

ПОНЯТИЯ И КАТЕГОРИИ

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Metaphysical Principles at the Basis of Analogical Predication of God and Creatures*

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The aim of the paper is to reconstruct the key metaphysical presuppositions on which Thomas Aquinas grounds his analogical predication of God and creatures. By doing so one can get a better grip on what analogical predication means in Aquinas and how a term predicated of God differs in meaning from that ascribed to creatures, e.g. the term “wise”. First, there are two kinds of predication of a property based on the mode of ontological realization of the property in God and creatures (essential predication and predication based on participation). These differences in modes of realization translate into the semantics of predication (the meaning of the copula and the subject and predicate terms). The properties in God and in creatures respectively are related by the relationship of exemplar causation. The property in God is not directly apprehended by the intellect but is partially understood based on the property in creatures. The latter, being apprehended by a human mind, must be qualified by negation and making eminent.

Keywords: Thomas Aquinas; theory of predication; analogy; exemplar causation; participation

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It is common knowledge that according to Aquinas, when one says, for instance, that a particular person is wise and that God is wise, the predication of “...is wise” has somewhat different meaning when applied to God than to a creature, a human

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person. The meaning is in some way different but not entirely different as in "...is a bank" applied to a financial institution and a riverbank. While the latter is a case of equivocal predication, the former an instance of analogical predication¹. It is the goal of this paper to point out some metaphysical underpinnings of this doctrine in order to better understand in what precisely this minor difference in analogical meanings consists.

Let us explain our undertaking more carefully. First, we can replace the vague term "meaning" by the phrase "conceptual content" (*ratio*) which is the term Aquinas uses, meaning the sometimes simple, sometimes complex feature or property expressed by a term, say the term "wise"². Now this conceptual content (e.g. wisdom) associated with the term (e.g. "wise") exists in a human person and in God as the ground for the two respective predications ("this person is wise", "God is wise"). The question is how the conceptual content of "wise" is different in both applications for the predication to be analogical rather than univocal as in "Peter is wise" and "Paul is wise" in which apparently the conceptual content is the same. The difference in the conceptual contents expressed by the two occurrences of "wise" in "this person is wise" and "God is wise" will be grounded in their respective realizations, as each exists in the person and in God. But this difference is also carried to the conceptual level itself, so the meanings will have to be partly the same and partly different. Hence, our task will be twofold: its first dimension is to understand how both *rationes* exist in the analogates (the person and God) and their mutual relationship which will turn out to ground their ontological difference. Its second dimension is to understand the conceptual difference based on the latter ontological one.

In the present study we will gradually unpack the following classic and rather condensed statement on analogical predication, as distinct from univocal predication, found in Aquinas's *Summa Theologica* I, 13, 5c:

...all perfections existing in creatures divided and multiplied, pre-exist in God unitedly. Thus when any term expressing perfection is applied to a creature, it signifies that perfection distinct in idea from other perfections; as, for instance, by the term "wise" applied to man, we signify some perfection distinct from a man's essence, and distinct from his power and existence, and from all similar things; whereas when we apply it to God, we do not mean to signify anything distinct from His essence, or power, or existence. Thus also this term "wise" applied to man in some degree circumscribes and comprehends the thing signified; whereas this is not the case when it is applied to God; but it leaves the thing signified as incomprehended, and as exceeding the signification of the name. Hence it is evident that this term "wise" is not applied in the same way to God and to man. The same rule applies to other terms. Hence no name is predicated univocally of God and of creatures³.

¹ It is debatable whether the analogical predicate is the same term as when used in a standard univocal predication. I assume it is but nothing in this paper depends on that and one could distinguish two different terms (as there are two different meanings).

² In this study we prefer the term "property" widely used in analytic metaphysics rather than the more specific Aristotelian terminology of "perfection" or "form" which appear in the primary texts.

³ The Blackfriars translation available at <https://www.newadvent.org/summa/>

1. Essential predication and predication based on participation

God and creatures differ in ontological complexity. God is absolutely simple⁴. The consequence of this fact is the following: while in humans being wise or wisdom is a property distinct from a person's particular nature which has it, in God it is identical to his very essence or nature⁵.

The goodness by which we are formally good is a certain participation of the divine goodness, and the wisdom by which we are formally wise is a certain participation of the divine wisdom (STh II-II, 23, 2 ad 1).

