Religious Language and Analogical Predication

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RECENTLY the language of religion has been subjected to considerable analysis by contemporary philosophers. They have recognized that the question of meaning of religious utterances is logically prior and logically independent of the issue of the truth or falsity of religious utterances, and they have been asking what sort of meaning we are to ascribe to sentences denominated as religious. This question certainly is not a new one. It has been the concern of philosophical theologians for centuries. The multiplicity and variety of religious utterances with their figurative and parabolic language have been subjected to constant analysis in the history of thought, and in recent years this analysis has been more acute and penetrating. Traditionally, the philosophical theologian has recognized that God's nature, being free from dependence and limitation, is not describable in terms of human thought and language, and that any statement offered as a statement about God must be understood with certain qualifications and limitations. Contemporary philosophers have been concerned with the nature and extent of these qualifications placed on the meaning of religious utterances.

An example from Antony Flew makes clear this concern: "Someone tells us that God loves us as a father loves his children. We are assured. But then we see a child dying of inoperable cancer of the throat. His earthly father is driven frantic in his efforts to help, but his Heavenly Father reveals no obvious signs of concern. Some qualification is made—God's love is 'not a merely human love' or it is 'an inscrutable love . . .'—and we realize that such sufferings are compatible with the truth of the assertion that 'God loves us as a father . . .'. We are reassured again. But then perhaps we ask: What is this assurance of God's love worth, what is this apparent guarantee really a guarantee against? Just what would have to happen not merely . . . to tempt but also . . . to entitle us to say 'God does not love us' . . . ?"[1] Flew's point is that the utterance, "God loves us," is compatible with any possible future experience and since it denies nothing, it also does not assert anything. It is Flew's (and others') contention that religious utterances "die the death of a thousand qualifications." They lose the literal and cognitive[2] meaning they purport to have and retain only emotive meaning.

Now those who employ the language of religion have no objection to the view that religious utterances have emotive meaning. Their objection is to the position that religious utterances have **simply and solely** emotive meaning. They are opposed to the view that religious utterances as a class have only the kind of meaning that a dream or a poetic fantasy has, namely, the kind of meaning which **satisfies** religious persons but which does not describe the facts of the world. It is argued that, although some religious utterances are **purely** emotive and are intended to be such, there are many religious utterances intended as factual statements about the universe. It is maintained that these utterances refer or **designate** but in a fundamentally different way from the manner in which literal statements refer or designate. The problem is that of getting clear about the manner in which these religious utterances, pur-

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[1] Antony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre (Editors), *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, London, 1955, p. 99.

[2] By "cognitive" I mean "capable of being true or false."

ported to be cognitive, refer or designate.

One of the traditional and perennial solutions to this problem is the doctrine of analogical predication. Religious utterances which purport to be cognitive refer or designate analogically. One of the most recent formulative of the doctrine of analogy is that of E. M. Mascall. In his **Existence and Analogy**[3] Mascall recognizes the crucial role that the doctrine of analogical predication plays for the theologian and makes it his concern to show how this doctrine enables statements about a transcendent God to have **cognitive** significance but not literal truth. He maintains that it is "transparently clear to anyone whose judgment is not shackled by a predetermined dogma that if two men respectively affirm and deny that God exists they are in fact disagreeing about the nature of reality, and not merely expressing different emotional or aesthetic attitudes."[4] Having thus rid himself of the positivist's emotive interpretation of religious utterances, Mascall gets on with his task of explicating the doctrine of analogical predication.

