Aquinas, Analogical Predication

Here, Aquinas asks: What can we know about God?

**1. What We Know For Sure:** At the very least, we know the following (I.12.12):

- God’s relationship to creatures: He is the first cause of all things.
- What God is not: God is not any of the created things.
- How God is not those things: Not by being defective, but by surpassing them all.

Notice that none of this gives us any specific positive description about what God’s essence; i.e., what God IS, or what God is LIKE. Knowing His RELATION to things (as their creator), and knowing what He ISN’T like doesn’t tell us what He IS like. Aquinas writes,

> “The names that are said of God negatively or that signify God’s relationship to a creature obviously in no way signify God’s substance, but rather the denial that he has some characteristic or the relationship of God to something else—or rather of something to God.” (I.13.2)

The closest positive description we get here is that God SURPASSES creatures. But, that’s not very specific. So: Can we give any specifics?

There are three possible answers to this question (to be explained in more detail below):

- **Univocal Predication:** Some of the terms in our language accurately describe God.
- **Equivocal Predication:** None of the terms in our language accurately describe God.
- **Analogical Predication:** None of them REALLY do, but some of them SORT OF do.

**2. Univocal Predication:** Perhaps terms like ‘good’, ‘wise’, ‘powerful’ and so on really do describe God’s essence—not some relation, or negation, but some positive trait that tells us what He’s like. Some reasons in favor:

(a) When living things create life, they create things just like themselves (e.g., humans give birth to humans, and so on). So, God is like the universe.
(b) Genesis 1:26 says that God made man in His own likeness.
(c) The 4th way: God is at the top of the spectrum of good things, and the goodness of all things are measured against His goodness. But, the measure of things is like what it measures (e.g., a ruler measures length by itself having length).
Against Univocal Predication: Some reasons against:

If a term doesn’t have the same meaning when it is applied to two different things, then it is equivocal, not univocal. But, none of our terms have the same meaning when applied to creatures and God. For instance, there’s no way that ‘wise’ has the same meaning in <Socrates was wise> and <God is wise>.

First, because all of our terms refer to (and are derived from) creatures, which are finite. But God is infinite. He infinitely surpasses human beings, and human terms.

Second, because God is simple (i.e., not composed of parts). But, then, in God, being ‘wise’, ‘good’, ‘powerful’ are NOT really distinct properties, like they are in us. So, they must not refer to the same properties that we have.

Third, when we say that, e.g., Socrates is a being (i.e., Socrates exists), this existence was something that had to be added to his essence. But, God’s essence IS existence (as we saw in Avicenna). So, God’s ‘being’ or ‘existence’ must not refer to the same thing that we have.

Aquinas concludes, “God’s essence is beyond what we can understand of God and beyond what we can signify through words.” (I.13.1)

3. Equivocal Predication: On this view, calling God ‘living’, ‘wise’, ‘good’ and so on are not positive descriptions of what God is like. Rather, those words indicate either:

   (a) What God is NOT (e.g., ‘living’ only means ‘not inanimate’)
   (b) What God CREATES (e.g., ‘good/wise’ only means ‘created good/wise things’)

Against Equivocal Predication: Aquinas rejects this view too.

First, If ‘wise’ applies to God because He creates wise things, then ‘body’ (i.e., matter) refers to God because he creates bodies. But, that is absurd. God is not a body.

Second, when I say that God is living, I mean something more than ‘not like a rock’. I mean to say something POSITIVE!

Third, this view leads to total skepticism, and renders theology a hopeless task. He writes, “this would entail that nothing can be known or demonstrated about God” (I.13.5) But, this is contrary to the faith, and contrary to holy scriptures.
4. **Analogical Predication:** So, *<Some of our terms describe God accurately> is false.* And *<None of our terms describe God accurately> is also false.* This is a contradiction. How can Aquinas have it both ways? Answer: He believes that there is a middle-ground between univocal and equivocal predication. Consider:

1. Univocal: Socrates and Plato are both **humans**.
2. Equivocal: This duck has **bill**, and the president vetoed a **bill**.
3. Analogical: I’m **healthy** now, because I eat **healthy** foods.

