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ANALOGY SANS PORTRAIT: GOD-TALK
AS LITERAL BUT NON-ANTHROPOMORPHIC

Barry Miller

The impression is sometimes given that the analogical character of God-talk could be established only by providing an account of the particular form that the analogy would take. In this paper I argue that it can be established without having to endorse any particular form of analogy at all: the former question is quite independent of the latter. As I present it, the argument for the analogical character of God-talk is based on two doctrines. One is the classical theistic doctrine of the divine simplicity; the other is the doctrine that some propositions are logically simple in the sense of having no sub-propositional logical parts.

The question I wish to address is the possibility of talking about a God that is transcendent, a God that therefore differs radically from any possible creature. One of the more recent and impressive discussions of this topic occurs in James Ross' Portraying Analogy, in which we are offered a portrait of precisely how non-theistic language might be extendable—without anthropomorphism—for use about a transcendent God. It is the merit of this and the many other attempts at such portraiture that their effect may be twofold; for, should the portrait be accurate, the very fact of showing how God-talk was analogical would succeed in showing also that it was analogical. Its demerit, if such it be, would lie in seeming to make an answer to the “that” question inseparable from an answer to the “how” question: if there were no way of showing how God-talk was analogical, we might seem to be precluded from ever saying that it was analogical. In the present paper I try to break any apparent nexus between the two, and to answer the former question independently of the latter, i.e., without having to endorse any particular portrait of analogy, whether it be Ross' or any other. The first thing to be said about this paper, therefore, is that it is a discussion of analogy sans portrait.

Painters of the various portraits have been imbued by a common desire to show how language about a transcendent God can escape the bonds of anthropomorphic discourse without producing a language made vacuous by its failing to interlock with non-theistic discourse. Their goal is to avoid anthropomorphism without however being committed to the so-called “linguistic discontinuity thesis,” a thesis which might be formulated as follows:

Predicates said of God (e.g. “___________ is wise”, “___________ is intelligent”) are totally unrelated in meaning to predicates of the same
spelling and sound used in ‘ordinary’ discourse. The former have been described variously as being completely discontinuous with those of ordinary discourse, as having “broken away from its moorings”, as having “gone on holiday”.

At first sight such a thesis may well seem the natural conclusion to draw, reluctant though one might be to do so.

Not surprisingly, the discontinuity thesis has its dissenters. Some reject it in part: while accepting a discontinuity in regard to the literal uses of language, they deny it in regard to the non-literal, metaphorical, or symbolic uses. Others reject the thesis totally, either because they think there is no call for figurative and extended uses of language, or because they think that language may be so extended as to be applicable even to a transcendent God, without being either non-literal or strained to the point of unintelligibility. Ross, for example, has suggested that the discontinuity exists only for those people who are “divorced from the practice that God-talk functions to modulate”; for such language is not fully intelligible, “unless you learn it, and its making sense to you is connected with your having or imagining a use for it to modulate living.” On this view, it would make little sense to those who are “outsiders to the forms of life, the practices, modulated by religious talking.”

Other accounts have been offered by Ramsey’s theory of models and qualifiers and Swinburne’s notion of analogy according to which the meaning of a term is extended both by abandoning some of the syntactic rules and by modifying the role of the standard examples in the semantic rules. Finally, there are also the more ancient theories of analogy which attempt to explain the literal but non-anthropomorphic character of God-talk in terms of analogy of proportionality, or analogy of attribution, or both. In the following pages, however, I shall generally be using the term “analogy” in a less theory-laden way than is often the case. In saying that God-talk is analogical I mean simply that, for some substitutions for “F,” the sense of “__________ is F” as applied to creatures and its sense as applied to God are so related that,

a. its uses in “God is F” and “James is F” have similar meanings,
b. those uses are in no way univocal,
c. but are such that “God is F” is literally (as opposed to figuratively) true.

The discontinuity thesis would be precluded by the first point, and anthropomorphism by the second. The third point does not deny that some predicates in God-talk may be merely figurative; it does deny that all are.

In this paper I, too, shall be rejecting the discontinuity thesis, and shall do so by arguing that at least some predicates of creature-talk can be extended in a
way that does violence neither to their literal character nor to the transcendence of the God of whom they are said. However, since the notions of God are notoriously various even in the Western tradition, little can be said of language about God until we respond to the question, “Language about what God?.” The notion of God that I shall be employing is one that H. P. Owens has dubbed “classical theism,” and which is said to define God as “the Creator, who is infinite, self-existent, incorporeal, eternal, immutable, impassible, simple, perfect, omniscient and omnipotent.” Stemming from Avicenna and Aquinas, its distinctive character is its inclusion of the admittedly difficult notion “simple.”

While many theists would be prepared to accept most of the notes mentioned by Owen, a great number would balk at God’s being simple, in the sense in which Aquinas and Avicenna understood that term, even though his simplicity is precisely the note which most strikingly manifests the transcendence of such a God. Because simple, there is no room for any real distinction between him and his existence: he must be subsistent existence, ipsum esse subsistens. Again, being simple, he has no passive potentiality of any kind whatever. Moreover, because lacking all such potentiality, he not merely has omnipotence or omniscience, or any other attribute; rather, he is his omnipotence, is his omniscience, and, in general, for any attribute F had by God, he is his F-ness. Not only would many oppose this claim, they would regard it as ipso facto precluding God-talk from being both literal and non-anthropomorphic.

Being unpersuaded by the critics, I have chosen to operate with the notion of a God who is simple in exactly the sense just mentioned. Indeed, I shall be arguing that the criticisms could hardly be more misguided; for, rather than being inimical to the analogical character of God-talk, it is precisely the classical theist’s doctrine of divine simplicity which makes such talk possible. In fact, it grounds both the transcendence of God and the possibility of analogical language about him. Thus, the second thing to be said about this paper is that it is an attempt not only to show that God-talk is analogical, but to show also that that conclusion is entailed by the divine simplicity, which paradoxically is the very doctrine that might seem least likely to support it.

