The Principle of Analogy.

ABSTRACT.
Sceptics question whether 'distinctively human' predicates such as 'just', 'loving' and 'powerful' can intelligibly be attributed to a divine being. If not, then a vicious form of agnosticism seems to threaten orthodox theism. Especially if one assumes a broadly empiricist semantics the challenge, whether formulated in terms of a univocal or an equivocal understanding of predicates, seems to generate intractable philosophical problems. Aquinas' theory of analogical predication, understood either in terms of 'analogy duorum ad tertium' or in terms of 'analogy unus ad alterum', is an influential response to this sceptical challenge. Difficulties in each understanding are explored and it is suggested that a more fruitful framework for understanding theistic language is to be found in late 20th century nativism of Fodor and Quine.

A familiar feature of Judaic - Christian thought and worship, indeed a feature of all theistic religions, is the belief that God possesses certain attributes. For example, he is wise, truthful, just and forgiving. Throughout the history of Christian thought, however, such attributions have given rise to intellectual perplexities for believers and unbelievers alike; for how can the language of finite human beings adequately describe the attributes of a transcendent God? And if divine attributes cannot be known then a form of radical scepticism seems to threaten orthodox theism.

The Principle of Analogy is a response to this problem. It is a philosophical device designed to clarify the meanings of predicates which are commonly attributed to God and to do so in such a way that it overcomes the scepticism concerning their meaningfulness which I have just described. In exploring the Principle I will first clarify the sceptical challenge and some of the assumptions about meaning on which it rests; I will then explain and critically examine some of the ways in which the Principle has been formulated; finally, I will offer a brief critique of the philosophical assumptions which underlie the

Principle indicating how an alternative approach might overcome some of the difficulties which have been addressed.

1. The sceptical challenge.

The sceptical challenge argues that terms can used meaningfully to refer to God only when certain semantic and theological background conditions are satisfied. It goes on to argue that theistic terms fail to satisfy the relevant background conditions and concludes that the terms familiarly used to refer to God are meaningless. The challenge runs as follows.

Consider some of the the terms with which, as I have said, we typically refer to God: He is loving, just, wise and forgiving. Let us suppose that we accept what might be called 'the Empiricist Principle' to the effect that the meanings of such 'essentially human terms' are learned in empirical contexts; I learn what wisdom is by contrasting the people that I know who possess it with those I know who do not possess it; I learn what love is by contrasting behaviour which is loving with behaviour which is less loving and so on. Let us accept, also, the logical truth that the property terms in question, when applied to God, either preserve or do not preserve the meanings which they have in everyday human contexts; in the former case the meanings are said to be 'univocal', in the latter they are said to be 'equivocal'. Now to suppose the meanings to be univocal renders an understanding of their meaning unproblematical; divine love is continuous with (though greater than) human love, divine wisdom is continuous with (though greater than) human wisdom and so on. Hence if we know the meanings of the terms in human contexts we can know them, by extension, in divine contexts. However, attractive though it first appears, some consider this account to be unacceptable: theologians have argued that it compromises divine 'otherness' or transcendence, it confuses the finite with the infinite,

and it leaves us with a wholly 'anthropomorphic' conception of God. These convictions form the first horn of the dilemma. The alternative assumption, that property terms referring to God are to be understood in an equivocal sense, also generates problems. If we only know the meanings of terms in empirical contexts and so can know nothing of their meaning in transcendent contexts, then since God is a transcendent being the properties cannot intelligibly be attributed to Him. And what then can we meaningfully say about God? The terms which we familiarly use of God have been emptied of all intelligible content and we are left with a conception of God which is so attenuated that we are in danger of lapsing into scepticism concerning the divine nature. This is the second horn of the dilemma. That these alternatives appear exhaustive and that each is unacceptable is the problem to which the Principle of Analogy is offered as a solution.

