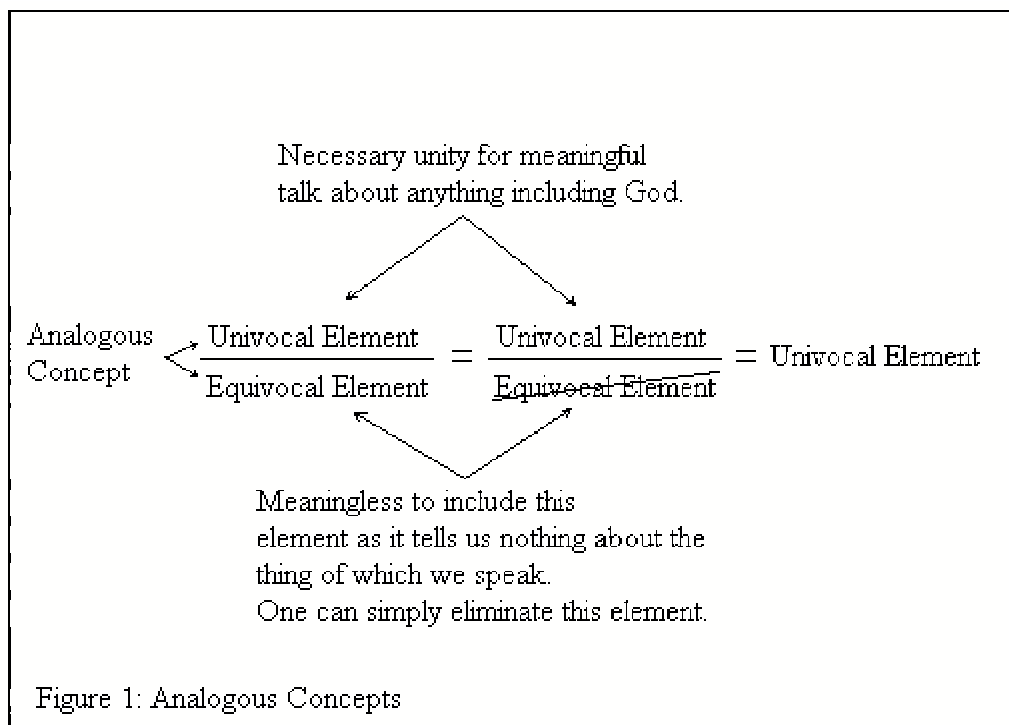
When various, distinct, and independent things are conceived, known, or understood according to their perfection as beings, then they are found neither to be simply the same in this perfection nor to be so diverse that they cannot be conceived according to some kind of common perfection. The being which is said to be analogous is not the concept, for a concept cannot be predicated of a thing. It is not simply a thing. It is an intelligibility which formally as intelligibility is actually existing only in the mind.<sup>15</sup>

The general idea in analogy is that there is a similarity and dissimilarity among common perfections. Whenever we speak of something being 'like' another thing, we refer to the fact that two things are in some respects the same, yet in other respects they are said to be different.

In dealing with analogy, it is necessary to discuss the difference between analogical concepts and analogical predication. First, it is argued that analogical concepts are reducible to either univocal or equivocal concepts. In any analogy, there must be a univocal element to the concept otherwise there are really two different concepts. If the analogous concept consists of two different concepts, then these concepts are not the same and are therefore equivocal. Hence, to avoid equivocity, univocal concepts are required. This is illustrated in figure 1.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 115.



This objection is actually helpful in clarifying what analogy is and what it is not. For Aquinas, the “doctrine of analogy is above all a doctrine of judgment of analogy, and not of the analogy of concept.”<sup>16</sup> This being the case, analogy ought to use univocal concepts. Analogy is still possible, however, because a univocal concept can be predicated differently. For example, saying that man is good and saying that God is good, are said in different ways.

When it’s said that God is good, “good” is applied to Him infinitely (and essentially) because God is the infinite Being. When the term “good” is used to describe man, “good” is applied in a finite sense because that is the kind of being that man is. In both cases the term “good” means the same thing, only the application or predication is

<sup>16</sup> Geisler, Norman L., *Thomas Aquinas: An Evangelical Appraisal*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1991), 138.

different. In other words, what's being said about the subject is the same, but the way something is said of the subject is different.