The plan for pursuing the foregoing aims is as follows:

I. An attempt to defend the classical theist’s notion of divine simplicity against the charge of being meaningless, the aim being to relieve at least some of the unease which the doctrine often and understandably engenders.

II. Explaining why the doctrine of divine simplicity may at first sight seem to be inimical to any God-talk that purported to be both literal and non-anthropomorphic.

III. Introducing a notion that will provide the key for resolving the
difficulties raised in (II). That notion is of a proposition that is logically simple, in the sense of containing no sub-propositional logical parts. Such propositions can occur in discourse that is not even remotely theistic.

IV. Finally, and in the light of the earlier remarks on logically simple propositions, it is argued that the classical theistic doctrine of divine simplicity underpins an account of God-talk that is both literal and non-anthropomorphic, an account which therefore rebuts the discontinuity thesis without however having to endorse one form of analogy rather than any other.

I. Divine Simplicity and the Charge of Meaninglessness

Since this paper is concerned only with the ways in which the doctrine of divine simplicity bears on the possibility of God-talk, there is no need to argue here for the truth of that doctrine. There is, however, some need both to state it and briefly to defend it against the charge of meaninglessness; and that is what I shall be attempting in this section. Some classical theists claim to be able to prove not only that God exists, is wise, is intelligent, is loving, is powerful, etc., but to prove also that it would be less misleading to express these conclusions in the form mentioned earlier, viz. “God is his F-ness.” This doctrine is often reproached for breaching the logical proprieties by purporting to frame an identity claim (e.g., ‘God is his wisdom’) in which one of the referring expressions is concrete, while the other is abstract. Prior was moved to remark, “that’s just bad grammar, a combining of words that fails to make them mean”—like ‘Cat no six.’

We can accept the charge of logical impropriety, however, without having also to accept that it reduces “God is his F-ness” to nonsense. If nonsense really were the result, we should be hard put to account for the success of so many advertisements in print, radio, and TV. If claims like “Brand X puts the whiteness back in your sheets” were meaningless because their benighted authors combined abstract with concrete expressions, advertising companies should long since have gone to the wall. That advertising is a growth industry suffices to show that even those who may well be affronted by granntactical and logical howlers in advertisements are also perfectly well aware of what they mean. “Brand X puts the whiteness back in your sheets” translates very simply into something like “Brand X makes your sheets white again.” And, what is more, even non-philosophers know that it does translate in that way.

Before dismissing “God is his wisdom” as unintelligible, therefore, we might try doing with it what we can do so readily with TV advertisements:
we might try translating it into a form that contains no abstract expression, and hence should be less offensive either to our grammatical or to our logical susceptibilities. As so rephrased, it might read, “God is identical with his attribute of being F,” or simply “God is identical with his being F.” This, however, suggests a fresh objection. The trouble with the original version arose because it purported to identify the referent of a concrete term with that of an abstract term. What is said to be baffling about a proposition like “God is identical with his being F,” however, is its seeming to express an identity which holds neither between individuals, nor between the extensions of attributes, but is between an individual and an attribute.

Lest the last consideration be regarded as decisive, it is worth remarking that the offending proposition does no more than put positively what is expressed negatively by “God is not distinct from his wisdom.” Now, there may be some dispute as to whether the latter proposition could ever be true, but it is not difficult to show that it is perfectly meaningful. We have only to remember that a predicate “F” cannot be meaningful unless “not-F,” too, is meaningful. “Red” cannot be meaningful unless “non-red” is, nor “intelligent” unless “stupid” (i.e., “non-intelligent) is, nor “adroit” unless “clumsy” (i.e., “non-adroit”) is. Similarly, “_________ is distinct from his being wise” cannot be meaningful unless “_________ is not distinct from his being wise” is meaningful. Now, the former occurs in “James is distinct from his being wise,” a proposition which is far from unintelligible, since it is equivalent to “James’ and ‘_________ is wise’ do not have the same referent. Obviously, then, the predicable “_________ is not distinct from his being wise” must be meaningful also. Now, “God is identical with his being wise” is simply another way of saying precisely what is said by “God is not distinct from his being wise.” And, because the latter employs a meaningful predicate, the former does too.

The argument in the foregoing section might now be summarized as follows:

1. “God is his F-ness” is intelligible if “God is his being F” is intelligible.
2. “God is his being F” is intelligible if “God is not distinct from his being F” is intelligible.
3. “God is not distinct from his being F” is intelligible if the predicable “_________ is not distinct from his being F” is intelligible.
4. The predicable “_________ is not distinct from his being F” is intelligible if the predicable “_________ is distinct from his being F” is intelligible.
5. The predicable “_________ is distinct from his being F” is intelligible if some predication employing a predicate of similar form is intelligible.
6. But, "James is distinct from his being wise" not only employs such
a predicate but is intelligible, since it is equivalent to "James' and
'__________ is wise' do not have the same referent".

7. Therefore, all the foregoing conditions have been met for "God is
his F-ness" or "God is his being F" to be intelligible.

If the foregoing argument is correct, it would be entirely inappropriate at this
point to insist that the notion of anything being identical with its attributes is *incon-
ceivable*. Of course, if "inconceivable" were being used merely loosely to mean
"unimaginable," the claim would be incontestable. However, there are many situ-
atations that are unimaginable without being also inconceivable. Thus, a non-
existing Socrates is unimaginable, even though perfectly conceivable, since that
is just what we do conceive of when we say "Socrates does not exist." Again,
although we cannot imagine black swans being simultaneously non-black, we
have no difficulty in conceiving of it, as we do in saying "Black swans are non-
black": although false, self-contradictory propositions are not meaningless. The
same kind of point can be made in regard to something being identical with its
properties. We need to distinguish between imagining it and conceiving it; and,
though the former is impossible, the latter is not. Indeed, that is exactly what we do
when we attach to "God" the predicable "__________ is not distinct from his
attributes." Conceivability is independent of imaginability, no less than it is of
truth. And God's being identical with his attributes is quite conceivable, irrespec-
tive of whether it be true or false, imaginable or unimaginable.