The problem just described has consistently engaged the Christian Church over the centuries. Seeds of a theory of analogical predication are to be found in the writings of the Patristic period. Augustine is influenced by it when, in *De Trinitate*, he illustrates the mysteries of the Triune Being by drawing attention to analogous mysteries surrounding human psychology and in the late medieval period a rigorous examination of the issues was undertaken, especially by Aquinas and Suarez. In the early modern period sceptical doubts still lingered: Archbishop King, for example, argued that our conceptions of God's nature are as different from true knowledge of God as is a map from the land which it represents; Bishop Browne maintained that since our knowledge of God is composed of worldly ideas we have no more notion of divine things 'than a blind man hath of light.' The neo-Kantian framework of phenomenal and noumenal worlds revived similar agnostic worries and even in the closing decades of the twentieth century the issue engaged theists such H.L. Mansel as well as sceptics such as A.G.N. Flew.

Responses to the sceptical argument either accept the basic philosophical framework which I have just described or they challenge it. The latter possibility should be noted because the Empiricist Principle has been rejected in this century by philosophers such as Chomsky, Fodor, Quine and Wittgenstein, a point to which I will return in the conclusion.

More commonly, theists have accepted the sceptic's underlying empiricist assumptions and, as a consequence, have been led to accept some form of the theory of analogy which forms the subject matter of this article. The principle of analogy is an important and influential response and it is to it, especially to its classical expression in the Scholastic period, that we must now turn.

2. The Principle of Analogy.

When Aquinas looked for a theory of the divine attributes he drew upon the philosophical traditions of the Greeks, especially upon the ideas of Aristotle whose works were at that time becoming available in the universities of Paris, Oxford and Bologna. Here he found both the basic philosophical assumptions and the detailed categories of thought within which the theory of analogical predication was formulated. Prominent in the former were, firstly, Aristotle's theory of concepts, especially his distinction between equivocal and univocal terms and his account of the different kinds of equivocation; and secondly, his account of the different senses of being, in particular his stress that the different senses of being may be unified by their relationship to one fundamental sense. Even more important to the needs of the Schoolmen was Aristotle's account of how we acquire knowledge of attributes. According to this view we have no direct knowledge of Forms such as wisdom, love or justice; rather we come

to know these things only indirectly by experiencing the imperfect embodiments of them in particular persons and actions.

The theory of analogy drew on these basic Aristotelian categories so as to explain how, granted our finite understanding, we can have knowledge of the infinite divine character. In so doing Aquinas distinguished, first, between the two forms that analogy may take, 'duorum ad tertium' and 'unius ad alterum' and then distinguished between two sub-divisions of the latter, namely the analogy of attribution and the analogy of proportionality. As we shall see, each of these elements played an influential role in the development of the theory of analogy and it is to and exposition and criticism of these theories that we must now turn.

'Analogy duorum ad tertium'. This form of analogy links two analogates, or bearers of properties, by virtue of their relationship to a third analogate in which the property which is the basis for the resemblance is paradigmatically displayed. Suppose then, that analogates Ai, Aii and Aiii all exhibit, non-univocally, a property P. An analogy duorum ad tertium obtains between P as exhibited in Ai and Aii if and only if the following conditions are satisfied: Ai resembles Aii; Ai and Aii both resemble Aiii; the property P is displayed paradigmatically in Aiii so that, in Scholastic terms, Aiii is the 'prime analogate' or Form of the property in question; finally, it is by virtue of the presence of P in Aiii that Ai resembles Aii.

Consider the property of being healthy. Fresh fruit is a healthy form of food, walking is a healthy form of exercise and Jones is a healthy person. The health that Jones enjoys is the prime analogate; fresh fruit and walking are healthy by analogy in the sense that they enjoy similar relationships to the prime analogate.

In our present context, humans and God are analogates which resemble each other by virtue of their relation to another analogate,

which is the Form of the property in respect of which God and humans are alike.

