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ANALOGICAL MODELS OF GOD:
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For my mother

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	vii
Introduction	1
Chapter 1: Analogy and Analogical Speech	11
1. What is analogy?	12
1.1 Ontological analogy	12
1.2 Similarity, properties, and S-properties	13
1.3 The relationship between proportional similarities and simple similarities ...	28
1.4 Analogical thought	32
2. What is it to speak analogically?	34
2.1 Type 1 analogical speech: Assertions of analogy	35
2.2 Type 2 analogical speech: Propositions asserted analogically	36
2.3 Irreducibility	44
3. The shortcomings of the “different but related senses” definition of analogy	48
3.1 Analogy as polysemy	48
3.2 Analogy as polysemy plus an ontological criterion	51
3.3 Sameness of sense as indeterminate	53
3.4 The impossibility of irreducible non-univocity	61
3.5 A continued role for the concept of non-univocity	72
4. Conclusion	75
Chapter 2: Why Analogy?	77
1. A global argument for analogy: The classical conception of God	79
1.1 The focal claim: God does not fall under our ontological categories	85
1.2 If God is not a concrete being, what is he?	92
1.3 Argument #1: The problem of competition	97
1.31 Individualist option #1: Simple hierarchy	97
1.32 Individualist option #2: Unity in virtue of obedience	99
1.33 Individualist option #3: Unity in virtue of imitation	100
1.34 The classical option	102
1.35 Individualist option #4: Unity through resemblance of creatures to God	105
1.4 Argument #2: Necessary existence and worship	108
1.5 Argument #3: God as the invincible tyrant	119
1.6 Why taking God not to be a concrete being requires a doctrine of analogy ...	122
2. Local reasons for appealing to analogy	124
3. Conclusion	131
Chapter 3: The Problem with Analogy	132
1. Unspecified similarity claims	132

2. Harris, Palmer, and Alston on the failure of irreducible analogy	137
3. Swinburne’s more determinate conception of analogy	144
3.1 Not just similar but <i>more</i> similar	144
3.2 A loosening of syntactic rules	150
3.3 The trouble with Swinburne’s account	157
4. Proportionality as a solution to the problem	168
5. Partial univocity as a solution to the problem	175
Chapter 4: Aquinas’s Doctrine of Analogy	188
1. Overview of Aquinas’s doctrine of analogy	188
2. Similarity in the doctrine of analogy	192
3. Possible solutions	201
3.1 The <i>res/modus</i> distinction	201
3.2 The like-causes-like (LCL) principle	206
4. Conclusion	219
Chapter 5: Analogical Models of God	224
1. Ramsey and Barbour on analogical models of God	225
2. Basic features of analogical models	238
2.1 An analogical model is not a description or theory	238
2.2 An analogical model bears relevant similarities, including at least some relevant <i>structural</i> similarities, to its target	247
2.3 An analogical model must be substantially <i>dissimilar</i> to its target	255
2.4 We can use multiple models for the same thing	256
2.5 A model is a model only insofar as it is <i>taken as</i> a model	257
2.6 An analogical model <i>represents</i> its target by virtue of its similarities to it	257
2.7 To take something as an analogical model is to employ it in <i>surrogate</i> <i>thought</i> about the target	263
2.8 Accepting a model as a practical stance	273
2.9 How models relate to analogical speech	274
3. The IRAM account of religious language	276
3.1 Models of God	276
3.2 How appealing to models <i>doesn’t</i> help	279
3.3 Taking something as a model of God	283
Chapter 6: Some Loose Ends: Fixing the Referent and Having Grounds to Believe .	294
1. How to fix the referent of “God” on a global IRAM account	294
1.1 The trouble with fixing the referent via irreducibly analogical description ...	296
1.2 An attempt to fix the referent via negative descriptions	299
1.3 An attempt to fix the referent via extrinsic descriptions	304
1.4 Why we can’t fix the referent by appealing to religious experience	312
1.5 Summation of the problem	315
1.6 Part one of the solution: the irreducibility condition	318
1.7 Part two of the solution: the irreplaceability condition	325

