

LOCKE AND THE SCHOLASTICS ON THEOLOGICAL DISCOURSE

WALTER OTT

It seems that any empiricist philosopher who wishes to preserve the sense of theological discourse will face one central problem: the doctrine that the mind is a *tabula rasa* seems to drain statements about God of significance. For without claiming that we have some privileged access to the divine nature, it seems we can never know this nature, and hence can never make meaningful statements about it. The path taken to circumvent this difficulty by Aquinas and some later scholastics, notably Cajetan, is that of analogy. Locke, however, seems to have abjured this path. Indeed, some of his statements in Book III can easily be read in such a way as to support a univocity thesis which would disallow analogical discourse, as this admittedly depends on some kind of equivocation. Moreover, the *Essay*¹ is rife with condemnations of scholastic theological discourse, which can easily give the impression that Locke thinks we cannot legitimately make statements about God. This is not to say that *proofs* of God's existence cannot be given in Locke's framework; on the contrary, Locke offers several, and admits that 'Reasoning from Analogy'² can be useful in securing our assent. But the question at hand is quite different; what we are concerned with here is whether and how statements such as 'God is wise', statements that apply to a transcendent being terms derived from human experience, can be made at all legiti-

¹ References are to John Locke, *An essay concerning human understanding*, ed. P. H. Niddich (Oxford 1975).

² IV. xvi. 12 at 666(37). The type of analogy Locke speaks of here is the analogy of inequality, as specified by Cajetan. This will be dealt with below.

mate in the face of Locke's withering attack on the 'learned Gibberish' of the schoolmen.

Let me offer a brief synopsis of the six sections of this paper. In the first section, I outline Locke's treatment of our idea of God in II. xxiii. 32-3, the most comprehensive, but not the only, such treatment to be found in the *Essay*. The second and third sections are concerned with the scholastic method of analogy. The fourth begins a deeper exploration of Locke's view, drawing out the role of analogy in his account of theological discourse. In the fifth section, I focus on the idea of infinity and its place in Locke's theory. The sixth section concludes the paper, ultimately suggesting that Locke's position is (a) not uniform throughout Book II, and (b) not as distant from those of the scholastics as at first sight it appears to be.

I

Locke seems quite sceptical about the possibility of making true statements about God, apart from bare statements of his existence. The attack on the scholastics which permeates much of the *Essay* makes clear that Locke saw the disputations of the schools as essentially worthless and a barrier to the advancement of knowledge.³ Nicholas Wolterstorff⁴ reminds us that the famous discussion Locke alludes to in his 'Epistle to the Reader' concerned morality and revealed religion, according to James Tyrrell's note; and on Locke's showing, it stalemated in perplexity. And Locke's philosophy of language can be seen as in part an attempt to undercut the philosophical confusions that

³ See *Essay*, III. x, esp. sections 8 and 9.

⁴ In *The Cambridge companion to Locke*, ed. V. Chappell (Cambridge 1994), p. 174.

arise from the use of words referring to no clear idea in the mind of the speaker. These facts combine to give the general impression that Locke wants to steer clear of the traditional discourse about God, contenting himself with having proved God's existence, and consigning the rest to the silence of faith and revelation.

As a result of this general impression, Locke's account of our idea of God in Book II has received little attention in the secondary literature;⁵ by contrast, the proofs of God's existence, and Locke's denial that he has any positive idea of infinity, have been treated more extensively.

But this approach fails to be fair to the text. Locke does indeed think we can meaningfully (quite apart from truthfully) make some theological statements, namely those of the kind secured by the scholastics' use of analogy, which predicate some quality of the divine being.

How is this accomplished? Here is one way to set out Locke's view in II. xxiii, the fullest (but not the only) account of our idea of God to be found in the *Essay*:

(1) '*Words in their primary or immediate Signification, stand for nothing, but the Ideas in the Mind of him that uses them*' (III. ii. 2).

(2) The only sources we have for these ideas are sensation and reflection or introspection (II. xxiii. 32, and many other places).

(3) Since we are not, in this life, acquainted with God, sensation and reflection can never directly provide us with ideas about God (ibid.).

