

The Univocal Predication of Scotus and the Analogical Predication of Aquinas: Some Issues of  
Similarity and Distinction in Religious Language

by

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# THE UNIVOCAL PREDICATION OF SCOTUS AND THE ANALOGICAL PREDICATION OF AQUINAS: SOME ISSUES OF SIMILARITY AND DISTINCTION IN RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE

## **Introduction**

The topic of this essay examined the univocal predication of Scotus and the analogical predication of Aquinas. Some issues of similarity and distinction were made between Scotus and Aquinas with regard to the religious language that has been used to describe God. Introductory material on the medieval theories of analogy and divisions of equivocation were provided as background material to provide a framework for this research. Some sources for the doctrine of analogy and history of the word "analogy" were explained in order to define the origin and language of analogy. The different divisions of analogy and equivocation were provided to show the distinctions that have developed over time by the various philosophers and theologians. The nature of univocal predication as advanced by Scotus and the analogical predication developed by Aquinas were both defined. Finally, some issues of similarity and distinction were made between Scotus and Aquinas with regard to their concepts of language about God.

## ***Medieval Theories of Analogy and Divisions of Equivocation***

Medieval theories of analogy were a response to problems in three areas: logic, theology, and metaphysics. Logicians were concerned with the use of words having more than one sense. Theologians were concerned with language about God. Metaphysicians were concerned with talk about reality. These medieval thinkers reacted to these three problems by developing the theory which divided words into three sorts, independently of context. Some

were univocal (always use with the same sense), some were purely equivocal (used with quite different senses), and some were analogical (used with related senses).<sup>1</sup>

There were three main types of analogy. In the original Greek sense, analogy involves a comparison of two proportions or relations. The word principle was said to be and analogical term when said the point and a spring of water because a point is related to a line is a spring is related to a river. This type of analogy came to be called the analogy of proportionality. In the second sense analogy involve the relation between two things, but which one is primarily in the other secondary. The second type of analogy became known as the analogy of the attribution, and its special mark was being said in a prior and a posterior sense. A third type of analogy, used by theologians, appeals to a relation of likeness between god and creatures. Creatures are called good or just because their goodness or justice imitates or a flex the goodness or justice of God. This type of analogy was called the analogy of limitation or participation. Of the three types, it is the analogy of attribution that is central to medieval discussions.<sup>2</sup> However, it is this third type of analogy that is the concern of this essay.

### ***Sources for the Doctrine of Analogy***

One of the issues associated with a study of the doctrine of analogy, is to look at the sources for theories of analogy. In studying the theory of analogy one must look at the history of education and the Latin-speaking western part of Europe. These theories arose as they were spawned by the learning confined to monasteries in the dark ages. There were very few texts

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<sup>1</sup> E. Jennifer Ashworth, "Medieval Theories of Analogy," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, (Winter 2004 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), available from <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2004/entries/analogy-medieval//>; Internet; accessed 6 December 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

from the ancient world that were extant but some of the texts that were available included the writings of Aristotle, Boethius, and other Islamic philosophers. When the first universities were established the writings of Aristotle and the others were recovered.

There were three sources that formed the foundation for the theories of analogy. One source for the theory of analogy is the doctrine of equivocal terms found in logic texts. The texts available from Aristotle in Latin were *Categories* and *On Interpretation* and a few other works including the monographs and commentaries of Boethius. For writers throughout the later middle ages, the discussion of the analogical terms was fitted into the framework of the univocal and equivocal terms provided by Aristotle and his commentators. Twelfth-century theology is a second important source for the doctrine of analogy and these also had their foundations in the works of Augustine, Boethius, and Greek theologians such as Pseudo-Dionysius. Such theologians insisted on god's absolute transcendence, and on what came to be called negative theology or *via negativa*. These theological doctrines raised the general problem of how we can speak meaningfully of God at all, but they also raised a number of additional problems. The third source for doctrines of analogy is metaphysics. One of the foundational texts was Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. Another foundational text is from Avicenna's *Metaphysics* which was translated into Latin during the Twelfth century where he writes that "being" is neither a genus nor a predicate predicated equally of all its subordinates but rather a notion in which they agreed according to the prior and the posterior.<sup>3</sup>