1.8 Similarity claims with an embedded counterfactual	330
1.9 Conclusion to Section 1	333
2. How could anyone have reason to <i>believe</i> an IRAM theology?	336
2.1 Testimony (i.e. revelation) as grounds for an IRAM theology	340
2.2 The circularity objection	345
2.3 Barbour and Wisdom and the inadequacy of appeals to <i>natural</i> revelation ...	349
2.4 Conclusion to Section 2	357
Conclusion	359
Bibliography	362

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Introduction

Thought about God in the Christian tradition, and in the Western monotheistic traditions more generally, is drawn in two conflicting directions. On the one hand, God is described in various specific ways: God is wise, God created the universe, God is good, God loves us, and so on. On the other hand, if God is the ultimate source and foundation of everything that exists, as theists believe, he¹ must be radically unlike any of the things we are familiar with, existing as he does at an entirely different ontological level from us. And in light of this, many or perhaps even all of the traditional claims about God seem overly anthropomorphic or otherwise inappropriate if understood as straightforward, literal, and unproblematically true descriptions of God.

To overemphasize the first pole of monotheistic thought is to worship a God that is little more than a glorified and perfected human being—a “gaseous vertebrate,” as Ernst Haeckel puts it.² But to emphasize the second pole exclusively, declining to think of God in any personal terms or any other terms drawn from mere creatures, would destroy religious faith altogether by emptying it of content. It is no easy matter to resolve the tension in a way that doesn’t fall into one or the other of these errors.

The traditional solution to this problem, at least within the Christian tradition, has gone by the name of *analogy*. To interpret claims about God analogically is to take a sort of middle

¹ I have chosen to use masculine pronouns for God, which will strike some readers as unhelpful. However, tradition has made this the language I find it natural to use, and I consider it unwise to use one sort of language to speak about God in my daily religious life and a different sort of language to speak about God in my philosophical work; the temptation for a philosopher of religion to forget who she is speaking of is great enough without that. So I must simply beg the indulgence of those readers who find this off-putting.

² Ernst Haeckel, *Monism as Connecting Religion and Science: The Confession of Faith of a Man of Science*, trans. J. Gilchrist (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1895), 79.

path between the two extremes just described. If “God is wise” is analogical, then “wise” in that sentence doesn’t mean what it means when we say “Socrates is wise,” but it indicates in an indirect and imperfect way some glimmer of the truth, because God is wise in some other, related sense of the word, or because God is that which wise creatures faintly resemble by virtue of their wisdom, or something of that sort.

On the version of this solution I will defend, to speak analogically of God is to speak in ways that assert or implicitly presuppose claims about God’s *similarity* to something else. However, if appealing to analogy is to be of any help in solving the problem of how to speak about God, the analogical claims in question must be *irreducibly* analogical—that is, they must be unable to be paraphrased non-analogically (by us). To illustrate, consider the following analogical description of my new curtains:

(1) My new curtains are similar to a lemon in respect of color.

The content of (1)’s description of my curtains could instead be expressed non-analogically, as

(2) My new curtains are bright yellow.

Thus (1) is a *reducibly* analogical claim. By contrast, on the view I will defend, at least some claims about God are irreducibly analogical (for human beings). What that means is that although believers assert claims of similarity about God, they are not in a position to specify what the specific similarities *are*—what specific properties, shared by God and creatures, render them similar. To assert that one’s own claims are irreducibly analogical involves admitting that, in *one* sense—that caveat is important—one does not know exactly what one is claiming.

Since at least the middle of the twentieth century, appeals to analogy have somewhat fallen into disfavor among analytic philosophers of religion. There are of course still many

theologians who employ claims of analogy, and some philosophers of religion as well, particularly those working in the Thomistic tradition. But a look through discussions of some of the major debates within analytic philosophy of religion in recent years will reveal few appeals to analogy. In debates about the problem of evil, about the nature of God's knowledge, and about whether God experiences emotion or suffering, what those on all sides seem to implicitly agree on is that whatever it is we ought to say about God can be said without appeal to analogy.