There are different kinds of analogy. Dr. Norman Geisler outlines these different kinds of analogy in his book, *Thomas Aquinas: An Evangelical Appraisal*. There are extrinsic analogies where “there is no real similarity between two parties”, and there are intrinsic analogies where “both things possess the same characteristic, each in accordance with its own being.”<sup>17</sup>

Extrinsic and intrinsic analogies are further divided into categories of attribution and proportionality. These divisions are given in figure 2. In the analogy of extrinsic attribution, “a given characteristic is attributed to the cause only because it produces this characteristic in the effect, not because the cause really possesses the characteristic.”<sup>18</sup> For example, if an egg is placed in boiling hot water for a long enough period of time, it becomes hard. There is a causal relationship involved, but the effect is different from the cause. In this case heat does not communicate heat, but hardness. In extrinsic attribution the cause does not necessarily produce a like effect. Since knowledge of God must be attained through His effects, this kind of analogy is not useful in the discussion of religious language.

In the analogy of improper proportionality, “there is only an analogy in the relationship, not a real similarity between the two things being compared.”<sup>19</sup>

For example,

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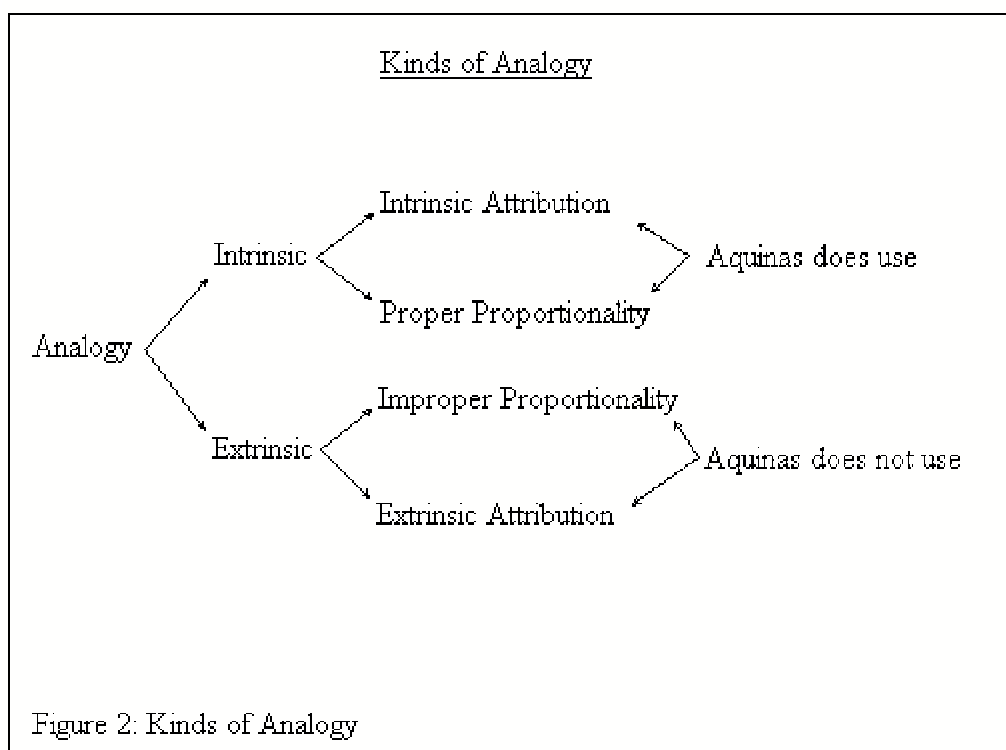
<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 142

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 142

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 142

Blood :: Oil  
Man     Car

In this analogy blood is not really related oil. However, they are both liquids that are vital for the continued function of their respective analogates. In this kind of analogy there “is merely a relationship between the two relationships, but there is no relationship between the two things being compared.”<sup>20</sup> Improper Proportionality is not useful for discussing religious language because it is unable to inform us of the similarity between the things being compared.



The analogy of intrinsic attribution “is where both parties possess the same attribute and the similarity is based on the causal connection between them.”<sup>21</sup> In this kind of analogy the cause communicates itself to its effect. Given the above hot water and

<sup>20</sup> Geisler, 142.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 143.

egg illustration, if an egg is in hot water long enough the egg will become hot. In this case heat communicates heat. If someone were to pull the egg from the hot water and feel it, that individual would immediately recognize that both the water and the egg was hot. In the analogy of intrinsic attribution the effect does give information about the efficient cause. This kind of analogy is useful for the discussion of religious language.

Finally in the analogy of proper proportionality, there is “a proper relationship between the attribute each thing possesses and their own respective natures.”<sup>22</sup> For example:

$$\frac{\text{Infinite Good}}{\text{Infinite Being}} :: \frac{\text{finite good}}{\text{finite being}}$$

In this example, proper proportionality is informative of the relationship between a particular attribute and God’s essence versus a particular attribute and a finite beings essence. The attribute of goodness is said to be infinite when said of an infinite Being while goodness is said to be finite when applied to a finite being. In the above analogy, “good” means the same thing on both sides of the equation. Similarly, “being” means the same thing on both sides of the equation. What makes “good” different when spoken of God and man is in the way the predicate refers to the subject. This kind of analogy is useful for pointing out the difference between two things.