The question of analogy arises, Mascall states, when "having satisfied ourselves that the existence of finite being declares its dependence upon self-existent being, we then apprehend that no predicate can be attributed to finite and self-existent being univocally."[5] Rejecting the equivocal use of predicates, Mascall is left with analogy. He states that "we must see the analogical relation between God and the world as combining in a tightly interlocked union both analogy of attribution and analogy of proportionality. Without analogy of proportionality it is very doubtful whether the attributes which we predicate of God can be ascribed to him in more than a merely trivial sense; without analogy of attribution, it hardly seems possible to avoid agnosticism."[6] Mascall argues that this union of analogy or attribution and analogy of proportionality provides a means whereby the cognitive (though not literal) significance of theological statements can be shown. The remainder of this paper will be concerned, first, to state this doctrine of analogical predication which unites analogy of attribution and analogy of proportionality. Our second concern will be a critical one. We will ask if the doctrine of analogical predication is successful in the sense that it enables theological statements about a transcendent God to be cognitively meaningful.

II

In setting forth his doctrine of analogical predication which unites analogy of attribution and analogy of proportionality, Mascall agrees with Gilson that the purpose of the doctrine of analogy is not to allow us to form concepts of the divine essence, but to allow us to affirm the divine existence; not to compare God's features with those of finite beings, but to allow us to assert that he exists when we can identify him only by describing him in terms derived from the finite order.[7] Mascall approvingly quotes one of Gilson's remarks on St. Thomas's treatment of analogy: "St. Thomas undoubtedly does allow us a certain knowledge of God, and unless we are to admit that St. Thomas has grossly contradicted himself, we must suppose that the knowledge of God which he grants does not in any way bear upon his essence. . . . Every effect of God is analogous to its cause. The concept which we form of this effect can in no case be transformed for us into the concept of God which we lack, but we can attribute to God, by our affirmative judgment, the name that denotes the perfection corresponding to this effect. To proceed in this way is not to posit God as sim-

[3] E. M. Mascall, *Existence and Analogy*, London, 1949.
[4] *Ibid.*
[5] *Ibid.*, p. 95.
[6] *Ibid.*, p. 113.
[7] *Ibid.*, p. 117.

ilar to the creature, it is to ground oneself on the certitude that, since every effect resembles it cause, the creature from which we start certainly resembles God."[8]

For Mascall the importance of the doctrine of analogy is that it enables one to "attribute to God . . . the name that denotes the perfection" corresponding to any of God's effects in the created world. Mascall states that this point is "so important that I (he) will try to make it in a slightly different way." I will quote Mascall's attempt to do this in detail:

> When . . . I say that God is good or wise or just, I am inevitably asserting that goodness, wisdom, and justice are inherent in the nature of God, for in God there are no accidents, no qualities that are not included in his essence. It follows that all of our statements about God have a directly existential reference, such as is possessed by none of our statements about finite beings except those in which existence is explicitly asserted. The only way in which I can assert that beings with horns on their noses exist is by affirming existence either of such beings in general or of some such being (for example, a unicorn or a rhinoceros) in particular; but I can assert that a good being exists simply by affirming that God is good. Since in God essence and existence are identical, any assertion about God's essence is at the same time an assertion about existence: anything which is affirmed to be included in God's nature is at the same time affirmed to exist, and indeed to be self-existent. . . . It is then, I suggest, in virtue of the inherently existential element in all of our affirmations about God that the possibility of analogical knowledge of God and of analogical discourse about him can be maintained. If it were possible to make a statement about God that bore exclusively on the essential or conceptual order, that statement would collapse into sheer equivocity and agnosticism, for no concept of the essence of God can be formed by a finite mind. Since, however, God's essence necessarily involves his existence, no statement about him can remain in the essential or conceptual order; it passes over immediately into the order of existence and the judgment. What begins as an attempt to conceive God's goodness—an attempt which is doomed to failure—issues in an affirmation that self-existent goodness exists; but even this last statement needs careful interpretation if it is not to be taken as implying that we form a concept of 'self-existent goodness.'[9]