Even those who depart from this general trend, and *do* assert the need for analogy in speaking about God, are likely to do so only in a tightly restricted fashion. For example, Richard Swinburne's account of God's nature in *The Coherence of Theism* does appeal to analogy at one crucial point. But he limits this appeal to one specific network of concepts, cautioning that "the 'analogical sense' card is a legitimate one . . . but it must not be played too often" because "if theology uses too many words in analogical senses it will convey virtually nothing by what it says."³ As a result, he adopts a strategy of employing analogy as "a last resort to save [one's] system from a charge of incoherence which would otherwise stick."⁴ This approach restricts analogy to playing only a minor role in theological reasoning, and indeed, Swinburne's isolated appeal to analogy seems to have no effect on his subsequent discussions of the nature of God.

The fact that analytic philosophers of religion have tended to steer clear of claims of analogy is not especially surprising. As already noted, to appeal to analogy involves admitting that in one important sense, one does not know exactly what one is saying. That is hardly a position an analytically trained philosopher will be eager to embrace. Humphrey Palmer further points out that it seems impossible to *infer* anything from irreducibly analogical claims. As a

³ Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1977), 70.

⁴ *Ibid.*

result, to take core theological claims to be analogical will have the consequence of destroying theology as an “argumentative science.”⁵ If Palmer is right, anyone who *does* adopt an analogical interpretation of any key theological claim will have nothing further to contribute to any debate about it.

But aside from these factors, appeals to analogy really do present significant philosophical difficulties. The main problem I will address is what I call the *problem of unspecified similarity*. As I have already noted, if appealing to analogy is to be the solution to the tension within theological thought described earlier, these appeals to analogy must be *irreducible*. If analogical claims about God could, like (1), be paraphrased non-analogically, that would mean that analogy wasn’t doing any essential work in how we speak (or more importantly, think) about God. But there are good reasons to be suspicious of claims of irreducible analogy. An irreducibly analogical claim is one that cannot be paraphrased except in other terms which themselves appeal to analogy. But the only way it will be impossible to paraphrase a claim of similarity in terms that don’t appeal to similarity is if we do not know the shared property in virtue of which the similarity holds. But to assert that *x* is similar to *y*, but that one has no idea *how* *x* and *y* are similar, seems to render the claim of similarity empty of content. And accordingly, William Alston argues that a doctrine of irreducible analogy leads to an “eviscerated” theology: to a theology so empty of propositional content that it has neither theoretical nor practical consequences.⁶ Such a theology cannot support a genuine religious faith or way of life.

⁵ Humphrey Palmer, *Analogy: A Study of Qualification and Argument in Theology* (London: Macmillan, 1973), 17.

⁶ William Alston, “Irreducible Metaphors in Theology,” in *Divine Nature and Human Language: Essays in Philosophical Theology* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 35.

My task in this dissertation is to offer an account of analogical claims which satisfactorily resolves these worries. I call this the Irreducibly Analogical Model (IRAM) approach to interpreting claims about God. On a “local” IRAM account, at least some particular claims about God are irreducibly analogical. On a “global” IRAM account, *all* true, positive claims that ascribe intrinsic properties to God are irreducibly analogical. I will demonstrate that the irreducibly analogical claims of an IRAM theology can in fact have both theoretical and practical consequences. As a result, one who adopts even a global IRAM theology can still have a sufficiently contentful theology to support a robust religious worldview and way of life. Alston’s theological evisceration can be evaded.

Having offered an initial sketch of my project as a whole, I’ll now briefly outline the chapters to follow.

Chapter 1 is devoted to a bit of ground-clearing. My account is part of a long tradition of accounts of religious language which assert that claims about God are *analogical*. But without further explication, the claim that we speak “analogically” of God is highly ambiguous. What’s more, the most common way of defining “analogy” in discussions of religious language is as “a mid-point between univocity and equivocity,” or “words said in different but related senses.” But this definition is not at all ideal. Defining analogy as a *linguistic* matter renders it superficial and eliminable, because any proposition expressed “analogically” in this linguistic sense could be expressed non-analogically simply by employing different words. One might object that the analogical claims made about God are *irreducibly* non-univocal, and that this irreducibility renders linguistic analogy neither eliminable nor superficial. However, *that* position turns out to be incoherent: there is no such thing as irreducible non-univocity.