### ***History of the Word "Analogy"***

In a study of the history of the word "analogy" it is apparent that this term had various senses. Aquinas noted that in scriptural exegesis, analogy was the method of showing that one

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

part of scripture did not conflict with another. In the modern study of biblical hermeneutics this concept would be of primary importance in the science of interpreting Scripture. In rhetoric and grammar, analogy was the method of settling a doubt about a word's form by appeal to a similar and more certain case and this was the sense in which the word was used in several twelfth-century theologians. Pseudo-Dionysius used the term in a strict ontological sense. By the 1220s use of the word came to be linked with the phrase "in a prior and a posterior sense". The word "analogical" soon became linked with the word ambiguous in Latin authors. This new use of analogy rapidly became standard in both logicians and theologians.<sup>4</sup>

### ***Divisions of Analogy***

The problem with Boethius's subdivisions was that they did not accommodate the different uses of the word "being". Thus, many authors added a third division to Boethius's to his last two subdivisions. They presented the division as the division of deliberate equivocals and identified it with analogical terms. This three-fold division was presented in the thirteenth century. It is found in Aquinas's own commentary on the *Metaphysics*. In this third division an analogical term is now seen as one which is said of two things in a prior and a posterior sense and is grounded in various kinds of attribution or relationship to the primary object.

The focus of this essay revolves around a second three-fold division of analogy which arose from reflection on the relationship between equivocal and analogical terms. Analogical terms were intermediaries between chance equivocals and univocals and were therefore identified with deliberate equivocals. First, under this classification there are analogical terms which are univocal in a broad sense of "univocal". A reference was made here to a broad genus term such as "animal". The analogy of human beings and donkeys as "animal" was appropriate

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

in this sense. In the second division, there are those analogical terms such as “being” which are not equivocal because only one concept or nature seems to be involved. They are not univocal either because they participate in this one unequally, in a prior and a posterior way. These things would be genuine intermediaries. In the third division, there are analogical terms that are deliberate equivocals because there are two concepts or natures which are participated in a prior and a posterior way. The example here was the term “healthy”. This second threefold division was the subject of much discussion including Scotus who bitterly criticized it in his writings.<sup>5</sup>

### ***Divisions of Equivocation***

A study of the evolution of theories of analogy must also include consideration for the divisions of equivocation found in medieval authors. In his commentary on the *Categories*, Boethius presented a series of two divisions which he took from Greek authors. The first division was in chance equivocals and deliberate equivocals. Chance equivocation was also called pure equivocation and was carefully distinguished from analogy by later writers. It is when occurrences of the equivocal term were totally connected such as “dog” referring to a barking animal, a marine animal, and a constellation (*canis*). In the second case of deliberate equivocation, some intention on the part of the speakers was involved and the occurrences of the equivocal term could be related in different ways. Boethius further had four subdivisions of deliberate equivocation.

The first of Boethius’s four subdivisions was similitude and was used of the case of the noun “animal” in the sense of real and pictured human beings. His second type of equivocation is *analogia* in the Greek sense with the standard example being the word *principium* (principle

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

or origin). The last two subdivisions of Boethius are “of one origin” with the word “medical” as the example, and “in relation to one” with the word “healthy” as the example. Aristotle had also used these same corresponding equivocations.<sup>6</sup>

### **The Univocal Predication of Scotus**

Scotus’s view of language about God is univocal (words about God are understood in their ordinary sense). His thought urged that descriptives or predicates of God should be univocal and conform to ordinary use. For Scotus, the *via negativa* could only lead to skepticism, agnosticism, and doubt regarding God’s real nature. To suggest that God’s wrath is more like love and God’s love, quite unlike our own, can only confuse the laity. Scotus called this all simply equivocation in which words mean what we want them to mean. David Meyer noted that if Scotus had been acquainted with the world of Lewis Carroll, he would have found the world of *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass* a fascinating one.<sup>7</sup> For Lewis Carroll shows us what silliness results when you let words mean whatever you want them to mean. This explains why Scotus was so concerned to say that words and descriptive expressions should be understood in their ordinary sense. According to Scotus, the difference between God’s love and our own is that his love is perfect and ours is not. To the extent that our word love sorts out the perfect element of love in our own, it is truly like unto God’s.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> David P. Meyer, “Religious Language” in *Audio Lecture 8a*, MP3, available from [http://lessons.trinitysem.edu/file.php/183/Audio/POR\\_Track01\\_8.mp3/](http://lessons.trinitysem.edu/file.php/183/Audio/POR_Track01_8.mp3/); Internet; accessed 4 December, 2006.