⁵ The major works on Locke that I am aware of give the topic either passing treatment or none at all. The works I have in mind are Ayers's *Locke*, the *Cambridge companion to Locke*, Yolton's books on Locke, and Mabbott's *John Locke*, among others.

(4) Thus these ideas of God must be got by enlarging the ideas furnished us by reflection, with our idea of infinity (ibid., 32-3). (This key step will be examined below.)

In II. xxiii. 33, Locke tells us that we arrive at our complex idea of the supreme being by performing operations upon simple ideas of reflection.⁶ Locke is demanding that, in our talk of God, we restrict ourselves to statements ultimately founded upon such simple ideas. And given Locke's list of the simple ideas provided by reflection for use in our idea-of-god-building project, this does not seem like much of a restriction at all: 'the *Ideas* of Existence and Duration; of Knowledge and Power; of Pleasure and Happiness; and of several other Qualities and Powers' (ibid.) can serve as the basis for our idea. This seems to open up the possibility of making all sorts of contentful statements about God. So, far from abjuring theological discourse altogether, Locke is here helping himself to a great deal of it.

But the real heart of the problem has not been touched yet. To see this, we need to look more closely at step 4 of Locke's account:

[W]hen we would frame an *Idea* the most suitable we can to the supreme Being, we enlarge every one of these [Ideas listed above] with our *Idea* of Infinity; and so putting them together, make our complex *Idea of God*. (II. xxiii. 33)

On the face of it, this is problematic. It remains to be seen whether any sense can be made of Locke's metaphor of 'enlarging' ideas with a concept of infinity; we will also have to see what concept of infinity Locke is working with.

⁶ '[T]he complex *Ideas* we have both of God, and separate Spirits, are made up of the simple *Ideas* we receive from *Reflection*' (314(27-8)).

II

Before I go on to address these issues, I want to draw out some differences between Locke's account and that of the scholastics. For Aquinas, such predicates as 'powerful' and 'knowing', when said of God, are univocal in one sense, equivocal in another. Consider this passage from the *Commentary on the first book of Sentences*:

[T]here are two aspects of the terms [predicated of God] to consider: the thing signified and the mode of being signified. Therefore we must consider that when we, who know God only from creatures, employ a term, we always fall short of a representation of God with respect to the 'mode of being signified': because the term signifies the divine perfections through the mode by which they are participated in by creatures.⁷

According to Aquinas, the intention (*intentio*) of a property-term specifies more than the property referred to; as James Ross puts it, it also specifies 'the way the property is signified'.⁸ In the case of theological discourse, there is a gap between the way in which the property is signified (because we know e.g. wisdom only through our earthly experiences of it) and the way in which God has this property. Thus, when we call both God and man 'wise' we are in one sense speaking univocally because the property predicated of God and man (the *res significata*) is identical; but we are also speaking equivocally, because the term signifies this property through the mode (the *modus significandi*) proper to talk of creatures, not of God. We must recognize that the order of knowledge is not the order of reality; just because we come to know wisdom first in created beings, we should not

⁷ Quoted in James Ross, 'Analogy as a rule of meaning for religious language', in J. F. Ross (ed.), *Inquiries into medieval philosophy* (Westport, CT 1971), p. 56.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

think that our idea of God is anthropomorphic, a mere extrapolation from our everyday experience. On the contrary, Aquinas insists that God's being is ontologically prior to that of his creations, but epistemologically posterior.⁹ And this is of a piece with what Jorge Secada has called 'scholastic existentialism': the view that 'whoever knows the nature of man, or of any other thing, must know that the thing exists'.¹⁰