Instead, I define analogical speech as speech that implicitly or explicitly appeals to the concept of *similarity*. On this account, to speak analogically of God is to speak of God in terms of what creaturely things God is similar to. However, the concept of “appealing to similarity” itself requires significant elaboration. One way for a claim to appeal to similarity is for it to be a straightforward assertion of similarity, perhaps of the form “*x* is similar to *y*,” but that is not the only way. I will draw on Josef Stern’s account of exemplifying metaphors to describe a second type of analogical claim, one in which the appeal to similarity is a presupposition of the claim rather than part of its propositional content.

Having clarified in Chapter 1 what I *mean* by saying that a claim is irreducibly analogical, Chapter 2 explains why we might *want* to say that some or all claims about God are irreducibly analogical. To defend an irreducibly analogical theology requires, as we shall see, substantial theoretical work. And one might at the outset suspect that this work is simply not necessary. Of course it would be wrong to uncritically import all of our assumptions about what qualities like wisdom, mercy, or power entail in human beings directly into our understanding of what it means to describe God as wise, merciful, or powerful. But can we not find *some* way of speaking about God without appealing to analogy, so long as we rule out unacceptably anthropomorphic elements of our concepts and formulate our descriptions with care?

To answer this challenge, this chapter spells out some of the undesirable theological consequences of a fully non-analogical theology. My argument is two-pronged. In the first part of the chapter, I argue for the value of a *globally* analogical theology, on which *all* true, positive and intrinsic claims about God are taken to be irreducibly analogical. The globally analogical position is a necessary consequence of a classical conception of God as radically transcendent in

the sense that he “escapes our conceptual nets”⁷ and cannot without falsity be described as falling into any of our conceptual categories, even those of “substance” or “concrete being.” While the conception of God I argue for here draws on the views of medieval thinkers to some extent, my aim is to present arguments that don’t rely on controversial scholastic metaphysical or theological premises. Instead, I aim to show that ordinary theists have good reason to adopt a classical or quasi-classical conception of God on the basis of commitments and intuitions they already possess.

However, since I am sure my argument for classical theism will not convince everyone, I also argue for the value of a *locally* analogical theory which takes only *specific* claims or families of claims about God to be irreducibly analogical. Two plausible locations for local appeals to analogy are claims about God’s emotions or love, and claims about the Trinity. If I’m right about these examples, even those who reject the classical conception of God in favor of a less radically transcendent God still have good reason to appeal to analogy at some points in their theology. But one who appeals to irreducible analogy at a single point faces the same logical difficulties as one who adopts a globally analogical theology.⁸ The remainder of the dissertation focuses on defending a *globally* analogical theology, because that is the greater challenge. However, if I succeed at that task, that same defense will *a fortiori* serve as a defense of local appeals to analogy as well.

⁷ I owe this expression to Merold Westphal, *Transcendence and Self-Transcendence* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 98.

⁸ There is one exception: one who adopts a locally analogical theology can rely on their other, non-analogical claims about God to fix the referent of “God”; that option is not available to the one who adopts a globally analogical theology. I address this problem in Chapter 6.

Chapter 3 then explains the *problem* with interpreting claims about God as irreducibly analogical. It is here that I will explore in detail the problem of unspecified similarity mentioned earlier. Once I have laid out the problem, I consider a few existing accounts of analogy which seem like they might offer a solution: Swinburne's elaborate account of analogical senses in *The Coherence of Theism*, Kant's and the early Aquinas's appeal to *proportional* analogy as a substitute for appealing to direct one-to-one similarity, and a modified version of Alston's own account of partial univocity. None of these accounts turns out to have the resources to solve the problem of unspecified similarity.