II. Why the Divine Simplicity Appears to Pose a Problem for God-Talk

God's simplicity means, among other things, that no distinction can be drawn
between the divine essence or nature and the divine existence. It means, too, that
there can be no real distinction between God and his attributes. This has implica-
tions not only for the syntax of language about God, but for its semantics as well.
The syntactical point is that propositions like "God is F" are peculiarly inappropri-
ate. This is because they are not simple. Rather, they are complex in the sense that
they contain a name and a predicate which, on the Fregean analysis, are related to
each other as a complete expression to an incomplete one. The correlative onto-
logical point is that, if "God is F" were an appropriate way of speaking about
God, then he would be conceivable as related to his property of being F as a
complete entity to an incomplete one. If, in addition, God's property of being
F were a real property rather than merely a Cambridge one, we might infer
from the truth of "God is F" that God could properly be conceived of as not
being identical with his property of being F.
Of course, it would not matter if God were conceived of as not being identical
with such of his properties as being popular, obeyed, adored, admired, ridiculed,
for they are all merely Cambridge properties; and the divine simplicity does not de­
mand that God be identical with his Cambridge properties. It does, however, re­
quire him to be identical with his real properties like existing, being intelligent,
being wise, and being compassionate. Einstein may receive the predicate “_____
is intelligent,” Socrates the predicate “________ is wise,” and Albert Schweizer
the predicate “________ is compassionate”; but, strictly speaking, God can
receive none of them. This is not because they are somehow unworthy of him,
but simply because they are predicates which refer to real properties. For that
reason, not even the first-level predicate “____________ exists” can strictly
speaking be said of God.

A striking consequence of saying that no predicate can strictly be said of God,
is that such a God can strictly speaking not be named, the argument for which
conclusion is as follows:

If there were even one first-level predicate (e.g. “________ is wise”) whose gap could not be filled by expression “NN”, then “NN”
could not be a proper name.
But, there are such predicates, for no expression that is strictly appro­
priate for referring to the God of classical theism could fill the gap in
“________ is wise”, for example.
Therefore, no expression appropriate to the God of classical theism
could be a proper name, i.e. strictly speaking, there can be no proper
name for God.

The first premiss is making a purely syntactical point rather than a semantical
one. It is not saying that “NN is wise” should be true, nor even that it should
be not be as incongruous as “Mt. Everest is wise” would be. It is saying simply
that “NN” should be no less a gap-filler for “________ is wise” than “Mt.
Everest” is. The second premiss is simply a corollary of the previous conclusion
that God’s identity with his real properties precludes the predicate “________
is wise” from strictly being said of him. This point will be still more evident in
Section III, where I shall argue that the only expressions strictly appropriate to
God-talk are propositions that are devoid of sub-propositional parts: no proposi­
tion, not even one devoid of sub-propositional parts, is a possible gap-filler for
“________ is wise.”

To have accepted the strict propriety of using a name and first-level predicates
of God would have been to accept that there was a distinction to be drawn
between the referent of the name and the attributes to which the predicates refer.
We should therefore have had to admit that there was, after all, a distinction
between him and his existence, and between him and his attributes, and thus
that he was not absolutely simple. We had a choice—either to say that God was absolutely simple, or to say that he could have a name and receive first-level predicates that refer to real rather than to merely Cambridge properties. What we could not do consistently was to affirm both these positions together. It is not that we could not name God, though some superior being could: the fact is that not even God could name God. That alone, incidentally, is enough to show that God's simplicity bespeaks rather more than lack of physical parts, for such a lack would itself be no bar to his being named, e.g., although points lack physical parts, they can readily be named.

Having reached the foregoing conclusion, let me stress immediately that I am neither saying nor implying that propositions like "God exists," "God is wise," and "God is powerful" are useless, and ought to be abandoned. Rather, I am saying that, though quite useful, they may also be quite misleading. They are useful because, no matter whether "God" be construed as a proper name or as a description, these propositions have a logical form with which we are familiar from similar talk about creatures. For that reason, and because no alternative forms of proposition are available to us in our God-talk, they ought certainly to be retained. In retaining them, however, we need to be conscious that they are of a form which is appropriate to someone who is not his existence but is merely characterized by existing, is not his wisdom but is merely characterized by being wise, is not his power but is merely characterized by being powerful. If God were none of those attributes, but was merely characterized by them, then "God exists," "God is wise," and "God is powerful" might be perfectly appropriate for God-talk also. But, precisely because those propositions contain first-level predicates which refer to real (not Cambridge) properties, they carry the implication that God is characterized in certain ways, and thus is not simple. That is why I call such propositions misleading. So much for the syntactical implications of the divine simplicity.

The semantical point becomes evident merely by comparing what we can say of God with what we can say of Ronald Reagan, Mt. Everest, or anything else in our experience. "Ronald Reagan exists" or "Mt. Everest exists" is permissible, but never "Ronald Reagan is his existence" nor "Mt. Everest is its existence." More generally, we can say "Ronald Reagan (or Mt. Everest) is F," but never "Ronald Reagan (or Mt. Everest) is its F-ness." That is why a God that is his existence and is his F-ness would be radically different from, or transcendent to, both the Universe and everything in it.

In calling the difference a radical one, I mean it to be more than a difference of degree such as between Einstein and a moron, and more even than a difference in kind such as between Einstein and an amoeba. For, despite the enormity of their difference, Einstein and an amoeba do at least belong to the one genus—the genus of cellular being—even though Einstein belongs to by far the higher of
the two species. But nothing comparable is true of a God that is identical with his attributes. Because he is each of his attributes, whereas an amoeba is not, we cannot say that God and the amoeba, nor God and Einstein, nor God and anything else belong to the one genus. Hence, as Aquinas pointed out, God cannot be a substance. Tillich, also, said as much in declaring that God is not a being. There is literally not one thing nor any created attribute from which God and his attributes do not differ in this radical fashion. Nor is the difficulty removed by saying that God is infinitely wise, compassionate, intelligent, and so on. For, while that is true, it is (or should be) just another way of saying that his attributes differ radically from those of his creatures. For that reason, all attempts to say anything positive about such a God seem predestined to failure.