So the statements needed for a given analogy (e.g., 'God is wise', 'Man is wise') will employ a predicate neither fully univocally nor fully equivocally, a middle ground indispensable for maintaining the integrity of the analogy. Locke, by contrast, never makes this distinction between *res significata* and *modus significandi*. Locke has no patience whatsoever with the talk of the schoolmen. He frequently demands that words be used 'constantly and steadily' (IV. viii. 11; see also IV. xvii. 13). If philosophers and poets used '*the same Word constantly in the same sense*', many of their works might be 'contained in a Nut-shell' (III. xi. 26). This may be mere anti-scholastic rhetoric, with no particular application to analogy intended. But I think it more reasonable to suppose that, since Locke does not explicitly use analogy as a tool for speaking contentfully about God, and since he offers no direct argument for this, Locke saw the equivocation demanded by Aquinas and Cajetan as insidious and potentially misleading. His reaction against scholasticism was severe enough to make any kind of equivocation unpalatable. Further, he might well have been aware of Cajetan's remark at the very beginning of *De nominum analogia*: 'An understanding [of the analogy of names] is so necessary that without it no one

⁹ Cf. *Summa contra gentiles*, ch. 34.

¹⁰ Aquinas, *Commentary on the Posterior Analytics* II. 6. 2. Quoted in J. Secada, *Cartesian metaphysics: An essay on the late scholastic origins of idealism* (Cambridge, forthcoming), ch. 1, and 'Descartes y la escolastica', *Areté* 7 (1995), 301-30.

can study metaphysics'.¹¹ Locke is suspicious of scholastic metaphysics, and frustrated with the fruitless debates it engenders; it is no wonder analogy plays no official role in his theory of how we arrive at our idea of God.

But the story is not nearly as simple as my account thus far suggests. We have not got clear on exactly what Locke's own means of preserving the sense of theological discourse amounts to: how do we enlarge our ideas, and what content can we give to the idea of infinity? And indeed, the central argument of the second half of this paper will be that Locke is, *malgré lui*, closer to the scholastics than he would like to admit.

III

Before going further, some historical comments are in order. It is often claimed that Aquinas has no definite theory of analogy, and that it is a later scholastic, Cardinal Thomas de Vio, known as Cajetan (Il Gaetano, or the man from Gaeta), who formalizes this doctrine.¹² Cajetan distinguishes three types of analogy: analogy of inequality, of attribution, and of proportionality. 'However, according to the true sense of the term and the practice of Aristotle, only the last mode constitutes analogy.'¹³

The analogy of inequality is ruled out by Cajetan as 'entirely foreign to analogy',¹⁴ because it employs its terms univocally:

¹¹ *The analogy of names*, tr. E. A. Bushinski (Pittsburgh 1953), p. 9.

¹² See, e.g., Bushinski's introduction to his translation of Cajetan's *De nominum analogia*. He writes, 'As a faithful interpreter of St. Thomas, Cajetan supplemented something which hitherto had been lacking in the imposing structure of Thomistic philosophy—a coherent, systematic and professional study of analogy itself, rather than its applications to other philosophical and theological problems' (p. 7).

¹³ *Op. cit.*, p. 11.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

Things are said to be analogous by analogy of inequality if they have a common name, and the notion indicated by this name is exactly the same but unequally participated in. We are speaking here of inequality of perfection; for example, *body* is a term common to inferior and superior bodies [e.g., common to plants and to celestial bodies such as the moon], and the notion of all bodies, in so far as they are bodies, is the same.¹⁵

This idea of a hierarchy of being is at least as old as Aristotle; but it is not hard to see why this sort of analogy will not fill the role Aquinas and Cajetan ask it to fill.¹⁶ For if Cajetan is right and the terms employed in this sort of analogy are employed univocally, then the distinction between the mode of signification proper to the attributes of creatures and that proper to the attributes of God will be transgressed. The univocity of its terms is presumptuous, and goes against the grain of Aquinas's empiricism.

But neither will analogy of attribution suit the theologian's purposes, though Cajetan does countenance it as a legitimate kind of analogy. Terms are said to be analogous by attribution if there is some focal meaning¹⁷ by reference to which the others derive their meaning. To use a venerable physiological example, a good breakfast, medicine, urine, and an animal are all called 'healthy', but of course only an animal can really be healthy. Here we have a term predicated of different things in a reasoned

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ross claims (op. cit., p. 57) that this type of analogy can sprout from the *res significata/modus significandi* distinction drawn by Aquinas in his commentary on the *Sentences*. This, it seems to me, is less than perspicuous in Ross's account. But presumably he reasons in something like the following fashion: if we acknowledge a gap between the mode in which creatures have a given perfection, and the mode in which God has the same perfection, and are therefore compelled to acknowledge a corresponding gap between the mode of signification proper to creatures (which is, it seems, built into the *intentio* of the term) and that proper to God, it is but a short step to countenancing the hierarchy of perfections implicit in the analogy of inequality.

