Analogy Does Not Explain Religious Language

by John C. Cahalan

Analogy is not the solution to the problem of religious language. That problem can be solved, but analogy is not the solution. Analogy is not even the explanation of religious language for the thinker most associated with the view that it is, Aquinas. For purposes of economy, in fact, I will use the texts of Aquinas to illustrate my thesis. My thesis, however, is philosophical, not historical. The principles that the texts of Aquinas illustrate will not show merely that analogy was not his solution to the problem of religious language. They will show why analogy should not be anyone's solution to that problem.

I

Legend has it that my thesis was first discovered in the late middle ages by Melvin of Dinant, a decendent of David. One day Melvin came across a copy of the Summa Theologiae. Although unlearned in philosophy or theology, he began reading Question 13, "On the Names of God". Reading the title of Article 2, "Whether Any Name Can Be Applied to God Substantially", he asked himself what it meant for a name to be applied to something "substantially". From the body of the article, he learns that names can be applied to God quite apart from any relation between Him and creatures. Of course, our knowledge of the truth of applying such names to God depends on relations that creatures have to Him, but the truth of those applications does not. That truth depends on what God is. Joe thinks, "Instead of expressing relations between Him and creatures, names said of God can express what He is intrinsically." And Joe is not wrong.

Article 2 does not satisfy Melvin's curiosity about divine names, however. He thinks, "The truth of a predication depends not only on what a thing is, it also depends on the meaning of the name. Truth is a relation of some sort between what is meant by words and what things are. Aquinas' explanation of why names can be attributed to God substantially makes the assumption that names can be truthfully said of God while being used correctly, that is, while retaining already-understood meanings.

Turning the page, Melvin finds that the next article is addressed to just that question, "Whether names can be applied to God properly. In the body of the article, Aquinas introduces a distinction between that which is signified by a name and the mode of signification. Unlike what is signified by metaphorical terms, what is signified by some names can be properly applied to God; that is, the perfection we signify by the name can be something belonging substantially (in the sense of Article 2) to His nature. The modes in which we signify such perfections, however, cannot be properly applied to God.

Again, Melvin is not satisfied. "Aquinas is assuming the very point at issue. No one would deny that the problem concerns that which is signified and not the mode of signification. How can what is signified by our words be something belonging intrinsically to what God is when we derive the meanings of our words from our finite and imperfect experience of finite and imperfect things? If Aquinas believed in a finite God, perhaps he could justify his assertion in Article 1 that some perfections found in creatures exist in God in a more perfect way. But if God is <u>infinitely</u> greater than creatures, how can what is signified by any of our words be the <u>same</u> as anything belonging to the nature of God?

Melvin's difficulty is reinforced when he reads Aquinas' reply to the first objection. In some cases, according to Aquinas, the imperfect way in which creatures receive a perfection derived from God is included in that which is signified by a name. In other cases, the name signifies a perfection but not the imperfect way the perfection is found in creatures. It is names of this second kind that can be applied to God properly.

"Not so fast," thinks Melvin, "If we give names to perfections because we apprehend these perfections as they exist is creatures, how can what is signfied by our names not include imperfection?" Hoping to find an answer, Melvin goes to the next article, "Whether Names Applied to God Are Synonomous". After reading the article, he concludes, "This question and Aquinas' answer to it are interesting only if it is already granted that names can be applied properly to God, that what they signify belongs to His nature."

<center>II</center>

Melvin closed the <u>Summa</u> and decided to pursue that matter by talking with the well-known Thomistic philosophy professor, Textus Empiricus. When he saw Textus, however, Melvin neglected to mention that he was trying to understand religious language. Instead, he went directly to the issue that had most troubled him.

Melvin: Tell me, Textus, how can Aquinas claim that what is signified by some of our names does not include imperfection?

Textus: To understand this, Melvin, you must understand Aquinas' doctrine that potency is the cause of limitation and, hence, of imperfection. For act of any kind to be multiplied so that it is found in more than one thing, in each thing that possesses a mode of actuality, the act must be limited, restricted to being the actuality that belongs to this thing and not some other thing. God is an infinite act of existence. There can only be one such infinite being since, if there were two, one or the other of them would lack something the other has. For there to be many existents, God must give existence to a potency for existence, a potency that limits the existence to being this existence of this particular way of existing or that.