Here, then, is a dilemma. If we want to say that God is so different from creatures as to be self-existent, identical with all his attributes, not a substance, not a being, we find that the only language available to us is one that is applicable to things that are not infinite, and are beings. Thus, we seem constrained to a silence, which could be broken only under pain of attributing to God qualities that differ merely in degree from those had by Socrates, Albert Schweizer, or Einstein. That is to say, language about God would seem to be irredeemably vacuous. This particular dilemma would not arise if God-talk were taken to be saying about God something either merely negative, or merely relational, or both, e.g., if “God is wise” were interpreted either as saying no more than “God is not wise in the way that human beings are wise,” or as “God is the cause of wisdom in creatures,” or both. Nor would it arise if all God-talk were either metaphorical or symbolic (although such theories are scarcely uncontentious). It arises only for a God-talk which claims to be not only positive and often non-relational, but asks to be taken literally as well.

So the divine transcendence, no less than the divine simplicity, threatens the very possibility of saying about God anything that is positive rather than merely negative, and to be taken literally rather than merely figuratively. The divine transcendence might lead us to think that a literal use of language could never say anything positive and non-relational about God. And the divine simplicity might suggest that the very logical structure, as distinct from the semantics, of language about creatures rendered it totally unsuited to God-talk.

III. Simple Propositions are the Most Appropriate for God-Talk

Having just remarked that the logical structure of language about creatures makes it less than suitable for talking about the God of classical theism, I want now to draw attention to propositions having a logical structure that is notably appropriate for God-talk, namely, propositions with no logical parts whatever. If this seems a bizarre suggestion, the reason may lie in our accepting unquestion-
ingly that propositions must always say something about something—that not only must predications always be propositions, but propositions must always be predications. 21

The last claim has only to be stated explicitly to be recognized as rather less than tautological, for what suffices to characterize a proposition does not suffice for a predication. To be a proposition it is enough that an expression be a bearer of truth-value; to be a predication, however, an expression has not only to be a bearer of truth-value, but has also to say something about something. All predications, of course, must be logically complex, containing at least two logical parts, either subject and predicate, or predicatable and higher-level predicate. But, what of the converse? Are all propositions predications—expressions saying something about something, and hence logically complex? Or, could there not be propositions that merely said something (with a truth-value), though without saying something about something? In approaching these questions we might ponder the warning implicit in Waismann’s remarks that,

by growing up in a certain language, by thinking in its semantic and syntactical grooves, we acquire a certain more or less uniform outlook on the world—an outlook we are scarcely aware of until (say) by coming across a language of a totally different structure we are shocked into seeing the oddity of the obvious, or what seemed to be obvious. 22

That we may have grown accustomed to think that all propositions must be about something is not sufficient to show either that they are so as a matter of fact, still less as a matter of necessity. I suggest not only that some could well be otherwise, but even that they need not be limited to the more esoteric areas of discourse. A striking example seems to occur in a novel by Clemens Brentano: “Grossmutter, da ist eine Maus drin! hört wie es klappert! da ist eine Maus drin”23 (Grandmother, there is a mouse inside! Hark at the rattling (or, at how it rattles)! There is a mouse inside!”) Here the “es,” being neuter, cannot refer back to the feminine “eine Maus.” Consequently, it cannot be a referring expression, but has to be construed as merely a grammatical filler. The result is that, since the proposition “Es klappert” contains no referring expression, it cannot be said to be about anything.

The same is true of the Rumanian “Fulgură,” which is like some other propositions in that language in being no more than a verb stem. It contains no referring expression like “es” or “it,” nor even the suffix “t” possessed by its Latin counterpart (“Fulgurat”). More importantly, it is only “Fulgură” as a whole—and not some part of it—that signifies in its own right. It is therefore logically simple. Elsewhere I have argued that propositions like “Es brennt,” “It is raining” and “It is thundering” might also be construed as having that same logical simplicity, notwithstanding their grammatical and verbal complexity. If
so, the lack of logical parts contrasts strikingly with the presence of those parts even in such uncomplicated propositions as “Tom is tall,” “Tasmanian tigers exist,” and “All men are mortal.” The first contains “Tom” and “_______ is tall,” the second “(∃x) (x _________)” and “_______ is a Tasmanian Tiger,” and the third “(x)(x __________ → x _________),” “_________ is a man,” and “_________ is mortal.”

It may be urged that no one of the allegedly simple propositions has to be construed as simple, but that all are equally construable as logically complex. I shall not debate the point here, nor need I do so, since for present purposes it matters not whether they be construable as logically complex, provided there is nothing against their being also construable as logically simple. It would not even matter that logically simple propositions may perhaps entail a logically complex one, e.g., “Es klappert” may entail “Etwas klappert” (“Something is rattling”), “It is raining” may entail “Rain is falling,” and “Es brennt” may entail “Etwas brennt” (“Something is burning”). The sole point at issue here is whether the notion of a logically simple proposition is an acceptable one, and acceptable indeed as one that may well be instantiated in quite ordinary creature-talk. Since, as I think, at least that much has been established in the article to which I alluded, there is no question of the notion being merely an ad hoc device used in a desperate move to overcome a difficulty in regard to God-talk.

Propositions of this kind seem to be the only ones that are entirely appropriate to God-talk, at least where the God in question is the God of classical theism. Propositions like “God exists,” or “God is wise,” or “God is powerful” are less than appropriate since each of them says something about something, thereby suggesting the presence in God of the very distinctions that he is said to lack. Their inappropriateness need not, however, reduce us to silence; for it could debar us not from saying something, but merely from saying something about something. Now, to say something without saying something about something is precisely the function of logically simple propositions; which is why they alone would be entirely appropriate to God-talk.