¹⁷ Cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Book Γ, ch. 2.

way; the equivocation here is not of the more familiar kind as exemplified in a term such as 'bank', which might mean the bounds of a river or a place to deposit money. This is why Cajetan adverts to the 'Greek philosophers', who hold that terms analogous by attribution 'lie midway between equivocal and univocal terms'.¹⁸ Nonetheless, Cajetan's conclusion is that such terms are equivocal, and clearly we do not want to equivocate every time we speak of God.

So Cajetan must find a way to steer between the Scylla of univocation and the Charybdis of equivocation.¹⁹ And this is precisely what the analogy of proportionality²⁰ is designed to do. It is worth looking at a definition of Cajetan's; analogous by proportionality

are called those things which have a common name, and the notion expressed by this name is similar according to a proportion. For instance, to see by corporeal vision and by intellectual vision are indicated by the common term *to see*, because just as *to understand* presents something to the mind, so *to see* presents something to the animated body.²¹

Cajetan's exposition is difficult, and roughly the second half of his treatise is devoted to explicating this notion, and ironing out all the kinks. But we have enough here for our purposes. To get clearer on this sort of analogy, let us take an example: God's

¹⁸ Op. cit., p. 22.

¹⁹ For more on the role of equivocation in analogy, see J. F. Ross, *Portraying analogy* (Cambridge 1981), ch. 4.

²⁰ We must distinguish between analogies of proper and improper (or metaphorical) proportionality. The latter obtains when a word has one meaning 'which is realized in one of the analogates and predicated of the other by metaphor. For example, *to smile* has one meaning in itself, but is metaphorically analogous with respect to a true smile and a blooming meadow or good fortune' (op. cit., p. 26). In the text, I mean to speak of the analogy of proper proportionality.

²¹ Op. cit., p. 25.

wisdom is to God's being as man's wisdom is to his being.²² We can see the *res significata/modus significandi* at work: wisdom is used univocally in both statements, since the same property is predicated of both man and God, and yet equivocally, since the mode of this wisdom is quite different. If Cajetan is right about all of this, he will have zeroed in on a way of conducting theological discourse which respects the epistemological limitations of the speakers without involving them in equivocation.²³

With all of this as background, I shall argue that Locke's account of our idea of God is problematic, in part because it is simply inconsistent on what sort of idea we can have of the infinite, but also, and perhaps more significantly, because it fails to acknowledge Cajetan's fundamental point about the importance of equivocation for theological discourse. Moreover, Locke's account cannot remain independent of the scholastic apparatus of the analogy of inequality, which was rejected by Cajetan. In short, I shall contend that Locke has not fully overcome the scholastic framework against which he argued so vehemently.

IV

We can now begin a more careful analysis of Locke's account, expanding on the outline above (in section I). Not having received any innate idea of God, we are obliged to construct one out of simple ideas provided by reflection. Not knowing the real essence of a 'Peble, or a Fly' (II. xxiii. 35), we certainly cannot know God's essence; God is simple and uncompounded, and yet

²² For a textual basis for this sort of analogy in Aquinas, see *On truth*, xxvii. 7.

²³ For a more detailed account of the relationship between Aquinas and this kind of analogy, see R. M. McNerny, *Studies in analogy* (The Hague 1968), ch. 1.

we must use a complex idea to represent him due to the inferiority of our intellect.²⁴ Locke suggests in II. xxiii. 33, that we frame an idea most adequate to God by ‘enlarging’ certain simple ideas, furnished us by reflection, with our idea of infinity.