Essence is Aquinas' name for the potency that receives and limits existence. Essence itself can be multiplied. A particular way of existing can be true of many individuals. If there is more than one X, something must explain why X_1 is similar to X_2, explain, in other words, why they are both X's. But whatever explains why they are similar to one another in being X's cannot explain why they differ from one another in being this X as distinct from that X. In each of these individuals, being X is restricted to being the nature of this individual and no other because a capacity for being X has received the characteristics of X from some principle that actualizes its capacity. What is signified by "X", in other words is either a mode of being that results from such a union of potency and act or a type of act that is multiplied in such composites.

When the essences of two individuals are generically or specifically similar, those essences are composed of a principle of act that Aquinas calls form and a principle of potnecy he calls matter. (To be technical, I should call them substantial form and prime matter, but you needn't worry why right now.) Form brings it about that an individual possesses a set of characteristics that are similar to those of other individuals. Matter brings it about that these characteristics are possessed by this individual and not that. The existing essence is the union of these principles.

Melvin: But what has all this to do with whether the referents of words include imperfections?

Textus: The referents of our predicates are the various modes of being, the ways of existing, that constitute the essences of things. Among the modes of being that we find multiplied in things, some depend on matter for their existence, some do not. All the modes of being we find in our experience depend on matter in order to exist <u>in</u> <u>the</u> <u>state</u> <u>in</u> <u>which</u> <u>we</u> <u>find</u> <u>them.</u> For we find them in beings that belong to the same genera and species as other beings. But in the things we experience we find modes of being that are capable of existing apart from matter.

In our experience, for example, we find both sense knowledge and intellectual knowledge. The words "sense knowledge" refer to a necessarily material mode of being, a characteristic of a being whose essence is a union of form and matter. The words "intellectual knowledge" do not refer to a <u>necessarily</u> material mode of being. Aquinas has arguments to show that intelligence does not have a necessary causal dependence on matter in order to be what it is. We derive the meaning of "intellectual knowledge" from our acquaintance with material beings. But what is necessary relative to <u>our</u> <u>cognition</u> of this mode of being is incidental relative to <u>its</u> <u>existence</u>. It can exist in matter but need not.

Melvin: I still don't see the connection with excluding imperfection from what is signified.

Textus: Matter is the cause of limitation relative to essence as essence is the cause of limitation for existence. A mode of being that does not depend on matter for its existence is a mode of being that does not depend for its existence on the cause of limitation in the order of essence. If there is an infinite being, therefore, nothing prevents a mode of being that does not depend on matter from belonging to the essence of that infinite being. Granted, we know these modes of being only in a finite state. But the question is whether it is necessary that these modes of being <u>exist</u> only in a finite state. If the existence of a mode of being does not necessarily depend on the cause of limitation for essence, it is not necessary that that mode of being always exist in a finite state.

Material characteristics, on the other hand, could not belong to the nature of an infinite being. Recall that material characteristics are mixtures of potency and act. Of them, we can say only that whatever there is of act in this mixture can belong intrinsically to the nature of an infinte being. To put it another way. when the referent of the word "X" is a material characteristic, "X" refers specifically to a limited way in which act is received by potency. That is what it means to say that what is signified by some words includes imperfection. When the referent of the word "X" is not a material characteristic, "X" does not refer to a specifically limited way in which act is received by potency but to a mode of actuality which may or may not be received by potency. That is what it means to say that the referents of such words does not include imperfection.

Melvin: Is any immaterial essence infinite?

Textus: Certainly not in the sense in which God is infinite. Any immaterial essence that receives an act of existence distinct from itself is the essence of a limited being, since essence is the cause of limitation for existence. But the ways of existing that characterize such an essence are capable of existing in an infinite state. Therefore, if there is a being whose essence and existence are not distinct, these immaterial ways of existing are found in that being as identical with its existence. They exist in that being in an infinitely higher state, no doubt, because they do not there function to limit existence. But the infinite distance between these states does not disturb their identity with themselves since they are not finite by essence.

Melvin: Even if I were to grant what you say about matter being the principle of limitation for essence, your explanation makes use of all sorts of hypotheses like "If there is an infinite being..." or "If there is a being whose essence is not distinct from its existence...". What if I don't know, or don't believe, that these hypotheses are true?