Now it may be correct to say that they would be the only kind of proposition entirely appropriate to God-talk, and from a logical point of view it may even be very helpful to do so. They do present us with difficulties, however, not because they are simple, but because to us they are almost totally uninformative. This is not so with the simple propositions mentioned above, for they can be grasped in their own right, i.e., without presupposing a grasp of any non-simple propositions. For example, a grasp of “Es klappert” presupposes no grasp of the non-simple “Etwas klappert,” precisely because we have direct experience of those states of affairs which make both of them true. But the simple propositions of God-talk are not made true by anything of which we have any experience at all. On the contrary, our understanding of them presupposes an understanding
of certain non-simple propositions which we may arrive at in different ways—
either, as I have just done, by reflecting on what kinds of proposition would be
appropriate to the God of classical theism, or possibly as the conclusion of an
argument for theism. In the absence of any such route to them, a simple proposi­
tion in God-talk would not be particularly informative to us. Obviously, there­
fore, if God-talk were to be at all informative to us, it could not be limited to
simple propositions alone: it would have to admit of logically complex\(^2\) ones
as well. Although not entirely appropriate for God-talk, the latter need not be
entirely inappropriate either.

IV. Establishing the Analogical Character of God-Talk

As explained in Section II, the doctrine of divine simplicity raises serious dif­
ficulties for the possibility of affirming of God anything that would be not only
positive and non-relational, but also to be taken literally. I want now to argue that
the selfsame doctrine that generated those difficulties contains also the seeds of
their solution. For that argument the notion of a logically simple proposition will
be indispensable.

I begin by noting three conditions for a predicable "________ is F" to be
used analogically in God-talk, in the very broad sense of "analogically" defined
previously, viz.

a. that its uses in "God is F" and "James is F" have similar meanings,
b. that their similarity of meaning be not construable as univocity, and
c. that, if "God is F" and "James if F" are both true, then "________
is F" is being used literally, not figuratively, in each case.

On their own, conditions (a) and (b) would establish merely that the uses of
"________ is F" were neither equivocal nor univocal, but not whether they
were literal nor non-literal. Hence the need for (c). It is precisely (c), however,
which is the stumbling block. Indeed, many critics dismiss it as quite untenable, as
witness the following objection from Nielsen:\(^{25}\)

If "James is intelligent" and "God is intelligent" have even one simi­
ilarity then at least one characteristic of God's intelligence is the same
as one characteristic of James' intelligence. But in that case the term
signifying that characteristic must be univocal. Therefore, to the extent
that "________ is intelligent" signifies that characteristic it is not
analogical but univocal.

Although Nielsen frames his objection in terms of sameness of characteristics,
it readily admits of being reformulated purely in terms of similarity of meaning.
It would then run as follows:
If "James is intelligent" and "God is intelligent" have any similarity of meaning, then there is at least one respect in which the meaning of the former is the same as of the latter.
But, then, the similarity of meaning must be simply univocity.
Therefore, to the extent that "__________ is intelligent" in the former has any similarity of meaning with "__________ is intelligent" in the latter, it is being used not analogically, but univocally.

It might be noted that Nielsen's second premiss depends on the possibility of inferring from similarity of meaning between "God is intelligent" and "James is intelligent" to some sameness of meaning between them. That inference could be justified, however, only by assuming that similarity of meaning had always to be understood in terms of sameness of meaning, which of course is precisely the claim that is being contested. Thus, Nielsen's argument rather begs the question. Instead of being either accepted or rejected unquestioningly, therefore, his assumption has either to be affirmed by argument or denied by argument. In the remainder of this section I shall be arguing for its denial.

**Argument for the Analogical Character of God-Talk**

Nielsen has noted the theistic claim to some similarity of meaning between the occurrences of "F" in "God is F" and in "James is F." He is puzzled as to how that could be, without there being some "common core" of meaning between the two uses. Yet, if there were such a common core, the uses of "F" would not be analogical, but either partly or wholly univocal. Not only that, but the effect of thus predicating "F" of God would be to apply to him some core predicates having exactly the same senses as when they were applied to creatures. The result would be a God conceived of in the image of creatures—an anthropomorphized God. This conclusion could be resisted, he would suggest, only by abandoning all claim to similarity of meaning between the two uses of "F" and allowing that the uses were equivocal—in the strong sense of that term, namely, in the sense of being casually ambiguous.

Equivocality, however, would conflict with the claim by some classical theists, including Aquinas, to be able to argue that certain predicates which are true of creatures must be true of God also. Such predicates are those which attribute the so-called pure perfections to creatures. In this paper it is impossible to give even a moderately detailed account of the argument. However, I should perhaps indicate at least its basic strategy, viz.

God is ontologically simple, i.e. he is actus purus, or actuality unmixed with any passive potentiality.
A being that contains no such potentiality cannot fail to have any of the *pure* perfections, i.e. any attribute which is in se unmarked by (not mixed with) passive potentiality, even though it may per accidens be so marked, e.g. when possessed by creatures.

Therefore, God has all the pure perfections: hence, if F is a pure perfection had by a creature, it must be literally true that F is had by God also.27

Nielsen and others would claim that not even a pure perfection (if such there be) could be said of God and creatures analogically. In doing so, however, they would be misconstruing the significance of the divine simplicity. It was that which allowed the classical theist to conclude that God had all the pure perfections. It is that same divine simplicity which will now allow us to conclude that, if F is a pure perfection had both by God and by James, then the uses of ‘F’ in “God is F” and “James is F” simply cannot be univocal, as Nielsen would maintain that it must. The argument will be based squarely on the conclusion drawn in the preceding section that the ontological simplicity of God would be expressed less misleadingly by a logically simple proposition than by a logically complex one. This will turn out to be the crucial consideration in arguing that the “F” in “God is F” is not univocal with its use in “James is F.”