The same is true of "... exists" (being) or "...is good":

Being is predicated essentially only of God, since the divine esse is subsistent and absolute. Being is predicated of all creatures by participation: no creature is its own existence, but rather is a being which has existence. In the same way, God is essentially good, because He is goodness itself; creatures are called good by participation, because they have goodness (Quodlibet II, 2, 3c).

These ontological facts translate into logical facts: while "is" in "God is wise" is that of identity, "is" in "this person is wise" is that of property possession. Let us not complicate matters by the fact that "this person is wise" is accidental predication one of whose interpretations in Aquinas amounts to "this person is someone who is wise" where the first "is" is that of identity and the second "is" is that of property possession⁶.

⁴ For an overview of the problem and arguments for divine simplicity see [Lamont, 1997, p. 521–538]. For a more historically based approach see [Burns, 1989, p. 271–293]. For a logical analysis of Aquinas's arguments that God is his essence see [Kąkol, 2013, p. 649–660]. For the defense of Thomas's doctrine see [Geach, 1954–1955, p. 251–272].

⁵ [Dei essentia] Est autem manifesta nobis per quasdam similitudines in creaturis repertas, quae id quod in Deo unum est, multipliciter participant, et secundum hoc intellectus noster considerat unitatem divinae essentiae sub ratione bonitatis, sapientiae, virtutis et huiusmodi, quae in Deo unum sunt. Haec ergo invisibilia Dei dixit, quia illud unum quod his nominibus, seu rationibus, in Deo respondet, non videtur a nobis (*Super Epistolam B. Pauli ad Romanos lectura* c. 1, lect. 6, no. 117).

⁶ It is debatable whether the property possession is to be analyzed in terms of predication or conceptualization only (in other words, whether it pertains to the first or second operation of the intellect as understood in the Aristotelian tradition). This accidental predication contrasts with essential predication, e.g. "this is a man" which is to be analyzed as "this is someone who is a man" in which the first "is" is that of identity and the second "is" is that of constitution. Constitution is like essential predication of divine attributes in that the feature predicated is identified with the predication subject's nature. However, while in the former case the identification is only partial (since a particular human being consists of the human nature plus its individual features), in the latter case of God it is total: God is (really) identical to any of his properties and they are identical with one another. The contrast we explore in the text is not that between essential and accidental predication but that between essential predication in God (i.e. the predication of divine attributes) and predication based on participation. The latter is either univocal predication, namely accidental predication (e.g. "this person is wise") and essential predication of differentiae (such as "...is rational") or analogical predication of transcendentals ("this person exists", "this person is one", "this person is good"). Univocal essential predication of genus or species (e.g. "this is a man", "this is an animal") has no parallel in essential predication of divine attributes as no term denoting some created species or genus can be predicated of God, save metaphorically ("God is a lion", "God is a rock").

So while “God is wise” implies “God is wisdom”, “this person is wise” has no corresponding implication. In fact, “God is wise” is equivalent to “God is wisdom”.

Further, since it is also true that “God is just”, “God is merciful” and so on, which are to be analyzed as “God is justice”, “God is mercy”, etc., it follows that “wisdom is justice”, “wisdom is mercy” and so on for the terms denoting divine attributes. Since no equivalences of this sort are true of wisdom and the other properties in creatures, divine properties and their corresponding human properties must be different. Let us spell “Wisdom” to denote the essential divine non-participated property, and “wisdom” for created wisdom, the instantiated particular property, that is, Wisdom instantiated in some individual.

Now one could ask whether Wisdom and wisdom share something in common, whether there is some property of which both are instances. Aquinas rejects this for the God – creatures analogical predication. There is the property as such in God (Wisdom) and its particular imperfect instantiation (wisdom) in an individual. The property Wisdom cannot be an instantiation of anything, so the question is not well put.