However, no critique of existing accounts of analogy in religious language could be complete without addressing the mature Aquinas's doctrine of analogy as laid out in the *Summa Theologiae*. In Chapter 4, I argue that Aquinas's theology is an analogical one in *my* sense of the term—that is, that Aquinas is committed to claims of unspecified similarity. Accordingly, I attempt to discover whether any resources for solving the problem of unspecified similarity can be found within Aquinas's thought. I consider two candidate solutions to the problem: one based on his distinction between the *res significata* and the *modus significandi*, and a second on the “like causes like” principle central to Aquinas's thought about God. However, no solution to our problem can be found in either of those directions, and as far as I can see, Aquinas's doctrine of analogy does not offer us any way to solve it.

In Chapter 5, I at last turn to the task of explaining my IRAM approach to interpreting theological statements. First, I offer an account of analogical models in general, drawing on current literature about *scientific* models. An analogical model, as I understand it, is an entity or system used to represent a second “target” entity or system, by virtue of structural similarities to

the target. To use something as a model of some target, involves not only taking it to represent the target, but also employing it in *surrogate thought* about the target. The second section of the chapter outlines my IRAM approach to interpreting religious language. On this approach, claims about God either serve to construct, or are based on, analogical models. An isolated irreducibly analogical *claim* about God like “God is in some way similar to a wise person” is, as Alston points out, not contentful enough to be of any use. But taking a wise person as an irreducibly analogical *model* of God involves a more substantial practical and cognitive stance. The special features of modeling enable one to adopt an irreducibly analogical theology while still having beliefs with practical and theoretical consequences.

Chapter 6 serves to more fully elaborate the IRAM account while addressing some remaining difficulties. The main difficulty to address has to do with fixing the referent of “God.” I have wanted to defend the viability of a theology on which *all* true, positive, and intrinsic claims about God are taken to be irreducibly analogical. However, if the IRAM theist lacks even a single positive, intrinsic, non-analogical claim about God to serve as an anchor, it isn’t clear how she could satisfactorily fix the referent of the name “God” in the first place. Furthermore, if she defines “God” as whatever best fits her core models, then “God” will have a referent by default, but it could turn out to refer merely to the physical universe or something else which any non-religious person also believes in. What the believer wants, by contrast, is for “God” to have a referent only if God really exists. My solution to this problem involves adding two additional conditions to the IRAM account. First, the global IRAM theist must be committed to the higher-order claim that her models of God are irreducibly analogical. Second, she must take at least some of her models to be “irreplaceable,” in the sense that the sets of models that come closest to

the truth about God all include it. Given these additional conditions, the theist can define “God” as whatever is best modeled by her core models of God, *and* is such that those models are *irreducible* and *irreplaceable* models of it. The reason this helps is that even if the physical universe (for example) turns out to be that which is the best fit for the believer’s models of God, the physical universe is not something those models are *irreducible* and *irreplaceable* models of. The above way of fixing the referent ensures that the only possible referents of “God” are those things the believer would actually take to deserve that name if she understood their nature.

However, while these additional conditions enable us to solve the referent-fixing problem, they give rise to a new problem: how could anyone have even the slightest reason to believe in the God described by an IRAM theology? My answer to this second challenge must be less satisfying, but the brief answer is that no IRAM theology could possibly be justified except on the basis of divine revelation. However, whether any particular IRAM theology can in fact be rationally justified on the grounds of any actual (purported) event of divine revelation is a question I cannot address in this project. Thus my defense here does not go so far as to show that any particular IRAM theology is in fact worthy of belief.

What my account does demonstrate is that the case against analogy in theology is not the open-and-shut case it has often been taken to be. There is no reason why even a globally analogical theology cannot be coherent and sufficiently contentful to ground a robust religious faith and way of life.

Chapter 1: Analogy and Analogical Speech

The account of religious language I will be offering is one on which we speak *analogically* of God. But before I can begin to defend this position, it is first necessary to clarify what precisely I mean by it. Not only is the term “analogy” used in several different ways, but the definition most commonly used in discussions of religious language is importantly flawed.