### **The Analogical Predication of Aquinas**

In his discussion on the doctrine of analogy, Colin Brown noted that Aquinas's teaching on analogy is especially relevant in light of the fierce debates on the meaning and nature of language. Brown asserted that Aquinas was well aware of the problem in the thirteenth century regarding statements about God. Aquinas noted that our words have neither a univocal nor an equivocal sense; instead, valid statements about God were analogical. In Aquinas's exposition of analogy, his fundamental point was that when we speak of God, we are not speaking the literal truth. He argued that this language must be figurative or analogical.<sup>8</sup>

Deely noted that Aquinas's main interest in the doctrine of analogy was in the context of the divine names where the philosophy of being reaches its outermost limit of human understanding. He argued that the philosophy of Aquinas was before all else a theological philosophy of being. Deely also maintained that Aquinas's doctrine of analogy was entirely an epistemological doctrine rather than an ontological one. By that he meant that it is a doctrine about our knowledge of things and use of language to express that knowledge to others, and as such, is not a doctrine about the things that are independently of our knowledge, a doctrine of being. The bottom line for Aquinas is that analogy is treated as a doctrine about how we use words to express what we know, and transfer words from one meaning to another in order to illumine related things and develop their connections in discourse.<sup>9</sup>

Gregory Rocca likens the mediating position of Aquinas on god-talk as a fascinating illustration that he calls "hovering over the abyss." In this metaphor about Aquinas's concept of

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<sup>8</sup> Colin Brown, *Philosophy & the Christian Faith* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1968), 30-32.

<sup>9</sup> John, Deely. "The Absence of Analogy." *The Review of Metaphysics* 55, no. 3 (2002): 521+. Database on-line, available from Questia, <http://www.questia.com/PM.qst?a=o&d=5000806492>; Internet; accessed 6 December 2006.

analogy, Rocca pictures a narrow abyss that is filled with super-hot magma and smoke. On either side of the abyss are towering cliffs that angle upward and backward from the chasm. The left side of the abyss he calls the Cliff of Equivocity and it encompasses the academic agnostics who are garrulous about God and their knowledge and talks about God is only equivocal at best. The right side of the abyss are Christians who have taken their stand on the Cliff of Univocity and while they acknowledge God as mysterious, they press for clear conceptual distinctions and demand that God be conceived in human terms. Negative theology or the *via negativa* is the only recourse for those who have been chosen by God for a descent into the abyss. Those Christians who follow Aquinas's position hold that talking about God is more like hovering dangerously between the Cliffs of Equivocity and Univocity while they peer and point below toward the dark luminosity at the heart of the world. They represent a unique, complicated, and subtle weaving of negative and positive theology, of analogy and incomprehensibility, which amounts to hovering over the abyss.<sup>10</sup>

### **Issues of Similarity Between Scotus and Aquinas**

With regard to natural theology, Scotus, as a good Aristotelian, thinks all of our knowledge begins in some way with our experience of sensible things. Williams noted that Scotus agreed with Aquinas that our knowledge of God begins from creatures. The medieval scholars used an argument called *quia* (reasoning from effect to cause) to prove the existence and nature of God rather than the argument *propter quid* (reasoning from essence to

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<sup>10</sup> Gregory P. Rocca, "Aquinas on God-Talk: Hovering over the Abyss." *Theological Studies* 54, no. 4 (1993): 641+. Database on-line, available from Questia, <http://www.questia.com/PM.qst?a=o&d=5000239578>; Internet; accessed 6 December 2006.

characteristic). Aquinas and Scotus further agree that for the same reason, we cannot know the essence of God in this life.<sup>11</sup>