Nevertheless, Aquinas allows this for another type of analogical predication, that of being and other transcendentals in the domain of created entities of various ontological categories. A substance exists in more proper sense than accidents, but this is a difference in kinds of instantiation of a property. Both a particular substance which has being (being 1) as well as its accident which has being (being 2) instantiate Being, are particular instantiations of it. To use Aquinas’s language, the difference concerns the manner of participation in a particular property which grounds analogical predication (as if the relationship of instantiation itself allowed for variation in the sense of more or less perfect). In contrast, God – creatures predication is based on the property – instantiated property relationship:

The Creator and His creature are reducible to a community not of univocation but of analogy. Such a community may be of two types. Either some things participate in some one perfection according to a relation of priority and posteriority (as do potency and act in the intelligibility of being, and substance and accident in like manner), or one thing receives its being and ratio from the other. The analogy of the creature to its Creator is of this latter type. A creature has being only as it descends from the First Being and is named being only as it imitates the First Being. And the same is true of “wisdom” and all other creaturely predicates (In I Sent. prol., 1, 2, ad 2)⁷.

Thus, we see that the difference in predication and logical (conceptual) relations concerning divine attributes and corresponding human properties are grounded by the way God and creatures realize them. God is identical to the property, whereas a creature instantiates it. The mode of realization of the property in God is ontologically superior to the one pertaining to creatures. According to Aquinas, divine attributes are perfect, while their corresponding counterparts in things imperfect. This imperfection could be at least partly seen as stemming from the necessarily limited way they are possessed by creatures (through participation rather than

⁷ See also e.g. *De Veritate* XXIII, 7, ad 10. *In II Sent.* 16, 1, 1, ad 3.

essentially), let us call this Difference 1 (this will be the basis for the discussion concerning the distinction of the mode of signification/ thing signified below).

However, this seems to be just the most extreme case of a general rule that in equivocal causes the property belonging to the cause is more perfect than the one belonging to the effect. An equivocal cause is causally active in virtue of a property (power) which is at least partially different from the property produced in the effect⁸. If the properties are specifically or generically the same (as in animal reproduction), then the causation is univocal⁹. We can dub this Difference 2.

Besides, there are also obvious differences in degrees as many of these properties can be graded, let it be Difference 3: Someone can be wiser, more just or merciful than another. We have also seen that sometimes there are differences in participation (instantiation) itself, let us call it Difference 4. This is true of analogates of analogical terms such as “exists” (being):

“More or less” can have three meanings... First, it may refer to the quantity of the thing participated... Such diversity according to “more or less” does not make for a different species. Secondly, it may describe one perfection which is participated while another is predicated essentially (as if we were to say, “Goodness itself is better than a good thing”). Thirdly, it may refer to one perfection which belongs to one thing in a higher way than it does to another thing (as heat belongs more properly to the sun than to fire). These last two meanings exclude unity of species and univocal predication. It is in this fashion that something is predicated of God and His creatures according to “more or less” (*De Potentia* VII, 7, ad 3)¹⁰.

Now the key observation is that, ontologically speaking, in Differences 1, 2 and 4, the higher property (such as Wisdom in God or being 1 in a substance) is not specifically or generically the same property as the lower property (wisdom or being 2). If this were so, that would make a ground for univocal predication. In reality, these are two different properties. In Difference 1, humans do not have full intellectual grasp of the higher property, e.g. Wisdom, apart from the fact that it is the property which is being instantiated in created things resulting in a particular wisdom in some individual. Now the meaning of the term “wisdom”, its sense, is the concept

⁸ The example typically given by Aquinas is taken from Aristotelian physics and cosmology: the Sun is not hot, but has the power to produce heat in things which are consequently hot. If “hot” is predicated of the Sun, it is predicated analogically.

⁹ *Sicut causa est quodammodo in effectu per sui similitudinem participatam, ita omnis effectus est in sua causa, excellentiori modo secundum virtutem ipsius... Oportet igitur omnia quae quocumque modo sunt in rebus, in Deo intelligibiliter existere secundum eminentiam substantiae eius... Primum ens est omnis esse principium...* (*De substantiis separatis*, 13, 14).

Dicendum quod sicut dicit Dionysius causata deficiunt ab imitatione suarum causarum, quae eis supercollocantur. Et propter istam distantiam causae a causato, aliquid vere praedicatur de causato quod non praedicatur de causa... quod quidem non contingit nisi quia modus causarum est sublimior quam ea quae de effectibus praedicantur. Et hoc invenimus in omnibus causis aequivoce agentibus; sicut sol non potest dici calidus, quamvis ab eo alia calefiant, quod est propter ipsius solis eminentiam ad ea quae calida dicuntur (*De Veritate* IV, 6c).