'Analogy duorum ad tertium' is rarely invoked as an account of divine attributes. Recall the problem with which the principle of analogy is centrally concerned: the meanings of all human property terms are derived from empirical contexts ('The Empirical Principle') and we wonder if they can be meaningfully applied beyond those contexts. The problem is that if The Empirical Principle is accepted then the meaning of prime analogates is as inaccessible as the meanings of the terms which describe divine attributes. We may state the problem in the form of a dilemma: either we accept The Empirical Principle or we do not accept it. If we accept the principle then we can never know the meaning of prime analogates because, as Forms, by reference to which attributes are ascribed both to God and to human beings, their meanings necessarily go beyond these contexts. On the other hand, if we reject The Empirical Principle and assert that meanings can transcend human experience then the meanings of prime analogates are, in principle, accessible. However, if that is the case then the whole theory of 'analogy duorum ad tertium' loses its rationale. If human empirical contexts can, after all, be transcended and we have direct access to the meanings of prime analogates, then there is no reason, in principle, why we should not have direct knowledge of the meaning of terms that refer to divine attributes. 'Analogy duorum ad tertium' is redundant.

If the scholastic principle of analogy is to be plausible, therefore, we must turn to the form that it took in 'analogy unus ad alterum'. This type of analogy postulates only a non-univocal relationship between two analogates, no third independent analogate is involved. In its turn, however, it subdivides into the analogy of attribution and the analogy of proportionality and it is to these forms that we must now look for a more coherent account of the theory.

The analogy of attribution. The most important feature of this form of analogy is that the attribute properly belongs to one of the two analogates, the prime analogate, and only relatively or derivatively to the other analogate. Some technical terms will require elucidation, however, in the process of expounding this conception.

Firstly, consider primacy. It is tempting to think that the primacy in question is ontological and that since all perfections are most fully realised in the divine nature, the prime analogate is God. In the present context, however, this would be a mistake. We are interested in the extent to which terms whose meaning is learned in human experience can, if at all, be applied to God and, by implication, whether we can ever know the meaning of such terms when applied to God. Consequently the primacy is question is semantic and epistemological, not ontological and it is the meaning of terms in finite, empirical contexts that is primary and their application to God that is derivative.

Secondly, when we speak of derivative attributions the relationship is usually thought of as being causal, the derivative attribution being causally effective in relation to the primary analogate. To take the standard example, fresh fruit is healthy because eating it is causally linked to the health of the healthy person. In the theistic context, therefore, a divine attribute is whatever is causally necessary to bring about the attribute which is properly displayed in the prime analogate, namely human beings. Thus when we say that God and humans are both good we are, so far as analogy of attribution is concerned, saying no more than that God has goodness to the degree and in the form that are causally effective in producing human goodness.

This having been made clear, the difficulty with the analogy of attribution is evident. We wish to know in what ways divine attributes resemble human attributes and the answer is this: the analogates apply non-univocally to both God and humans and God's attributes are causally sufficient in relation to human attributes. But this does not enable us to say whether, in what respect or to what degree divine attributes are like human attributes.

Our agnostic and sceptical doubts are not relieved by the analogy of attribution; we must either find a more plausible rendering of primacy or reformulate the theory without any conception of primacy. It is the latter alternative which we will now explore.

The analogy of proportionality. In this, as in the previous case, the principle of analogy involves a common attribute ascribed, non-univocally, to two analogates. In the case of proportionality, however, the relationship is not hierarchical: neither of the analogates is primary. The attribute is found formally in both analogates but the mode of their presence is determined by the nature of the bearer. There is not then, a literal equivalence between wisdom or love or justice as found in God and in humans. Both possess the attributes but the essential nature of the bearer determines the form of the attribute that each possesses. As A.M.Farrer explains, 'Divine intelligence is appropriate to divine existence as creaturely to creaturely.'

In summary, in the analogy of proportionality an attribute is exemplified in each of two analogates in the form that is appropriate to each analogate and quite independently of any relation to a prime analogate.