What though is the basis for analogy? The basis for analogy between God and man is found in the principle of causality. There is a causal relationship between God and man. Since man is caused to be by God it is reasonable to hold that there is a likeness between man and his Cause. An efficient cause cannot give to its effect something that it

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 143.

does not itself possess. Therefore something of the cause is always communicated to its effect.

As was noted above, not all attributes or qualities of the cause can be found in the effect. In the case of extrinsic attribution, hardness was a result of heat, but hardness is not the same thing as heat. The relationship between heat and hardness is an extrinsic one. Heat could, for example, cause something that is hard to become soft. The same heat that caused hardness in the egg could soften or melt hard objects such as wax and steel.

This does not show that analogy is a failure, rather it shows that analogy must be based on an intrinsic causal relationship. Once again, the hot egg was hot because it was in hot water. Heat was communicated from the cause to the effect. In the case of God's causal relation to man, Being is communicated to being, and Act is communicated to act. This is the kind of causal relationship that makes analogy possible. Dr. Geisler elaborates on this point,

All of creation is like God insofar as it is actual, but unlike God insofar as its limiting condition (potentiality) determines how the actuality is received. For example, the same cause (a sculptor) cannot produce the same effect in the pudding and stone. Pudding simply does not have the same potential that stone does to take on a stable and lasting form. In other words, there is a real difference in the potential, even though the same actual form is imposed on both. In like manner, the similarity between God and a creature will depend on limited potential of that creature to receive actuality from God. Thus, creatures differ from God in their potentiality, but are like (although not identical to) God in their actuality.<sup>23</sup>

As was mentioned earlier, analogy always has elements of similarity and dissimilarity. Positive talk of God can be successful because there is an intrinsic causal connection between God and man. Differences between God and man must also be

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<sup>23</sup> Geisler, 145.

accounted for in any theory of religious language that understands the infinite difference between God and the created order.

This infinite difference is taken into account by speaking *via negativa* (the way of negation). Since man has limitations and God does not, man cannot appropriately apply any limitation to God. When a term is applied to God it must be stripped of any limitation. Because being is understood finitely by humans, it must be clear that the term being cannot be said of God in a finite way.

Not all terms can be stripped of their finitude. Transcendental terms such as good, beauty, logic, and love can be applied to God, but terms that refer to something that is necessarily limited (by its very nature) cannot be used. Simply because man is made of matter does not justify the conclusion that God is an infinite ball of matter. It is very important to consider the nature of the thing being talked about before making judgments or predications of that thing.

In analogy both univocity and equivocity are retained. Found in the principle of analogy is an answer to both the skeptic and the mystic. The skeptic wants to reduce all human knowledge to that which can be conceptualized. Since God is infinite and all of our concepts are of finite things, the skeptic feels adequately justified in his stance of agnosticism. The mystic wants to bifurcate knowledge so as to make knowledge of God untouchable by the skeptic and unknowable to the theologian.

Finally then, how does analogy answer these two critics? First of all, the principle of analogy does not deny the truth of many of the claims made by the mystic and the skeptic. For example: The mystics attempt to argue that God is beyond our concepts is a very legitimate endeavor. It is certainly true that a God whose Being is infinite cannot be

captured by finite concepts attained through the apprehension of the natural world. The mystic does well to embrace this. The mystic fails, however, in his endeavor to know truths about God when he rejects univocal talk about God in order to embrace a mystical category of knowledge. This is not necessary since analogy accounts for both the univocal elements of religious language and differences between the infinite and the finite. The mystic fails to understand the basis for analogy (causality) and the way of analogy (predication).

The skeptic is correct in his affirmation that, given their methods of philosophical inquiry and linguistic analysis, God is unknowable. The skeptic rules out knowledge of God by restricting knowledge to a very narrow criterion. This is found in Scientism, Positivism, and various forms of skepticism. This reductionistic approach is not really a positive case against the doctrine of analogy, rather it is the philosophical pigeonholing of those influenced by bad philosophy. Analogy does not make sense to many modern minds; in part because of the modern minds understanding of the nature of knowledge. There is a general failure, on the part of the skeptic, to recognize the limitations of their method in philosophical inquiry. This being the case, these kinds of critics are arguing against analogy with a defective method.

Analogy stands as a superior principle given a proper grounding in metaphysics. Analogy answers her critics once certain metaphysical principles are understood and once it is understood that analogy (according to Aquinas) is not an analogy of concepts. The failure of the modern mind to accept analogy is not a failure on the part of analogy, but a failure on the part of the modern mind.