¹⁰ Under “first” the text treats Difference 3, Difference 1 is second. The third is Difference 2. Difference 4 is not given, but perhaps it could be seen as a special case of Difference 2 (formal causation?). Difference 1 and Difference 2 (excluding those cases that also exhibit Difference 4) are pertinent to the predication of divine attributes.

consisting of the universal property wisdom derived by intellectual abstraction from particular instantiations of Wisdom in created things¹¹. The property can be said to be instantiated by these particular wisdoms in different individuals (often called tropes in contemporary literature). However, this is *logical instantiation*, not the *ontological instantiation* discussed so far which Aquinas calls participation and is exemplar causation to be discussed below. It is important not to confuse this universal wisdom with divine Wisdom¹². It is as if there were real features of a real person and a number of painted images of this person and her features. The relation between the real features and the painted ones is ontological instantiation or, in other words, participation¹³. Each depiction of the real features is somewhat different and in some way imperfect in not being faithful to the original. One could abstract from all these paintings what they have in common and create a kind of quasi-universal image (computers can do that). Each painted image is a particular logical instantiation of this common quasi-universal image. However, the common image of a person's features is definitely not identical to the flesh and blood features of the real person!

The upshot of this discussion is that the meaning (sense) of the term "wise" as applied to creatures is the concept of a thing having this universal property of wisdom or a concept of this very property¹⁴. On the other hand, the meaning of the term "wise" as applied to God denotes the property Wisdom which is identical to

¹¹ We say "universal property", not "abstract property" because Aquinas does not accept abstract objects as they are understood today (e.g. in Frege's theory). The conceptual content of a particular property in an individual and this universal property existing only in the mind as the result of the intellect's abstraction is the same. What differs is the mode of being the conceptual content has in the mind (there it is one and universal, i.e. predicable of many individuals) and in individuals (there it is particularized and thus pluralized as there exist many particular variants of the same universal conceptual concept in the mind). The mode of being is not part of the conceptual content, it does not enter it. This is the essence of Aquinas's moderate realism concerning the doctrine of universals.

¹² The distinction between wisdom of God (called Wisdom here), Wisdom (universal property of wisdom) and a particular wisdom in a created individual (particular accident) is correctly brought out by P. T. Geach: *This distinction is needed in order to make Aquinas's doctrine of subsistent or separate forms logically intelligible. When Aquinas says things like Deus est ipsa sapientia, he is not meaning that God is that of which the noun "wisdom" is a proper name; for the Platonists are wrong in thinking that there is such an object, and Aquinas says that they are wrong. But we can take it to mean that "God" and "the wisdom of God" are two names of the same thing; and this interpretation does not make Aquinas guilty of the impossible and nonsensical attempt to bridge the distinction previously expounded between form and individual, or find something intermediate. For we can significantly say that "God" and "the wisdom of God" and "the power of God" are three names with the same reference; but "the wisdom of..." and "the power of..." have not the same reference, any more than the predicates "wise" and "powerful" have. Non dicimus quod attributum potentiae sit attributum scientiae, licet dicamus quod scientia (Dei) sit potentia (Dei) (STh I, 32, 3 ad 3) [Geach, 1954–1955, p. 260].*

¹³ One should not press this analogy too far. While a real person shares with the painted one only external, non-essential features, Wisdom, Knowledge, Goodness, etc. are essential for God. Thus, creaturely participation on God reaches deeper than this analogy might suggest. Accordingly, deification, becoming like God, assumes more substantial meaning than just imitating the external appearance of some exemplar.

¹⁴ We do not wish to commit ourselves either to the identity or the inherence reading of the copula in Aquinas. This interpretative problem does not have to be solved in order to answer questions we raise in this study concerning the difference in meaning of terms applied to creatures and to God.

all other properties of God and thus the divine nature as such, ergo God himself, because God is identical with his nature. It is unknowable apart from the fact that it is that which gets ontologically instantiated (participated) by individual people as particular logical instances of the universal property wisdom. Thus, the nature of this property Wisdom can be imperfectly pictured by particular instances of wisdom.