As already noted, the senses of logically simple propositions may entail and be entailed by the senses of logically complex ones, as in the case of the simple “Es klappert” and the complex “Etwas klappert,” for example. Let “P,” therefore, be the logically simple proposition whose *sense* entails and is entailed by the *sense* of “God is identical with his being F.”28 Since the senses mutually entail each other, they are obviously not unrelated. But that is not all: more interesting for our purposes is that the relation in question is not simply between the sense of one proposition and that of another, but between the sense of a proposition and that of a *predicate*—between “P” and “F.” The ground for saying so is that “P” entails “God is identical with his being F,” but obviously does not entail “God is identical with his being G.” Hence, “P” expresses not merely a sense that is common to those two complex propositions, but also one that is peculiar to the former of them. What is peculiar to the former, however, is its containing the sense of “F” rather than of “G.” Consequently, the senses of “P” and “F” must be similar in some way, their difference of logical type notwithstanding. (There could, of course, be some other simple proposition, say “Q,” whose sense entailed and was entailed by the sense of “God is identical with his being G”; and so on for the various other attributes such as his being H, being J, being K, etc.).

Bearing in mind the points already noted, it can now be argued that, within the context of the classical theism, the senses of “F” in “James is F” and in “God is F” cannot be univocal. The argument is as follows:
A. If what distinguishes the sense of “James is F” from the sense of “James is G” were even partly univocal with what distinguishes the sense of “God is F” from the sense of “God is G”, then it should also be partly univocal with what distinguishes the sense of “P” from the sense of “Q”.

But, what distinguishes the sense of “James is F” from the sense of “James is G” cannot be even partly univocal with what distinguishes the sense of “P” from the sense of “Q”. (This premiss will be defended below.)

Therefore, what distinguishes the sense of “James is F” from the sense of “James is G” cannot be even partly univocal with what distinguishes the sense of “God is F” from the sense of “God is G”.

But, what distinguishes the sense of “James is F” from the sense of “James is G” is the sense of “F” in “James is F”; and what distinguishes the sense of “God is F” from the sense of “God is G” is the sense of “F” in “God is F”.

Therefore, the sense of “F” in “God is F” cannot be even partly univocal with the sense of “F” in “James is F”.

The first and second premisses of (A) call for some explanation. About the first, we might ask why the consequent follows from the antecedent. The reason is simply that the sense of “P” entails and is entailed by the sense of “God is identical with his property of being F.” As for the second premiss, it can be demonstrated as follows:

B. If “P” and “F” were synonymous, they would be either wholly synonymous or partly so. They could be wholly synonymous, only if both were of the same logical type, i.e. if both were propositions or both predicates.

But they are not of the same logical type.

They could be partly synonymous, only if “F” were synonymous with some logical part of “P”, or “P” were synonymous with some logical part of “F”.

But, “P” contains no logical parts, nor does “F” contain any proposition (since “God is F” is an atomic proposition).

For the above reasons, therefore, “P” and “F” can be neither wholly nor partly synonymous: although “P” and “F” do have related senses, the relation between them can be one of neither total nor partial synonymy.

Having defended the first two premisses of argument (A), the only ones remaining are the third and fourth. The third follows immediately from the first
and second premisses, and the fourth is simply a truism. Hence, we are entitled to accept the conclusion of (A), viz. that the sense of “F” in “God is F” cannot be even partly univocal with the sense of “F” in “James is F.” If the theses of classical theism are true, therefore, many of the predicates in God-talk cannot be univocal with those in creature-talk, notwithstanding their being used literally of him.

Objections

Obviously enough, two points were central to argument (A). One was that “P” entailed only “God is identical with his being F,” but not “God is identical with his being G”; the other was that the expressions “P” and “F” were of different logical types. Some might object to both points. Against the first it might be argued that, since God is identical not only with his being F but also with his being G and each of his other attributes, no proposition could entail “God is identical with his being F” without also entailing “God is identical with his being G.” In that case, however, there would be no ground for claiming that the senses of “P” and “F” were any more closely related than those of “P” and “G”. The foregoing argument would thus be blocked before it even began.

The objection rests on the claim that whether the logically simple propositions “P” and “Q” have the same senses is determined by whether they are made true by the same or different states of affairs. That claim could be sustained, however, only if sameness of truth-conditions were always to be matched by sameness of sense. Of course, it must be admitted that sameness of truth-conditions between two propositions will generally be matched by sameness of sense. Not always, however, as witness the two propositions “X is triangular” and “X is trilateral” which differ in sense, despite being subject to the same truth-conditions, viz. X’s vertices having such-and-such spatial coordinates. Indeed, that example alone is enough to dispel the idea that “P” and “Q” cannot have distinct senses if God and his attributes are identical with each other.

As for the second point mentioned above—that expressions “P” and “F” are of different logical types—, it might be objected that the claim is at least debatable, since apparently different types are sometimes transformable or reparsable into each other. Thus, Frank Ramsey argued that logical subjects and predicates were interchangeable; others, following Quine, have suggested that names could be reparsed as predicables; and Frege regarded propositions as a kind of name, viz. of truth-values. Perhaps, then, a latter-day Frege-Quine would be prepared to argue that, since propositions are names, they are amenable to being reparsed as predicates; and, hence, “P” and “F” would not be irreducibly different logical types after all. Indeed, ought not both of them be treated as predicates, with “P” being a zero-place predicate and “F” a one-place predicate?
Apart from this improbable piece of philosophical eclecticism being almost certainly wrong on one count and probably on both, there is no way in which a bearer of truth-value (a proposition) could be transformed into a non-bearer of truth-value (a predicate), nor vice versa. Although one bearer of truth-value might be transformable into another of different logical structure, it could not be transformable into a non-bearer of truth-value. Naturally, a truth-bearer could often be analyzed or decomposed into non-bearers of truth-value; and, likewise, non-bearers of truth-value could certainly be combined to form a bearer of truth-values, i.e., a proposition. Considered simply on its own, however, no non-bearer of truth-values could ever be reparsed into a proposition, nor vice versa.