In what follows, Section 1 describes the three main realms in which analogy is said to occur: analogy at the level of things themselves, analogy at the level of thought, and analogy at the level of speech. My main focus in Section 1 is on analogy at the level of things themselves, i.e. *similarity*. However, my ultimate goal is to defend the claim that believers *speak* analogically of God, and accordingly, Section 2 offers a detailed account of analogical speech. Analogical speech, as I mean the term, is speech which either explicitly asserts a similarity, or implicitly appeals to similarity as a means of asserting something else. I also offer an account of what it means for such speech to be *irreducibly* analogical.

The conception of analogical speech I offer here is not exactly unusual, though I have endeavored to explicate it with greater care than it ordinarily receives. However, the conception of analogical speech I offer has a major competitor, because analogical speech is often defined rather differently as the use of words in different but related senses. Section 3 addresses this disagreement. I first explain the shortcomings of this competitor definition, arguing that this common conception of analogy is not suitable for the task of accounting for how believers speak about God. However, I also argue that the “different but related senses” account amounts to roughly the same as my own definition when appropriately supplemented. This will enable us to

continuing employing the traditional talk of “different senses,” but with a clearer understanding. And it will illuminate the way these two rather different definitions of analogical speech serve ultimately to describe the same phenomenon.

1. What is analogy?

1.1 Ontological analogy

The original use of the term “analogy” was for mathematical proportions of the form 2:4::3:6. Aristotle extended the term to apply to other kinds of proportional relationship of the form “*a* is to *b* as *c* is to *d*.” The concept of analogy was particularly important to Aristotle’s biological discussions, for instance in comparative anatomy:

There are some animals whose parts are neither identical in form nor differing in the way of excess or defect; but they are the same only in the way of analogy, as, for instance, bone is only analogous to fish-bone, nail to hoof, hand to claw, and scale to feather; for what the feather is in a bird, the scale is in a fish.¹

An analogy in this sense consists fundamentally in a similarity between relationships. A “relationship,” as I mean it here, consists in all of the relations that hold between two specified relata.² Thus, the relationship between fish-scales and fish consists in all of the relations which hold between scales and fish, such as *being smaller than or forming a protective layer around*

¹ Aristotle, “History of Animals,” in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, trans. d’A. W. Thompson, vol. 1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 1.1 486b18-22.

² There are relations that involve more than two places, of course, and there could be proportional analogies involving such relations. For example, the lover, the beloved, and love are to one another as are the perceiver, the perceived object, and perception. However, these more complicated proportional relationships can be broken down into sets of standard four-part proportional analogies. For example, the above proportional analogy between two triads of objects could be asserted instead as a list of three standard proportional analogies: the lover is to the beloved as the perceiver is to the perceived object, the beloved is to love as the perceived object is to perception, and the lover is to love as the perceiver is to perception. Since more complicated proportional analogies can be reduced to sets of standard four-part ones, we will lose nothing by restricting the discussion here to standard four-part proportional analogies involving two-place relations.

*the body of.*³ “Scales are to fish as feathers are to birds” asserts a proportional analogy, which is to say it asserts that the relationship scales have to fish is importantly similar to the relationship feathers have to birds. For example, both scales and feathers serve to form a protective layer around the outside of the animal’s body, and the size ratio of fish to their scales is similar to the size ratio of birds to their feathers.

It follows from the above definition that any assertion of a four-part proportional analogy can be reduced to an assertion of a direct two-part similarity—not between any two of the named relata, but between the *relationships* between the relata. For example, “Scales are to fish as feathers are to birds” can be paraphrased as “The relationship of scales to fish is similar to the relationship of feathers to birds.” Thus, proportional analogies are just a specific kind of similarity—similarity between the relationships between pairs of specified relata.

1.2 Similarity, properties, and S-properties

I will have more to say about proportional analogies later in this chapter, but it will be helpful to first say a few words about similarity more generally, because the concept of similarity plays a central role in my account of religious language.

First, all similarity is similarity in some particular *respect*. Two things cannot be similar without being similar in some specific way. For example, my new curtains and the lemon on my kitchen table are similar in respect of their color, in that both are bright yellow, and also in respect of being three-dimensional objects, being composed largely of organic matter, and so on.