In (3), the meaning of ‘healthy’ in the two instances isn’t the same—food isn’t healthy in the same way that humans are. When we say that food is “healthy” we mean that it CONTRIBUTES to health, or something. So, ‘healthy’ doesn’t mean quite the same thing in both cases. But, nor are the two meanings totally dissimilar. This in-between area is called “**analogical**” predication.

So, HOW are these terms related?

4. Socrates was **good** and **wise**, as God is **good** and **wise**.

We come to understand the meanings of terms like ‘good’ and ‘wise’ through creatures. So, we have some understanding of those concepts in FINITE things.

From creatures, we apply those terms to the Creator—but, when doing so, we have to recognize that, while our UNDERSTANDING of those terms is derived from creatures, *they REALLY apply to God more properly than they do to creatures.* So, we do not fully understand the TRUE meaning of those terms. In that sense, they “they fall short of a representation of God.” (I.13.2) Aquinas concludes,

> “Thus, when the term ‘wise’ is said of a human being, it in some way describes and comprehends the thing signified; this is not true when it is said of God, however, for what is signified remains incomprehensible, exceeding the signification of the name.” (I.13.5)

Yet, we do not have NO understanding of what God is like. For our terms DO apply to God, only they apply “in a more excellent way” (I.13.5)

Some relevant passages:

> “It therefore must be said that names of this kind are said of God and creatures according to analogy, that is, according to proportion.” (I.13.5)
“Names of this kind signify the divine substance and are predicated of God substantially, but that they fall short of a representation of God.” (I.13.2)

“In the names that we attribute to God there are two things that need to be distinguished: namely, the very perfections signified—such as goodness, life, and the like—and the mode of signifying. As regards what names of this kind signify, these names apply properly to God, indeed more properly to God than to God’s creatures, and they are said primarily of God. As regards their mode of signifying, however, they are not properly said of God, for they have the mode of signifying that belongs to creatures.” (I.13.3)

“And thus whatever is said of God and creatures is said according to some ordering of creatures to God as source and cause in which all the perfections of things preexist in a more excellent way. This kind of commonality lies in between pure equivocation and simple univocity. For when things are said analogically, there is not a single meaning in common, as there is in the case of univocal terms, nor is there a completely diverse meaning, as in the case of equivocal terms.” (I.13.5)

**Duns Scotus, Univocal Predication**

1. **On Univocal Predication:** Scotus says that “univocal” predication entails two things:

   (1) Univocal predicates cannot both be affirmed and denied of the same thing at the same time.

   For instance, sometimes, we say things like, “It’s like I’m here. But, I’m also not here... You know?” If being “here” were used univocally, then this would be a contradiction. But, the speaker is obviously using “here” in two different senses (i.e., equivocally). For example, perhaps their body is “here” but their mind is not “here” (e.g., their thoughts have wondered off and they’re not paying attention to what’s happening around them).

   (2) Univocal predicates can serve as the “middle term” in a syllogism without rendering the argument invalid (by committing the fallacy of equivocation).

   For instance, consider the following argument:

   1. Socrates is a human.
   2. All humans are mammals.
   3. Therefore, Socrates is a mammal.
Here, ‘human’ is the so-called “middle term” of this argument. If it is used univocally, then the argument is valid. But, if it is used equivocally, then the argument is invalid:

1. Everyone at the meeting was a chair (of some department).
2. All chairs were designed to be sat on.
3. Therefore, everyone at the meeting was designed to be sat on.

2. Against Analogical Predication: Aquinas’s analogical terms fail the test for univocity.

(1) First, pairs of analogical predicates CAN be both affirmed and denied of the same thing without contradiction. For instance, Socrates is wise (in the way that the term applies to humans), but is NOT wise (in the way that it applies to God).

(2) Second, pairs of analogical terms can NOT be used to make valid arguments:

1. If something is good (divine sense), then it is morally perfect.  
2. Socrates was good (human sense).
3. Therefore, Socrates was morally perfect.

The conclusion SHOULD follow from the premises, if the terms were univocal, but they do not—so the terms are equivocal.

So, analogical terms do not mean the same thing! Scotus thinks that Aquinas’s claim that there is some “in-between” view is absurd. For, there are two possibilities. Either:

(a) There is some component that analogical predicates do share in common, or
(b) there is not.

If (a), then analogical terms bottom out in some univocal concept. And if (b), then analogical terms are equivocal. There is no third alternative.