As for the suggestion that “P” is ‘really’ a predicate (viz. a zero-place one), it ignores the fact that the term “zero-place” is being used as an alienans adjective like “rocking” in “rocking horse” and “decoy” in “decoy duck.” A zero-place predicate is no more a predicate than is a rocking horse a horse or a decoy duck is a duck. And that simply serves to confirm the conclusion that there can be no univocity between “P” and “F,” despite their senses being related in some way.

God-Talk is not Anthropomorphic

Although the foregoing discussion has shown that the relation between the uses of “F” in “God is F” and in “James is F” is not one of univocity, that alone does not suffice to preclude “F” from being used anthropomorphically in regard to God. Even if someone wanted to say that “F” in “Tibbles (a cat) is F” was related non-univocally with the “F” in “James is F,” he would not want to claim that Tibbles transcended the created universe. Why, then, could “F” not be used anthropomorphically in “God is F,” even allowing that its relation with the “F” in “James is F” was not one of univocity?

Well, let us consider whether the proposition “God is identical with his being F” could be an anthropomorphic one. It would be simplistic to suggest that the mere fact of its being about God sufficed to show that it was not anthropomorphic; for that would beg the very point at issue, which is whether the notion of God is an anthropomorphic one. Until that has been settled, there are no grounds for arguing that a proposition is non-anthropomorphic simply by reason of its being about God. What does, however, establish the non-anthropomorphic character of “God is identical with his being F” is not the presence of the term “God,” but the presence of the predicate “__________ is identical with his being F.”

For example, even though “__________ is wise” could be predicated truly of creatures, “__________ is identical with his being wise” could not. Because that predicate can be true of no individual whatsoever, any atomic proposition in which it is truly predicated can only be a non-anthropomorphic one. (As
mentioned earlier, God is not an individual in any univocal sense of that term.)

The question still to be decided is whether "F," too, is non-anthropomorphic in any way. Are we entitled to conclude that the non-anthropomorphic character of the proposition carries over to its proper logical parts? Certainly, we cannot simply assume that, if a proposition is non-anthropomorphic, every part of it must likewise be non-anthropomorphic; for that would be to commit the fallacy of composition in reverse. There is, however, another argument which is innocent of that fallacy. We begin by noting that our simple proposition "P" is no less non-anthropomorphic than is its complex counterpart "God is identical with his being F," for their senses mutually entail each other. Now, we have seen already that "F" and "P" have related senses. Yet, because "P" has just no logical parts at all, the relation between its sense and that of "F" obviously cannot be ascribed to any proper part of "P." *A fortiori*, therefore, it cannot be ascribed to any anthropomorphic part. But, in that case, "F" and "F" can have related senses only if "F," too, is non-anthropomorphic. Of course, it does not follow that "F" is wholly non-anthropomorphic, but it does follow that it is at least partly so. For present purposes, however, that is quite enough.

V. Comments on the Argument

In the course of the paper various difficulties have been raised about the possibility of God-talk being analogical. Principally there have been three, viz.

1. Analogical uses of an expression are said to have different, but not totally dissimilar, senses. However, to say that they have different but not totally dissimilar senses is simply to say that they are partly univocal. 31

2. For the analogical character of God-talk, there can be no argument that is not so wedded to one or other particular theory of analogy as to be unable to survive the demise of the theory.

3. God's transcendence and simplicity preclude there being any likeness whatever between divine and created attributes. Hence, predicates that refer to those attributes used of creatures could never be literally true of God, but could be used of him only in some figurative sense.

If my argument has been correct, all three objections fail. They do so, moreover, precisely because they overlook what is implied by the doctrine of the divine simplicity. That doctrine, considered to be an insuperable obstacle to literal but non-anthropomorphic God-talk, has on the contrary been the key to removing the obstacles to the possibility of such language. It has done so by implying that the propositions most appropriate to God-talk should be logically simple in the
sense of having no sub-propositional logical parts. Once this was recognized, it could be shown that the senses of some predicates employed in talk about creatures must be similar to the senses of the simple propositions that would be appropriate to God-talk. Because of the syntactical difference between a simple proposition and a predicate, their senses could never be related univocally. But, to say that senses are similar, though not at all univocal, is simply to say they are analogous. And that is the answer to difficulty (1). Moreover, since this was the conclusion of a quite general argument—one wedded to no particular form of analogy—it thereby rebutted the second difficulty.

Finally, and contrary to the third objection, it is not that the divine transcendence and simplicity debar any likeness between God and creatures. On the contrary, they are quite integral to the case for the possibility of such likeness. In fact, the divine simplicity is the ground for saying that, properly speaking, the propositions of God-talk should be logically simple; and it is because of the relation between such propositions and predicates employed in talk about creatures that the divine attributes can be said to be like created ones, yet without being anthropomorphic. Thus is rejected the discontinuity thesis mentioned at the beginning of the paper.

Admittedly, the argument has presupposed the classical theistic doctrines of divine simplicity, divine transcendence, pure perfections, and of the possibility of proving that God is his being F (given that F is a pure perfection), doctrines which are scarcely uncontroversial even among theists outside the classical school. That, however, is not to its discredit, since the expressed aim of the paper was to discuss not the truth of those doctrines, but only their implications. What are their implications for the possibility of language about God, and, in particular, for a God-talk that could be used literally, yet not anthropomorphically? That was the question being addressed, and its answer would seem to be that, logically speaking, the analogical but non-anthropomorphic character of God-talk could be denied only by denying some of the central tenets of classical theism. As to whether those tenets should be affirmed, that is a question for another place.

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NOTES


2. I am using "anthropomorphic" in a wide sense. Strictly speaking, a predicate would be anthropomorphic only if it could properly be predicated of a human being. As I shall be using the
tern, however, "F" is used anthropomorphically in "God is F" only if it is univocal with the "F" used in "X is F," where X is any creature, whether human or non-human, animate or inanimate. My excuse for this departure is twofold. First I know of no existing word that could fill that role; and, secondly, very many of the predicates applied to God are ones that derive from applications to humans.

3. J. Ross, op. cit., 161-63. As he notes, the linguistic discontinuity thesis "contends that religious occurrences are fraudulent meaning pretenders, whose pretense is negated by the lack of proper ancestry in meaningful discourse."