Since each particular instantiation of a property is imperfect in some way, the more particular instantiations there are, the more the perfection of the property gets represented. The imperfect aspects of one particular instantiation are better represented by another particular instantiation as if the features of some person are brought out better by more imperfectly painted images rather than few.

Because every created substance must necessarily fall short of the perfection of the divine goodness, in order that the likeness of this divine goodness be communicated more perfectly to things there has to be a diversity in things, so that that which cannot be perfectly represented by one thing may be represented in a more perfect fashion in different ways by different things (ScG III, 97).

This brings us to the exemplar – image relationship.

2. Exemplar causation

The relationship we call here ontological instantiation and Aquinas calls participation is by its nature causal relation:

That which is essentially some perfection is the proper cause of that which has that perfection through participation... God alone is being by His very essence; all other things are beings by participation (ScG III, 66).

A perfection common to both cause and effect exists in a higher way in the cause than in the effect, for it flows from the cause to the effect. Whatever exists in the lower causes; therefore, and is attributed to the first cause of all, belongs to it in a most excellent way (De substantiis separatis, 13, 14).

The primary causal relationship underlying analogical predication of God and creatures is exemplar causation¹⁵: It is the relation of similarity (imitation) between a property, called exemplar, and another one made in its likeness, the image, which underlies this type of causation. However, exemplar causation is this similarity *plus* efficient causation of an intentional agent seeking to realize a goal. So, there is also final causation involved. The image is effected by the agent with the intention (goal) to imitate the exemplar known by him (this divinely known property to be imitated is an idea) by bringing it about¹⁶:

¹⁵ For a very useful secondary source see [Doolan, 2008].

¹⁶ Not every divinely known property as imitable, i.e. not every idea, is an exemplar as for something to be an exemplar it has to be actually imitated, in other words, chosen by God to be imitated in reality: Non autem omnes huiusmodi rationes exemplaria dici possunt: exemplar enim est ad cuius imitationem fit aliud; non autem omnia quae scit Deus ex Ipso posse prodire, vult in rerum natura producere; illae igitur solae rationes intellectae a Deo exemplaria dici possunt, ad quarum imitationem vult res in esse producere, sicut producit artifex artificiatam ad imitationem formarum artis quas mente concepit, quae etiam artificialium exemplaria dici possunt (*In V De div. nom.*, lect. 3, n. 665).

...each being is called good because of the divine goodness, the first exemplar principle as well as the efficient and final cause of all goodness (STh, I, 6, 4c).

The reason for the being of the image is to imitate the exemplar:

A third meaning of form signifies that to which something is formed. This is an exemplar form, to whose likeness something is made. Idea is ordinarily used in this sense, so that idea and the form which is imitated are the same (De Veritate, III, 1c).

Mere similarity is not sufficient to call something an image, there has to be an intentional imitation by an agent:

From this consideration it is evident that likeness is a part of the intelligibility of an image, but that an image implies something more than is contained in the notion of a mere similitude: namely, that the similitude be drawn from another. For image is applied to something which is made in imitation of another (STh 93, 1c)¹⁷.

Intentionally made similitude can be also called representation:

The diverse perfections of creatures... imperfectly represent the divine perfection. For from the fact that some creature is wise, it to some extent approaches likeness to God (Responsio ad Joannem Vercellensem, 1)¹⁸.

God knows his essence (with which every divine attribute is identical) and creates limited beings as external imitations of his attributes in a similar way as an artisan fashions artifacts according to his ideas¹⁹. In early texts such as *Commentary on the Sentences*, Aquinas makes a distinction between divine attribute as known (divine idea) and as existing in divine nature. Consequently, there is a distinction between two (types of) relationships of exemplarity: one between the divine idea and the created property, the other between divine property as part of God's nature and the created property:

The exemplar cause of things exists in God in two ways. First, it is present as something in his intellect; thus, according to its ideas the divine intellect is the exemplar of all things which come from it, just as the intellect of the artisan, through his art, is the exemplar of all his artifacts. Secondly, it is present as something in his nature; thus, according to the perfection of that goodness by which he himself is good, God is the exemplar of all goodness (In I Sent. 19, 5, 2, ad 4).