Meyer noted that Aquinas was sympathetic with the concerns of Scotus. Aquinas believed his analogical approach was a mediating approach to that of *via negativa* and Scotus. Aquinas looked at the two approaches of *via negativa* and Scotus's univocity and suggested that each was partly true and partly false and, in dialectical fashion, he suggested that anger did indeed vary according to the subject. Aquinas agreed with Scotus that we know the basic meaning of the word love even prior to its application to God. Our learning that God is our father is understandable in light of what we know of our human fathers. Meyer added that both Scotus and Aquinas thought it absurd that God's love and fatherhood should be the opposite of the love and fatherhood we know from our human father.<sup>12</sup>

### **Issues of Distinction Between Scotus and Aquinas**

The main issue of distinction between Scotus and Aquinas is that Scotus believed we can apply certain predicates univocally (with exactly the same meaning) to God and creatures. Aquinas insisted that this is impossible, and that we can only use analogical predication where a word as applied to God has a different meaning from but related to the meaning of that same word as applied to creatures.

Scotus has a number of arguments for univocal predication and against the doctrine of analogy in his work *Ordinatio*. One of his most compelling arguments used Aquinas's own view against him. Aquinas had said that all our concepts come from creatures. Scotus's reply was to

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<sup>11</sup> Thomas Williams, "John Duns Scotus," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2005 Edition)*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), available from <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2005/entries/duns-scotus/>; Internet; accessed 15 December 2006.

<sup>12</sup> Meyer, "Religious Language."

ask where that analogous concept came from since it has to come from somewhere. Scotus postulated that if all our concepts come from creatures then the concepts we apply to God will also come from creatures. Scotus further argued that they will not just be like the concepts from creature, as Aquinas maintains with his analogous predication, but rather, they will have to be the very same concepts that come from creatures univocally. Consequently, according to Scotus, these are the only concepts we can possibly get and if we cannot use the concepts we get from creatures, then we cannot use any concepts at all which would effectively negate any talk about God, which is false.<sup>13</sup>

Scotus used an argument for univocal predication from Anselm. Anselm's argument was to consider all predicates and get rid of the ones that are merely relatives, since no relative expresses the nature of a thing as it is in itself. Anselm argued that predicates that describe God as "creator" or "supreme being" don't tell us anything about what God is in himself, only how he is related to other things. According to Anselm, all other predicates must imply some sort of limitation or deficiency. Both Scotus and Aquinas agreed with Anselm on this point. However, Scotus had his own terminology for predicates that applied to God. He called such things "pure perfections" but he took this concept a step further than Anselm. He said they must have to be predicated univocally of God. Scotus further argued that not only can we come up with concepts that apply univocally to God and creatures, we can even come up with a proper or distinctive concept of God which he called the concept of "infinite being".<sup>14</sup>

Williams goes on to add regarding the existence of God that divine infinity is for Scotus what divine simplicity is for Aquinas. For Scotus, infinity is not only what is ontologically central about God but is the key component of our best available concept of God and a guarantor of

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<sup>13</sup> Williams, "John Duns Scotus."

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

the success of theological language. Scotus noted that the argument of Aquinas for divine infinity was fallacious. Scotus claimed Aquinas argued in this way: If a form is limited by matter; it is finite, God, being simple, is not limited by matter. Therefore, God is not finite. Aquinas's conception of infinity, therefore, was negative and relational according to Scotus. Scotus then goes on to ask us to shift from thinking about an actual quantitative infinity to thinking about an actual qualitative infinity such as God's perfect goodness. Williams concluded that Scotus's concept of infinite being is the simplest concept available to us for understanding God. One could then deduce that virtually all other infinite perfections of God fall under the umbrella of Scotus's infinite being.<sup>15</sup>

Ashworth noted Scotus's belief that without a unified conception of being, theology as a science would be impossible, and we would have no natural knowledge of God. Scotus rejected the view that for a term to be univocal it had to be a strictly categorical term, picking out some natural kind or other. He argued that it was sufficient for univocity that contradiction would arise when the term was affirmed and denied of the same thing. Scotus then argued that "being" was a univocal term subordinated to a single univocal concept. Consequently, those within the Thomistic tradition had to take his arguments about the univocity of "being" seriously.<sup>16</sup>

John Deely has noted that within the study of analogy in the Thomistic tradition, there was a long period of time where the doctrine was not developed further. Deely maintained that there has not been enough study of Scotus's position on analogy to justify an antithetical position to that of Aquinas. Deely argued that the apparent contrast of analogous and univocal