But before moving on to the idea of infinity, we need to get clearer about the role the analogy of inequality plays in Locke’s discussion in II. xxiii. It is this kind of analogy Locke recommends as useful in natural theology:

Observing, I say, such gradual and gentle descents downwards in those parts of the Creation, that are beneath Man, the rule of Analogy may make it probable, that it is so also in Things above us, and our Observation; and that there are several ranks of intelligent Beings, excelling us in several degrees of Perfection, ascending upwards towards the infinite Perfection of the Creator, by gentle steps and differences, that are every one at no great distance from the next to it. (IV. xvi. 12)

Though Locke is speaking here of probability and assent, I would suggest that this technique is needed also in giving content to our idea of God. For how are we to choose which of the simple ideas found in reflection are fit for use in building our idea of God? Locke tells us that they are those ‘which it is better to have, than to be without’ (II. xxiii. 33). But this demands that we have reason to believe (not know, since God’s essence is inaccessible) that God is perfect, and this can only be arrived at by an analogy of inequality: just as man is superior to lower animals, so God must be superior to man, and therefore must have the best of the qualities known by us. So this is one clear way in which Locke’s account depends on the analogy of inequality, a scholastic tool rejected by Cajetan.

Indeed, it seems that the very trait which made this kind of analogy repugnant to Cajetan, namely, the univocity of its

²⁴ Cf. Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles*, ch. 35.

terms, is the trait which appealed to Locke, who made the use of this analogy consonant with his insistence on the univocity of terms.

V

What is this idea of infinity with which we are supposed to enlarge our ideas? Let us consider the account Locke gives at II. xvii and following. The idea is in a certain sense confused, because it contains two inconsistent parts: first, however great an idea we frame of space or number, it is yet an idea of some definite space or number, and this is denied by the second part of the idea, 'which *consists in a supposed endless Progression*' (II. xvii. 8). The only clear idea we can have of any sort of infinity is a negative one: we are like 'a Mariner' trying to fathom 'the depth of the sea',

where having let down a large portion of his Sounding-line, he reaches no bottom: Whereby he knows the depth to be so many fathoms, and more; but how much that more is, he hath no distinct notion at all: And could he always supply new Line, and find the Plummet always sink, without ever stopping, he would be something in the posture of the Mind reaching after a compleat and positive *Idea* of Infinity. (II. xvii. 15)

It is absurd to say that we have a clear and distinct idea of an infinite something or other, since having such a distinct idea would entail its being limited, which is just what is denied by the notion of infinity. This is the heart of Locke's argument against Descartes, whose claim that he had such a clear and distinct idea provided the grounds for the first proof of God's existence in Meditation Three. Descartes even held that 'the whole force of my proof depends on this one fact'.²⁵ We can see this argument

²⁵ Replies to the First Objections, in Descartes, *Meditations on first philosophy*, tr. J. Cottingham (Cambridge 1986), p. 88.

of Locke's as a rejection of Cartesian essentialism and a return, of sorts, to scholastic existentialism and empiricist (and indeed Old Testament) scepticism about knowing the infinite. On Locke's account, the denial of limit constitutes the only idea of infinity available to us.

But this makes the account of our idea of God that Locke provides later in Book II (at xxiii. 32–3) problematic at best. For how are we to 'enlarge' anything with a purely negative idea? Further, in his account of infinity in chapter xvii, Locke contended that our idea of infinity can only properly concern those things that admit of parts, e.g. duration and space. Since we can always imagine duration and space increased by quantitatively specifiable degrees (e.g., a foot, a minute), we can imagine infinite space and duration in the sense that we know we can always add another unit to however many units have already been compiled. For this reason, our idea of God as infinite in power, wisdom, goodness, and other such properties which do not admit of units are predicated of God 'figuratively' (II. xvii. 1). This is a clear point of tension with the account proffered in chapter xxiii, where Locke writes:

If I find, that I know some few things, and some of them, or all, perhaps, imperfectly, I can frame an *Idea* of knowing twice as many; which I can double again, as often as I can add to Number, and thus enlarge my *Idea* of Knowledge, by extending its Comprehension to all things existing, or possible ... and thus frame the *Idea* of infinite or boundless Knowledge: The same may also be done of Power ... and also of the Duration of Existence ... and so frame the *Idea* of an eternal Being. ... For it is infinity, which, joined to our *Ideas* of Existence, Power, Knowledge, *etc.*, makes that complex *Idea*, whereby we represent to our selves the best we can, the supreme Being. (II. xxiii. 34–5)

Earlier, in chapter xvii, Locke was ready to admit some kind of figuration or analogy in speaking of God's wisdom, power

and goodness; here, he retracts this, and insists we can frame an idea of a Being possessing these qualities to an infinite degree. Worse, it seems as if Locke has entirely forgotten that the idea of infinity is negative, not positive; what would it mean to say that our ideas are enlarged by being coupled with a purely negative idea? What Locke saw in chapter xvii, and seems to forget here, is that the way in which God knows, is wise, or is good, is qualitatively different from that in which men do these things. In short, the *res significata* of any given predicate applied to God is the same as when this predicate is applied to man; but the *modus significandi* is different. We cannot frame an idea of an all-knowing being just by imagining an increase in the knowledge we possess. With respect to duration and ubiquity, we can use these terms univocally; but the other terms must be used analogically or 'figuratively'.

The account in chapter xxiii seems to depend on the analogy of inequality in so far as Locke needs some reason for thinking that certain ideas provided by sensation and reflection and not others are the proper basis for forming an idea of God. But the objections I have just been raising help us see why Cajetan rejected this kind of analogy: its univocity is presumptuous. Locke can indeed imagine a gradation of beings above him in the hierarchy of being to complement the gradation that he sees below him; this use of the analogy of inequality provides us with a reason for believing that (probably) there is a God. But here, in chapter xxiii, Locke seems to be putting more weight on this analogy, in so far as he needs it not only to help secure our assent, but also to give content to our idea of God. As we saw above, this analogy is crucial in selecting the ideas to be enlarged.

Recall the earlier (II. xvii) treatment of infinity as the negation of limit. In so far as we try to make this idea substantive and positive, we also make it unclear, because to do so is to

couple it with something contradictory: a limit, one imposed by our own faculties of thought. Locke gives up this reasonably coherent account for a much more ambitious one, where he seeks to give more content than this to our idea of God, and to ground our predications of knowledge, wisdom, etc. of Him on firmer ground than some unspecified 'figuration'.

VI

As is well known, the *Essay* was not composed in a single sitting but rather over a great number of years. It thus seems advisable to ascribe an inconsistency to Locke's account on this score, rather than to attempt any interpretative contortions on his behalf. I hope my interpretation lets us see just where and to what extent Locke departs from the scholastics. His strong univocity thesis prohibited his use of the traditional analogy of proportionality, and this may well have been for the best. Later philosophy has not looked kindly on this sort of analogy. Quite apart from Locke's rejection of equivocation, it has been pointed out by Peter Geach²⁶ that 'a rule-of-three sum can be worked only if three of the quantities involved are known; but God is not "known" in the relevant sense—i.e. something encountered as an item in the world'. This shows statements like 'God's wisdom is to God as man's wisdom is to man' to be entirely unhelpful because the left-hand side (so to speak) of the analogy is completely unknown to us.

But Locke's own account suffers from quite different problems. First, we are hard pressed to see how a positive idea of God can be arrived at by enlarging our simple ideas with what must be a wholly negative idea of infinity. Second, Locke seems

²⁶ 'Aquinas', in G. E. M. Anscombe & P. T. Geach, *Three philosophers* (Oxford 1961), p. 123.

to have changed his mind in the course of writing Book II on the issue of which simple ideas admitted of 'enlargement'. And I have tried to point out the costs of giving up the Thomistic distinction between *res significata* and *modus significandi*, and with it any sort of equivocation. While his account of theological discourse is firmly rooted in the scholastic framework of analogy, his departures from the teachings of Cajetan and Aquinas make his account problematic at best.²⁷

²⁷ I would like to thank an anonymous referee at *The Locke newsletter* for helpful comments and suggestions.