However, this distinction disappears in later texts because, due to divine simplicity, his essence (nature), his attributes as known (divine ideas) and attributes as realized in the essence are all identical. There are not two types of exemplarity relations but one, that between the divine essence and the created properties which imitate it [Klubertanz, 1960, p. 26–27]:

“Idea” is a name for an exemplar form. There is one thing which is the exemplar of all things, namely, the divine essence, which all things imitate inasmuch as they exist and are good... (Quodlibet II, IV, 1, 1c)

¹⁷ See also *STh* I, 93, 1c.

¹⁸ See also e.g. *STh* 13, 2c.

¹⁹ In mente divina sint omnium creaturarum forme exemplares, quae ideae dicuntur, sicut in mente artificis formae artificiatorum (*Quod.* 8, 2).

3. The foundation of analogical predication

It is the exemplar causal relationship between the divine attribute and the created property (with the associated efficient and final causation) which is the basis for analogical predication²⁰:

Every agent is found to produce effects which resemble it. Hence if the first goodness is the efficient cause of all good things, it must imprint its likeness upon the things which it produces. Thus, each thing is called good because of an intrinsic perfection, through a likeness of the divine goodness impressed upon it, and yet is further denominated good because of the first goodness which is the exemplar and efficient cause of all created goodness (De Veritate VI, 4c).

Now based on what has been said it is evident that both the divine property and its created analogate are two distinct but similar properties. As apprehended by the intellect (i.e. having intentional being)²¹, there are two distinct universal properties sharing their respective conceptual contents (*rationes*) with their real counterparts. So, there are two distinct but similar conceptual contents (*rationes*) involved in a divine property – created property analogical predication. While in early *Commentary on the Sentences* Aquinas speaks about one conceptual content only, in other texts he clearly states that there are two *rationes*²²:

[In analogy] a name is predicated of many according to rationes which are not totally different but which resemble one another in some respect (Ethic. I, lectio 7, nos. 95–96)²³.

Now the conceptual content as realized in the divine property and as identical with the divine essence is not directly apprehended by human intellects²⁴. Thus, the basis for analogical predication concerning God is that

²⁰ When we say “analogical predication” we mean both the analogy of attribution as well as the analogy of proper proportionality, both used by Aquinas. There are two complications here: First, there is the question whether the attribution model of analogical predication allows for the *ratio* to be intrinsic in the secondary analogates, as the typical example of “healthy”, e.g. said of a diet, would suggest that the denomination is extrinsic only, because the *ratio*, i.e. health, is not present in a diet. Second, it is a well-known fact that Aquinas seems to prefer the analogy of proportionality in some texts (*De Ver.* 2, 11), yet settles for attribution in his mature works such as *Sth* I, 13, 5. See e.g. [Hochschild, 2013, p. 531–558].

In our view, the analogy of attribution as employed by Aquinas is consistent with the *ratio* being intrinsic in secondary analogates. Nor does the question of whether Aquinas changed his mind on what constitutes the best model of analogical predication of God and creatures have any bearing on our investigation in this paper. Both attribution and proper proportionality applied to God and creatures presuppose the ontological relationships we try to reconstruct here and their bearing on how predication works in these cases.

²¹ For *esse intentionale* see e.g. [Moser, 2011, p. 763–788].

²² *In I Sent.* 22, 1, 2, ad 3; 22, 1, 3, ad 4.

²³ See also e.g. *Metaphys.* IV, lectio 1, nos. 534–39.

²⁴ ...Secundum diversos processus perfectionum, creaturae Deum repraesentant, licet imperfecte; ita intellectus noster secundum unumquemque processum Deum cognoscit et nominat. Sed tamen haec nomina non imponit ad significandum ipsos processus, ut cum dicitur: Deus est vivens, sit sensus: ab eo procedit vita; Sed ad significandum ipsum rerum principium, prout in eo praeexistit vita, licet eminentiori modo quam intelligatur vel significetur. (*Sth* 13, 2 ad 2).

a) the term which expresses the created property as (a part of) its sense, is applied to denote the divine property;

b) the predication is interpreted as stating identity between the divine essence denoted by the word “God” (because God is his essence) on one hand and the divine property (which is identical to his essence) on the other.

c) the conceptual content associated with the divine property is only indirectly and partially understood based on the created property through intellectual operations (*viae*) of negating (or *remotio*, i.e. removing imperfection) and making eminent. The latter is rooted in the exemplar causal role of the divine property in relation to the created property²⁵.