For Mascall the doctrine of analogy enables us to attribute to God the perfections which correspond to the effects of his created world. It does not enable us to conceive of God's goodness or his anger, for no concept of the essence of God can be formed by a finite mind. The meaning of analogy is to be grasped by recognizing the contingency of existence which arises from the fact that in finite beings essence and existence are really distinct, whereas in God essence and existence are identical. In the statement, for example, that both a given man and God are good, there is not a formal participation of the same characteristic in the different analogates. Rather God is described as being good because His relation to His goodness is similar to the relation that a good man bears to his goodness. This does not mean that "goodness" is to be found formally in God. What is meant, Mascall states, is that the analogue under discussion (like "goodness") is found formally in each of the analogates but in a mode that is determined by the nature of the analogate itself. Indeed this is what is meant by the analogy of proportionality. However, the analogy of proportionality (the view that the goodness of finite being is to finite being as the goodness of God is to God) which is expresed by Mascall in the following formula:

$$\frac{\text{goodness of finite being}}{\text{finite being}} = \frac{\text{goodness of God}}{\text{God}}$$

is "held together by that analogy of attribution which asserts, not merely in the conceptual but in the existential order, that finite being can exist only

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 118.

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 119-120.

in dependence in God."[10] That is, the predicate "good" belongs formally and properly to only one of the analogates, namely, finite being, and "relatively and derivatively" to the other, namely, God. What is meant by "relatively and derivatively" is that in any case where the analogates concerned are God and a creature or created thing, the relation upon which the analogy is based is that of creative causality. Thus if we say that God and a given man are both good, the content of the word "good" is derived from our experience of the goodness of creatures and we are saying no more than that God has goodness in whatever way is necessary to produce goodness in his creatures.[11] The combined use of analogy of attribution and analogy of proportionality does not enable us to have a concept of God's goodness, anger, or other attributes. It simply permits us to affirm that these qualities or perfections, **whatever they are,** are identical with God's existence. The doctrine of analogical prediction still leaves all of our assertions about God "grossly inadequate in so far as they apply concepts to him but they are thoroughly adequate in so far as they affirm perfections of him."[12]

III

The above, I think, is a fair and accurate summary of Mascall's formulation of the doctrine of analogy. However, for several reasons this doctrine of analogical predication will not do the job for which it was devised, namely, that of permitting theological statements to retain cognitive significance, while at the same time avoiding univocal predication. I will suggest several reasons why this true. These critical remarks will apply not only to Mascall's position but **mutatis mutandis** to others who employ the doctrine of analogical predication.

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 120.
[11] *Ibid.*, p. 102.
[12] *Ibid.*, p. 120.

The doctrine of analogical predication enables us "to attribute to God . . . the name that denotes the perfection" corresponding to the effects of God's creation, or as Mascall puts it, "all our assertions about God. . . . are thoroughly adequate in so far as they affirm perfections of him." But what does it mean to ascribe a perfection to God? We can have no concept of what any of these perfections could be. Is it enlightening, having no concept of "goodness" when applied to God, to say that God's goodness is to God as man's goodness is to man? Is it enlightening, having no concept of "anger" when applied to God, to ascribe "anger" to God, meaning by this that God's relation to the punishments which he imposes is "similar" to that which an angry man has to the injuries which he inflicts? Does this method enable statements about a transcendent God to have cognitive significance? I think not. Such statements could be enlightening only if we had some literal knowledge of God. That is, if one is to know analogically something of God (or any other object) then one must know something of God (or any other object) **literally.** The assertion, for example, that God's goodness is to God like man's goodness is to man is significant to the extent that we know something non-analogical about God, namely, something about the meaning of "goodness" when applied to God. Otherwise the analogy conveys no meaning. It also seems to be the case that some non-analogical knowledge of God is necessary in order to know that certain analogies are appropriate ones to apply to Him.

