

On the Analogy of Being

In *ST I* q. 13 a. 5 St. Thomas explains the notion of the analogy of being. He shows that things cannot be predicated of God and creatures in the same way because whatever qualities or perfections we observe to exist in creatures do not exist in God in the same way. He also shows, however, that a certain similarity remains between the two despite the differences in predication, and herein lies the metaphysical principle of the analogical predication of being.

Analogical predication entails the idea that two things have a certain likeness to one another, such that one can validly make a comparison between them, but for all that there remains an even greater dissimilarity between them. This is the mean, as it were, between equivocal and univocal predication. In the former, two things share the same name without sharing any essential similarity, such as the bank of a river and a bank as an edifice that stores and guards the money of its investors. In the latter, two things share the same name as well as an essential similarity, such as “Peter is man” and “Paul is a man.” In these statements, man is predicated univocally of Peter and Paul, since both are men and have the same essence. The difference between univocity and equivocation lies in the concept signified by the term. In univocal predication, the term and the concept signified by the term are the same; in equivocal predication, only the term is the same while the concept differs.¹

In analogical predication, the term and the concept designated by the term are the same, thought not without difference. This is the case in things predicated of both God and creatures. To say that “God is a being” and “Man is a being” is to affirm that both subsist, that both exist, but not entirely in the same sense. God is a being because He is Being itself, or rather, He is self-subsisting being. Man is a being because he participates in being, he has being, though not from himself, but only from God

¹ H.D. Gardeil, *Introduction to the Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas: Vol. IV, Metaphysics*, trans. John A. Otto (Raleigh, NC: Lulu, 2009), 50.

who is the cause of his existence. There is an infinite difference between self-subsisting being and being by participation, though both God and men truly exist and both are subjects of which the term “being” is predicated.

St. Thomas clarifies this truth when he shows that whatever is predicated of a man signifies something distinct from himself, his other perfections, and his very existence, but that this is not the case with God. To say that a man is wise tells us something about this man that is distinct from the man’s own nature, for a man can obviously have a nature and still lack the perfection of wisdom; it tells us something distinct from his other perfections, for the man may or may not also be strong; and it tells us something about the man distinct from his existence, for the man may or may not even exist, and among men that do exist, many lack wisdom, so wisdom is not an essential feature of a man’s existence. But this is not at all the case with God, because wisdom as a perfection of God does not signify anything distinct from God’s nature, existence, or other perfections, and indeed exceeds the very idea that the term signifies.² Therefore, wisdom is not predicated of God and men in the same way.

On the other hand, there remains something similar in the concept of wisdom that applies to both God and men. If this were not so, St. Thomas says, “nothing could be known or demonstrated about God at all,” at least by the light of reason, but this is clearly false because the philosophers, especially Aristotle, were able to come to know many things about God through reasoning alone.³ Therefore, whatever is said of both God and creatures is predicated analogically, in which the meaning of the term is partly the same and partly different. Perfections that exist in creatures are found pre-eminently in God; that is, they exist in God in a much higher and more perfect way, and even in the fullest way, whereas in creatures they exist in a finite and participated way.

² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I, 13, 5, 2nd rev. ed., trans. English Dominican Fathers (Notre Dame: Christian Classics, 1981).

³ Ibid.

The similarity that exists between God and creatures is due to the fact that God is the efficient cause of the existence and the perfections possessed by creatures, and since an effect must be proportionate to its cause, whatever is in the effect must be contained in the cause. But since the perfections of creatures do not adequately reflect the fullness of the perfections contained in God as their efficient cause, they cannot be predicated univocally.⁴ Yet the similarity is not altogether an inadequate one, and the manifestation of God's perfections is truly found in the perfections of the things He has made. Therefore, whatever exists in creatures exists also in God, but only by way of analogy.

⁴ Ibid.