However, knowing how to modify the conceptual content of the created property on the way towards the content of the divine property or understanding some of the general features the conceptual content associated with the divine property must exhibit is not the same as understanding the conceptual content of the divine property! The latter remains mostly clouded in mystery. It is akin to knowing some general (meta-)features of an unknown solution to a mathematical problem similar to one of which we know the solution in mostly limited fashion. This is not the same as knowing or understanding the solution itself.

In later texts negation concerns the mode of signification, not the thing signified²⁶. Aquinas means that abstract terms, such as “wisdom” (or “goodness” in his example in the *Suma contra gentiles*), denote a property which is inherent in some subject. On the other hand, concrete terms such as “wise” (or “good”) denote an individual in which the property denoted by “wisdom” inheres²⁷. So it seems that part of the conceptual content associated with abstract terms are these formal features indicating the type of object denoted from an ontological perspective. Abstract terms denote things simple but not subsistent (i.e. things that are essentially inherent

²⁵ ...cum creatura exemplariter procedat ab ipso Deo sicut a causa quodammodo simili per analogiam, ex creaturis potest in Deum deveniri tribus illis modis quibus dictum est, scilicet per causalitatem, remotionem, eminentiam (*In I Sent.* 3, 1, a. 3).

Dicit enim [Dionysius] quod ex creaturis tribus modis devenimus in Deum: scilicet per causalitatem, per remotionem, per eminentiam. Et ratio hujus est, quia esse creaturae est ab altero. Unde secundum hoc ducimur in causam a qua est. Hoc autem potest esse dupliciter. Aut quantum ad id quod receptum est; et sic ducimur per modum causalitatis: aut quantum ad modum recipiendi, quia imperfecte recipitur; et sic habemus duos modos, scilicet secundum remotionem imperfectionis a Deo et secundum hoc quod illud quod receptum est in creatura, perfectius et nobilius est in creatore; et ita est modus eminentiam (*I Sent.* 3 div. prim. par.).

Sed ex effectibus divinis divinam naturam non possumus cognoscere secundum quod in se est, ut sciamus de ea quid est; sed per modum eminentiae et causalitatis et negationis, ut supra dictum est. (*STh* 13, 8 ad 2).

For the development of the doctrine in Aquinas and his interpretation of Dionysius’s teaching on the *triplex via* in *On the Divine Names* see [Ewbank, 1990, p. 82–109].

²⁶ For a more detailed treatment of the distinction between *modus significandi* and *res significata* in Aquinas (including historical background), see [Rocca, 1991, p. 173–197].

²⁷ To put it in contemporary terminology of sense and denotation, or intension and extension, we might say that while the term “wisdom” expresses the universal property of wisdom as its sense and denotes particular wisdoms (tropes) belonging to individuals, the term “wise” expresses the property “individual having wisdom” and denotes wise individuals.

in something else). Concrete terms denote things subsistent but not simple. This formal aspect of meaning of the term projects itself onto logical morphology and syntax. In other words, it determines the shape of the word (the identity of the symbol used) and its role in predication – essentially what the copula means, whether it is interpreted as expressing the identity relationship or that of constitution/inherence. Apart from these formal aspects, the meanings of terms have material aspects too in which they obviously differ. For instance, the terms “wisdom” and “goodness” have the same formal aspects of meaning – they denote the same types of objects, have the same morphological shape and the same function in predication – yet not material ones: someone can be good but not wise. So what Aquinas is getting at is that in predication involving God we must deny or suspend the validity of one of these formal features. In the use of an abstract term we have to deny that the object denoted is not subsistent and force subsistence. In the use of a concrete term we need to exclude that it is complex and force simplicity. Both denials result in the predication being interpreted as identity and not inherence or involving inherence. The use of an abstract term in the predication involving God highlights that what is predicated is simple (for that is a general formal semantic feature of abstract terms). In contrast, the use of a concrete term stresses that what is affirmed is subsistent. So, we argue that the phrase “mode of signification” refers to the formal aspects of meaning while “the thing signified” refers to the material aspects.