This conception of analogy has its origins in Greek mathematics in which it referred to the proportionality, that is to the common or

reciprocal relations (eg. double, triple etc.), which exist between two proportions. However, it was best known in the context of direct comparisons between terms with similar meanings and resemblances between relations. Thus:

divine wisdom = human wisdom , divine love = human love

divine nature human nature divine nature human nature

This conception of analogy has much to commend it. On the one hand, it seems to justice to the sense of divine 'otherness', to the sense that God's attributes differ in kind as well as in degree, from human attributes; and so it is not open to the charge of anthropomorphism to which some accounts seem vulnerable. Yet, on the other hand, it does seem to recognise a continuity between divine attributes and human attributes, thus avoiding the threat of scepticism.

The difficulty with the analogy of proportionality is not so much that what it asserts is false: how, for example, could one fault the contention that God's attributes are appropriate to His divine nature? The problem is more that the theory does not say enough and that what it says does not show how agnostic doubts about the nature of divine attributes can be answered. The theory attempts to throw light on the divine attributes by drawing attention to the fact that the relationship between God's attributes and God's nature is the same as the relationship between human attributes and human nature. Since we know the latter relationship, it is assumed that we can move to the former; and that we can move from knowledge of the former to knowledge of the nature of God's attributes. However, we do not come to know human attributes by grasping their relationship with some

conception of human nature. Rather, we have direct non-analogical knowledge of human attributes. That being the case, the problem in connection with divine attributes is that on the present theory we do not possess a knowledge of the divine nature which enables us to qualify the relevant attribute, nor do we know what the appropriate qualification would be. In place of a theory there is merely the promise of one.

Consider a specific example. We are told that human love is relative to human nature. But how does that differ from merely saying that there are certain characteristic ways in which human beings show their love? And, correspondingly, it is not clear how the view that divine love is relative to the divine nature differs from merely saying that divine love manifests itself in various characteristic forms. The analogy of proportion seems to take us no closer to a knowledge of the nature of the divine attributes.

3. Conclusion.

If an intermediate position between univocal and equivocal accounts of divine attribute terms cannot be found then Christian philosophers might be expected to explore radical alternatives which would challenge the framework within which the basic problem arose. One such radical alternative, to which I alluded briefly, at the end of section 1, would be to challenge the Empirical Principle and it is to this suggestion that I now return. There are both philosophical and theological strands to such an alternative.

Firstly, at a philosophical level we should note the precarious status in contemporary philosophy of the Empiricist Principle itself. The Empiricist Principle (the meaning of all property terms is derived from experience) is not self-evidently true, so on what grounds is it asserted? It has been challenged from many philosophical quarters in

recent decades. Chomsky has argued that one cannot explain the acquisition of basic linguistic structures without postulating innate cognitive capacities and Fodor has extended this thesis to the acquisition of all concepts. More generally, Quine and Wittgenstein have mounted sustained attacks on the empiricist conceptions of concept formation. If we follow Quine in replacing the 'two dogmas of empiricism' by a form of holism, constrained by simplicity, consistency and epistemic conservatism we would have an alternative framework for defending human knowledge of divine attributes. The alternative to empiricism would be a nativism which held that our knowledge of meanings is a function of our innate cognitive structures together with experience which shapes and informs those innate structures.

Secondly, at a theological level, the account of human knowledge of divine attributes would form one part of the general belief that humans were created in the image of God. On such an account empiricist conceptions of concept formation would be replaced by what I shall refer to as 'strong theistic nativism.' Nativism is the view that concept formation is, at least in part, a function of the structure of the cognitive capacities of the knowing subject. Theistic nativism is the view that nativism is true and that human cognitive capacities are the result of God's creative activity. Strong theistic nativism is the view that nativism is true and that God has created human cognitive capacities so that they can recognise and respond to God's own character.

Empiricist incomprehension concerning the divine attributes would be overcome on such a view. Acceptance of the Empiricist Principle made it seem strange, if not incomprehensible, that our finite cognitive structures could provide us with knowledge of the divine nature. However, on strong theistic nativism this is not in the least strange: humans have knowledge of the divine attributes precisely because

God created them in such a fashion that they might know, love and serve Him.

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