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ashworth, "Medieval Theories of Analogy."

terms was only superficial.<sup>17</sup> Ashworth noted that despite the vast amount of modern literature devoted to the study of Aquinas's theory of analogy, he himself had very little to say about it. She argued that Aquinas used a general division into equivocal, univocal, and analogical uses of terms and presented both of the threefold divisions of analogy, but he offered no prolonged discussion.<sup>18</sup>

Gavin Colvert argued that Aquinas is neither Scotus, who regarded the unit of the concept of being as requiring univocity, nor Henry of Ghent who regarded the unity of being as established only by a confused concept which abstracts from the ontological difference between God and creatures. Instead, Aquinas resisted both a vague concept of being and the reduction of analogical predication to abstract univocal predication regarding terms that applied to God and creatures.<sup>19</sup>

Meyer noted the distinctions that Aquinas made between Scotus's univocalism and the *via negativa*. He used the example of the expression "loving father" which can refer to both the humanly and heavenly father. Aquinas argued that the expression is not simply univocal as Scotus urged nor is it equivocal as in the *via negativa* but rather should be understood as an analogous predication. Meyer added a further example to make the distinctions. The statement that "God is perfect" is univocal since perfection has a universal application in all instances. However, the statement that "God is a loving father" is decidedly analogous, according to Aquinas. Meyer concluded that some predicates of God are univocal and other predicates are

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<sup>17</sup> Deely, "The Absence of Analogy."

<sup>18</sup> Ashworth, "Medieval Theories of Analogy."

<sup>19</sup> Gavin T. Colvert, "Having Our Cake and Eating It, Metaphysically Speaking: Analogy as the Key to the Unity of Metaphysics as a Science of Being qua Being: A Response to Oliva Blanchette," *The Saint Anselm Journal* 2, no. 2 (Spring 2005), 38, PDF, available from <http://www.anselm.edu/library/SAJ/pdf/22Colvert.pdf>; Internet; accessed 6 December 2006.

analogous and the wise theologian knows the difference. Meyer noted that part of the problem with Scotus was his suggestion that all predicates of God were univocal and likewise, the problem with the *via negativa* was that it overlooked instances where predication should clearly be univocal. Aquinas suggested that in both approaches, cases were overlooked where predication was analogous.<sup>20</sup>

### **Conclusion**

It is the opinion of the writer that the diverse nature of religious language demands that there be univocal, negative, and analogous predication with respect to statements about God. It seems that Aquinas's approach was a balanced one as it takes into consideration both qualitative and quantitative concepts of God. One can understand the universal application of a phrase like "God loves perfectly" to mean that his love has no limitations in a univocal sense. At the same time, we also understand in an analogous sense that a phrase like "God is a loving father" can apply to humans as well as God as it is neither univocal nor is it *via negativa*. The classic demonstration of language about God was actually embodied by the God-man Jesus Christ. When Jesus' disciples asked him to show them the Father, Jesus reply was "if you have seen me you have seen the Father." Jesus then became an analogy of the Father because his disciples could then see and hear him and compare his life and message with how God had revealed himself in the Old Testament to his people. The religious language about God from the Old Testament could be seen in action in the life of Jesus Christ.

We use points of analogy frequently in describing what God is like. An analogy of God was made by the nineteenth-century mathematician Edwin Abbott. In his work *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions*, Abbott described God as a three dimensional sphere that

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<sup>20</sup> Meyer, "Religious Language."

descended into the two dimensional world of the man in Flatland. This analogy by Abbott has been helpful in describing the higher dimension that God occupies relative to the three dimensional world of human beings. Another common analogy used to describe the concept of God is that of water. Just as biblical language describes one God in three persons, so the analogy of water describes one compound that is found in three different phases. The point here is that religious language about God encompasses univocal, negative, and analogous concepts in order to explain what God is like so that humans may understand the nature of God to some degree.

In summary, this essay examined the univocal predication of Duns Scotus compared with the analogical predication of Thomas Aquinas. Introductory material on the medieval theories of analogy and equivocation were provided to understand the origin and background of these concepts. The univocal predication of Scotus and the analogous predication of Aquinas were defined. Finally, some issues of similarity and distinction were presented between the univocity of Scotus and the analogy of Aquinas.

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