Thus, one can speak about the conceptual content (*ratio*) in a broader sense including the formal aspects, or in a narrower sense solely in relation to the material aspects of meaning. If one uses “conceptual content” in the latter sense, one might raise a question whether for Aquinas it still includes imperfection in its created realization, so negation would be needed beside eminence. We shall leave this question open²⁸. Let us quote *ScG* I, 30 where it seems that what is negated in applying a term to God is solely the defective mode of signification:

I have said that some of the aforementioned names signify a perfection without defect. This is true with reference to that which the name was imposed to signify; for as to the mode of signification, every name is defective. For by means of a name we express things in the way in which the intellect conceives them. For our intellect, taking the origin of its knowledge from the senses, does not transcend the mode which is found in sensible things, in which the form and the subject of the form are not identical owing to the composition of form and matter. Now, a simple form is indeed found among such things, but one that is imperfect because it is not subsisting; on the other hand, though a subsisting subject of a form is found among sensible things, it is not simple but rather concreated. Whatever our intellect signifies as subsisting, therefore, it signifies in concretion; but what it signifies as simple, it signifies, not as that which is, but as that by which something is. As a result, with reference to the mode of signification there is in every name that we use an imperfection, which does not befit God, even though the thing signified in some eminent way does befit God. This is clear in the name goodness and good.

²⁸ It seems that the imperfection of the effect in Difference 2 pointed out above does not pertain (only) to the formal aspects of meaning. God – creature relationship is of this type too (Difference 1 seems to be a special case of Difference 2). So, it appears that the question should be answered in the affirmative as image is necessarily imperfect in its material aspect in relation to the exemplar.

For goodness has signification as something not subsisting, while good has signification as something concreated. And so with reference to the mode of signification no name is fittingly applied to God; this is done only with reference to that which the name has been imposed to signify. Such names, therefore, as Dionysius teaches [De divinis nominibus I, 5, De caelesti hierarchia II, 3], can be both affirmed and denied of God. They can be affirmed because of the meaning of the name; they can be denied because of the mode of signification²⁹.

Now what has been said so far explains why affirming the sentence “God is wise” can be true and false at the same time. The sentence is ambiguous, and this ambiguity can be resolved in at least two different ways: it is true when “wise” is taken in the changed mode of signification (excluding complexity from its formal meaning). It is false (and the corresponding negation is true) when there is no change in the mode of signification and the term is taken with the same meaning as in creatures:

Although Dionysius says that there is truth in denying these expressions of God he does not say that there is untruth in affirming them, but that their signification is vague: because as regards the thing signified they are truly ascribed to God, since in a way it is in him, as we have shown. But as regards their mode of signification they can be denied of God, since each of these terms denotes a definite form, and in this way they are not ascribed to God as we have already stated. Wherefore absolutely speaking they can be denied of God, because they are not becoming to him in the way signified (De Potentia VII, 5 ad 2)³⁰.

4. Conclusion

We have seen that according to Aquinas, the ontological peculiarity of the divine attribute as an exemplar cause of its corresponding created property, its imperfect image, translates into logical semantics. Predications of God use terms which ordinarily denote particular properties (abstract terms) and individuals having them (concrete terms). If used in divine predication, the term partly changes its meaning. It denotes a subsistent property identical with divine essence. Thus, the formal aspects of meaning of the term must be different than in its regular usage. Thus, predication is interpreted as expressing identity (rather than inherence) and the predicate term denotes a simple and subsistent object (rather than denoting either a complex subsistent object or a simple non subsistent one). The material aspects of meaning, the property expressed by the divine attribute, is not fully known in this life. It is partially comprehended as the material meaning embodied in the created property understood in certain ways: as being rid of imperfection (part of the *via negationis*), having the utmost degree of realization (*via eminentiae*), and as being the (exemplar) cause of the created property (*via causalitatis*).

²⁹ T. Aquinas, *Contra Gentiles. On the Truth of the Catholic Faith*, Hanover House, New York, 1955–1957. Edited, with English, especially Scriptural references, updated by Joseph Kenny, O.P. (See: <https://isidore.co/aquinas/english/ContraGentiles.htm>)

³⁰ T. Aquinas, *Quaestiones disputatae de potentia Dei. On the Power of God*. Trans. by the English Dominican Fathers, The Newman Press, Westminster, Maryland 1952, reprint of 1932. Html edition by Joseph Kenny, O.P. (See: <https://isidore.co/aquinas/QDdePotentia.htm>)

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