This objection can be put in another way. It is a quite meaningful use of analogy to take any given characteristic of our experience and postulate a much higher degree of that characteristic than our experience actually shows. Thus though the meaning is not precise, it nonetheless is quite meaningful to speak of men attaining a much higher degree of moral goodness than they

now have or speak of men attaining a higher degree of knowledge than they now have. However, the use of analogy in religious utterances requires much more than differences in degree of some characteristic found in our experience. The religious use of analogy requires that the characteristic alluded to in human experience (for example, "goodness" or "knowledge") be fundamentally **different in kind** when offered as an attribute of God. The characteristic does not differ merely in **degree** for God possesses these characteristics in an absolute or **unlimited** sense. God is "infinitely good" and "infinitely wise." These religious utterances go completely beyond the use of analogy viewed as a movement to a higher degree of a characteristic found in our experience, for when these attributes are predicated of God, we are speaking of something unconditioned and unlimited. That God possesses the qualities of "infinite goodness" and "infinite wisdom" conveys no meaning since the difference between human goodness and knowledge and divine goodness and knowledge is not one of **degree** but one of **kind.** These infinite qualities do not have the experiential grounding required for meaningful comprehension.

There is a further problem involved in the theologian's use of analogical predication. If something literal about God is not known, then one becomes involved in invoking one analogy in order to explain another analogy. Paul Hayner[18] points out that this is exactly the predicament that St. Thomas is in when he remarks that an effect can be said to **resemble** God solely according to analogy. The notion of "resemblance" itself must be viewed analogically. We can say, for example, that God's goodness resembles that of man. But it is not only the case that "goodness" is to be viewed analogically when applied to God; it is also the case that the relation of "resemblance" must be viewed analogically. This seems to leave one in a regress of analogical explanations. If this is true, then surely the appeal to analogy loses its value as a means whereby the meaning of theological statements can be fixed.

There is a further problem for some theologicans who want to rely on analogical predication. The unknowable qualities, like "goodness" or "anger," which are attributed to un unknowable transcendent being cannot be properly spoken of as attributable at all. This is the case because God's nature is viewed as simple and incomposite. God's existence and his ascribed attributes are stated as being identical with his essence. But if there are no relations in God, then the relation of attribution is also ruled out. Or is the relation of attribution itself to be viewed analogically? If so, the theologian is left in the uncomfortable position of attributing unknowable properties to an unknowable being using an unknowable relation of attribution. The "cloud of unknowing" is a complete overcast.

Our objection to analogical predication can also be stated in the following manner: Predicates, like goodness, when applied to God have been so "eroded" (to use Antony Flew's notion) of their ordinary meaning that they appear no longer to have meaning at all. We are told that the goodness of God and the goodness of man differ in degree and it is assumed that this gives theological statements an empirical grounding and some sort of cognitive meaning, such that one then knows what is being asserted. However, it is added that this difference in degree between the goodness of God and the goodness of man is **infinite,** whatever that means. The force of this qualification seems to make the statement, "God is good," compatible with any possible occurrence so that no evidence at all could possibly confute it. But if this is the case, can we say that it means anything at all? The application of the pred-

[18] Paul Hayner, "Analogical Predication," *Journal of Philosophy,* Vol. LV, September 25, 1958, p. 857.

icate "good" (and others) to God will be compatible with God's being of any character whatsoever, and consequently, nothing whatsoever will follow from the fact that the predicate "good" (and others) applies to God.

For the above reasons, I do not think that the doctrine of analogical predication fulfills the function that Mascall (and others) wishes it to perform, namely, that of giving cognitive meaning to statements about a transcendent being. It does not satisfy two basic requirements for a theological statement to be cognitively meaningful, namely, that the speaker and hearer know or can find out what the statement is about and that the extent of the claim which is being made about it can be determined.

The failure of the doctrine of analogical predication need not mean that religious utterances are non-cognitive expressions of emotion. However, it does point to the necessity for a careful analysis of religious utterances on the part of those who claim they are cognitive. The emotivist is certainly correct on one point: the issue of the meaning of any utterance is logically prior to the issue of the truth or falsity of any utterance, and this fact has been neglected by many of those who employ religious discourse, including theologians.