Textus: It is important that the truth of Aquinas' theory of the
limitation of act by potency does not depend on when we learn that truth. The
truth of nothing that we learn depends on when we learn it. Until we prove
that intelligence is immaterial, we do not yet know that what is signified by
a word like "intelligence" does not depend on matter. But our ignorance of
that fact does not make it true that intelligence does depend on matter.
Likewise, before we have the proofs, we do not know that there is a being
whose essence and existence are identical or that there is an infinite
existence. But the fact remains that if existence does not require to be
received by an essence distinct from itself, it need not be finite. And the
assertions that existence must be distinct from essence and cannot be infinite
would be as much in need of proof as the contradictory assertions.

Melvin: Textus, your presentation has my head spinning. The only way I
will be able to understand all this is by you giving me some readings in
Aquinas that go into these issues surrounding the limitation of act by
potency. Then I can try to answer my questions at my own pace.

III

Using the texts given him by Textus, Melvin pondered the theory of the
limitation of act by potency, in all its dimensions, for a long time.
Gradually, he came to understand the theory. One day he had even come to
understand it well enough to agree that it was true. So elated was Melvin
that he rushed to tell Textus about his accomplishment.

Melvin: Textus, your explanation has answered all my questions.

Textus: Good.

Melvin: Now I understand the solution to the problem of religious
language.

Textus: You mean you now understand the doctrine of analogy?

Melvin: What?

Textus: The doctrine of analogy.

Melvin: What's that?

Textus: The solution to the problem of how human language can be
meaningfully applied to God.

Melvin: But you didn't mention analogy in you conversation with me; nor
did any of the readings you gave me talk about analogy. They talked about
things like potency and act, substantial and accidental forms, prime matter,
genera, species and individuals, essence and existence, perfection and
imperfection, the infinite and the finite.

Textus: Yes, I did not go into the doctrine of analogy because you were
not asking me about the problem of divine names.

Melvin: I neglected to put it that way. But in order to know that a word like "intelligent" can be properly said of God, what more do I need to know than that "intelligence" does not refer to a way in which act is received and limited by matter but to a mode of actuality that need not exist in matter? Hence, what we call "intelligence" can exist infinitely and still be what we call "intelligence".

The reason I was asking you about words not signifying imperfection was that I had found Aquinas making that claim in Article 2 of Question 13 in the Summa Theologiae.

Textus: If you had read just two articles further, you would have found Aquinas asking, "Whether What Is Said of God and Creatures Is Univocally Predicated of Them." He answers that words cannot be predicated of God and creatures univocally. This does not reduce religious language to equivocation, however, since analogy is a mean between univocation and equivocation. Words used analogically are used in ways that are neither wholly the same nor wholly different. Although what Aquinas means by analogy and how he intends it to explain religious language has been variously interpreted, no one doubts that the doctrine of analogical predication is his explanation of religious language.

Melvin: That sounds like a very interesting doctrine. As you just pointed out, however, Aquinas raises the issue of analogy _after_ he has established, at least to his own satisfaction, that names can be applied to God both substantially and properly. Just as the point of asking, in Article 4, whether the names of God are synonomous depends on its already having been established that it is legitimate to attribute names to God, so also does the point of asking whether names are said of God and creatures univiocally or analogically. What Aquinas is asking in Article 3 is "Whether the Names We Have Already Established to Predicable of God with Full Legitimacy Are Predicated Univocally or Analogically?"

This is an important question. But it is a _secondary_ question when it comes to the problem of religious language, secondary in the very precise sense that it arises _after_ the problem has been solved of how human words can be used in a proper sense of a being infinitely greater than us.

Textus: My boy, you are being much too literal. The order in which these questions appear may be entirely accidental.

Melvin: Perhaps. Do you know of any place where Aquinas does not settle issues like substantial and proper attribution before bringing up analogy?

Textus: Come to think of it, I do not.[1]

Melvin: Even if you could find such a place, more is at stake here than a correct reading of a past philosopher's opinions. The question I asked you earlier remains: to know that what is meant by "intelligence" can be found in the nature of an infinite being, what more do I need to know than that intelligence does not have a necessary dependence on the cause of limitation for essence?

Look at it this way. Does analogy by itself explain how we can attribute names in a proper sense to something <u>infinitely</u> different from us?

Textus: What do you mean?

Melvin: Words can be used in ways that are partly the same yet partly different of things whose differences are finite. Hence the fact that words can be used analogically does not by itself explain how words can be properly