3. The Proof of Univocity: Scotus argues that at least some of our terms are applied univocally to both God and creatures. Here are some reasons to think so:

1. It is impossible to make statements about what something is NOT unless you know at least a little about what something IS. For instance, imagine your friend telling you:

Friend: I’m thinking of something. Guess what it is. Here are some clues: It’s not a vegetable. It’s not a mineral. It’s not smaller than a bread box. It’s not red. It’s not found in North America.
You: Is it grey with big ears and a long snout? Is it an elephant?

Friend: Oh, I have no idea what it is. I know nothing positive about it whatsoever.

You: What the... How are you saying what it’s NOT if you don’t know what it IS? Why are we even playing this game?

2. We understand that <God exists>. But, you can’t understand a proposition unless you understand (at least partially) the TERMS included in that proposition.

Friend: I believe that <Mooples exist>. However, I have no idea what I mean by the term ‘mooples’. (This is absurd.)

3. When we consider some perfection (i.e., a good-making feature, or attribute), one of the following has to be the case:

(a) That predicate applies only to creatures, but is inapplicable (univocally) to God.
(b) That predicate applies only to God, but is inapplicable (univocally) to creatures.
(c) That predicate applies univocally to both God and creatures.

Scotus thinks (a) and (b) would both make theology impossible. Over and over, we see philosophers stating that we know God through His creation. But, apparently there is NOT a link between knowledge of creation and knowledge of God if either of these is the case—for they share nothing in common. Furthermore,

• (a) is absurd, because it entails that creatures have some perfections that God does not. But, God is supposed to be the greatest conceivable being; the most perfect being. *(Note: Even if (a) said that only SOME perfections apply only to creatures, but not to God, this objection would still apply. There cannot be ANY perfections which creatures possess, but God does not. God must have them all.)*

• (b) is absurd, first, because it entails that there are no perfections in creatures. Furthermore, in order to know what the perfections are, we’d first have to know God (and whichever traits we discovered Him to have would be the perfections). But, Anselm teaches us that it’s the other way around. We discover the perfections, and THEN we know that God has them.

• Therefore, (c) must be the case.
4. **Univocal God-Talk:** So, what is God like? As it turns out, Scotus thinks that so-called “analogical” predicates DO bottom out in some univocal concept. For instance:

4. We can be certain that \(<\text{God exists}\>\) and \(<\text{Socrates exists}\>\). That is, they both have ‘being’. And we can know this WITHOUT being certain about whether God and Socrates have ‘infinite being’ or ‘finite being’. But, we cannot be both certain and uncertain of the same thing. Therefore, the concepts are distinct. He writes,

“[We] can be certain concerning God that he is a being while it is unsure whether he is a finite being or an infinite being. Therefore, the concept of the being of God is distinct from the concept of finite being and from the concept of infinite being. In itself it is not identical with either of them, and it is included in each of them. Therefore, it is univocal.”

[Can’t we be both certain and uncertain of the same thing? Perhaps a child is certain that water will quench her thirst, but is uncertain whether \(\text{H}_2\text{O}\) will quench her thirst—though, as it turns out, water and \(\text{H}_2\text{O}\) are the same thing.]

In short, when we say that God and Socrates both exist, or both have ‘being’, we mean the SAME THING. Only God has ‘being’ infinitely, or perfectly, and Socrates has it only finitely, or imperfectly. And the same can be said of all the other divine attributes. Scotus writes,

“Every metaphysical inquiry concerning God proceeds by considering the formal notion of something, removing from that formal notion every imperfection that it has in creatures, purifying that formal notion and attributing utterly supreme perfection to it, and in this way attributing it to God. Take, for example, the notion of wisdom ... First that notion is considered in itself and according to itself. And because that notion does not formally entail any imperfection or limitation, all the imperfections that accompany it in creatures are removed. Thus purified, that same notion of wisdom ... is attributed to God in the most perfect way. Therefore, every inquiry about God presupposes that the intellect has the same, univocal concept that it derives from creatures.”

The **Danger of Analogy:** The claim that, e.g., ‘wise’ applies differently to humans and God is dangerous. For then, ANY time we think that two things are the same (e.g., Plato and Socrates are both ‘human’), we might be mistaken (e.g., ‘Plato’s humanity’ and ‘Socrates’ humanity’ really mean different, but closely related, things). [This will be Ockham’s view]