5. J. Ross, op. cit., 177.
8. Cajetan, De Analogia Nominum.
13. To say simply "God is identical with the attribute of being F" might suggest that the F had by God was the same as the F had by James. As well, it might suggest that attributes existed extra rebus. In my view the suggestions are false; and the use of "his" in "God is his being F" is intended to preclude both of them.
14. It should be noted that this premiss requires only that the two predicates have the same form. It does not require that there be any relation between their senses. To have done so would have been question-begging, since such a relationship has yet to be established.
15. I distinguish real properties from Cambridge ones. The adjective "Cambridge" was applied originally by Geach to such changes as have no effect on their subject, and contrasted with those changes which do have a real effect on their subject. Butter's rising in price is a Cambridge change in butter, whereas its melting is a real change. I have extended the application of "Cambridge" from changes to properties.
16. I have argued elsewhere ("In Defence of the Predicate 'Exists'," Mind, 78 (1975), 338-354; "Negative Existential Propositions," Analysis, 42 (1982), 9-16; "Cambridge Properties and Defunct individuals," Analysis, 43 (1983), 7-9; "'Exists' and Existence," The Review of Metaphysics, 40 (1986), 237-270) for there being two irreducibly different senses of "exists," a first-level use when it is said of individuals, and a second-level use when it is said of kinds or attributes. In this paper I shall be concerned exclusively with the first-level use. In regard to this use, see also Geach, "What Actually Exists," Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, supp. vol. 42 (1968), 7-16; J. L. Mackie, "The Riddle of Existence," Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, supp. vol. 50 (1976), 247-266.
17. Aquinas, Summa contra Gentiles, I, 25. "A substance is "a thing to which it belongs to be not in a subject. The name thing takes its origin from the quiddity, just as the name being comes from to be. In this way, the definition of substance is understood as that which has a quiddity to which it belongs to be not in another. Now, that is not appropriate to God, for he has no quiddity save his being. In no way, then, is God in the genus of substance." Cf. also Summa Theologiae, I, 3,
5, ad lum. Italics in the translation.

18. P. Tillich, Systematic Theory, I, part II, IIb, 3b. “God is being-itself, not a being.” Italics in the original.

19. Although the few examples that I have given of God-talk are all predications—indeed, they are all predications employing first-level predicates—I use them not to suggest that all God-talk must be of this very basic kind, but simply because a grasp of more complex kinds of propositions presupposes a grasp of some atomic propositions, namely, those that enter into what Dummett calls the ‘constructional history’ of a proposition.

20. Cf. my “Logically Simple Propositions,” Analysis, 34 (1973-74), 123-28. I here give no more than the conclusions and some examples from that article. To have included the supporting argument would have lengthened the present paper unreasonably.

21. As I am using the term “predication,” it is simply a tautology to say that a proposition which is about something is a predication. Of course, the predicates are not restricted to being of first-level nor even to being simple as in “Socrates is wise.” In “Elephants exist,” for example, the predicate will be of second-level, e.g. “(x)(x ________).” In, “If Tom hits dogs, he is foolish;” the predicate would be complex, viz. “If ______ hits dogs, ________ is foolish.” Each of these propositions is no less a predication than is “Socrates is wise.”


24. As I use it in this paper, “complex proposition” is to mean not “proposition having propositional logical parts,” but merely “proposition having sub-propositional logical parts.

25. K. Nielsen, “Talk of God and the Doctrine of Analogy,” The Thomist, 40 (1976), 40. This passage also illustrates the tacit, but common, assumption that no claim for the analogical character of predicates is acceptable unless its defenders can explain also just what is the pattern of logical relations to which the predicates conform. As I have said, I hope to show that assumption to be untenable.


27. Examples of pure perfections are intelligence, wisdom, power, volition; examples of mixed or impure perfections are capacity for seeing, hearing, being hot, being mutable, being extended. According to Aquinas, the pure perfections are had by God formally and eminently, but the mixed perfections are had by him only virtually and eminently. To say that a perfection is had by him formally is to say, inter alia, that it can be attributed to him literally. What is had by him virtually can be attributed to him only metaphorically. Needless to say, God may well have many more pure perfections than the rather limited number that are to be found in creatures; but they would be beyond our ken.

28. This is not simply a longwinded way of saying, “Let ‘P’ be a logically simple proposition that entails and is entailed by ‘God is identical with his being F.’” My point in speaking of the senses of those propositions is to preclude their relationship being understood as solely one of mutual deducibility or mutual strict implication. Rather, the connection between them is one based on their senses. Hence it is akin to what Ackermann has called “rigorous implication.” (W. Ackermann, “Begründung einer strenger Implikation,” Journal of Symbolic Logic, 21 (1956), 113-128.)

29. I use “synonymous” rather than “univocal” in this argument, because “univocal” often connotes not merely synonymy but synonymy between two terms having the same sound or shape. “Synonymy,” however, can be applicable to any two terms irrespective of whether they have the same sound or
shape. An example of wholly synonymous uses would be “man” in “James is a man” and “Tom is a man.” Each of these, however, would be partly synonymous with “animal” in “Fido is an animal.” Should “partial synonymy” be regarded as an inadmissible notion, argument (B) would of course be even more straightforward than it already is.

30. I do not say that all predicates applied to God must be non-anthropomorphic, for some are clearly anthropomorphic, e.g., “_________ is worshipped,” “_________ is obeyed,” “_________ is loved (feared, hated, ignored, trusted).” Speaking generally, it might be said that any predicate that refers to a Cambridge property may be anthropomorphic. Predicates that refer to real properties, however, are not used anthropomorphically of God.

31. Although this is Nielsen’s main objection, it antedates him by many centuries, as witnessed by the following quotation: “Those masters who deny univocity with their lips really presuppose it.” (Scotus, *Reportata Parvisensa*, I.3.1, no. 7, quoted by R. Swinburne in his *Coherence of Theism*, p. 74.)