³ I refer to relations like, e.g., that of being smaller than, either in ordinary English as “the relation of being smaller than,” or in italics as “*being smaller than*,” and I use corresponding forms to refer to one-place properties. In both cases, the difference between the two forms signifies nothing.

Likewise, the relationship of scales to fish and the relationship of feathers to birds are also similar in particular respects, for example in respect of including the relation *forming a protective layer around the body of*.

Similarities are not always as straightforward as these examples, of course, and in some cases, the particular respect in which two things are similar may be difficult to pinpoint. Two things may be similar in some highly abstract or formal way, or in ways we have no vocabulary to describe. Sometimes we just perceive two things as similar, or feel inclined to lump them into the same category, yet would not know how to answer the question, “In what respect are they similar?” Nonetheless, for two things to be similar just *is* for them to be similar in some particular respect; it would be incoherent to posit a similarity while denying that there was any particular respect in which the similarity held.⁴

The respect in which two things are similar can be described as a property shared by the two things. For example, my new curtains and the lemon on my kitchen table share the property of being bright yellow, along with the properties of being spatiotemporal objects and being composed largely of organic matter. These are all respects in which the curtains and the lemon are similar. The same holds for cases of proportional similarity: for example, the relationship of scales to fish shares with the relationship of feathers to bird the property of including the relation *forming a protective layer around the body of*.

⁴ Quine argues that our most “primitive sense of similarity” is that of overall comparative similarity—that is, that the perception of *a* as more similar to *b* than to *c* is more basic than the perception that *a* is similar to *b* in some particular respect *r*. W. V. Quine, “Natural Kinds,” in *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), 122. This seems at least plausible as a psychological claim about how we perceive similarity, so I have no quarrel with Quine on this point. The fact that to *be* similar is to be similar in some particular respect is entirely compatible with it being possible to *perceive* a similarity without *perceiving* any particular respect in which the similarity holds.

One might object that not all similarities consist in shared properties. For example, the color turquoise is more similar to royal blue than it is to red, in that it is closer to royal blue than to red on the spectrum of colors. But while this is one of the most intuitively obvious forms of similarity, it is not naturally described as a matter of *shared properties*. The similarity between turquoise and royal blue consists in their degree of closeness on a spectrum, not in a set of discrete shared properties.

However, even this form of similarity *can* be analyzed and expressed in terms of shared properties. For example, turquoise and royal blue are similar in respect of having a wavelength between 475 and 510 nanometers; this is a property they share. The closer two colors are on the spectrum, the more such properties they will share; two very similar hues of blue may share the property of having a wavelength between 475 and 480 nanometers, and by virtue of that will also share the property of having a wavelength between 475 and 510 nanometers, and infinitely many similar properties corresponding to the intermediate set of ranges. Admittedly, to describe the similarity of turquoise and royal blue as actually *constituted by* some such infinite set of properties would seem a bit unnatural. Nonetheless, whether or not their similarity is *constituted* by discrete shared properties as an ontological matter, it is possible to successfully *pick out* the similarity between turquoise and royal blue by describing the set of properties of this sort that they share. Thus all similarities, even spectrum-type similarities like that between turquoise and royal blue, can be identified in terms of shared properties. For this reason, when I need to describe the respect in which two things are similar, I will do so in terms of the properties the two things share, even though that is a slight oversimplification in some cases.

However, while all similarities can be described in terms of shared properties, not all properties count as respects in which two things are similar—at least not if we are using the word “property” in the broad or “abundant” sense on which every predicate expresses a property.⁵ For example, the predicate “is either an oak bookshelf or a member of the Chicago Bears” expresses the property of being either an oak bookshelf or a member of the Chicago Bears, but *being either an oak bookshelf or a member of the Chicago Bears* is not a respect in which two things can be similar. Supposing that Jimmy Clausen and the bookshelf in my hallway share the property of being either an oak bookshelf or a member of the Chicago Bears, this does not constitute a respect in which Jimmy Clausen and the bookshelf in my hallway are similar, at least as far as I can tell. (I do not think it is possible to decisively prove a claim of this variety.)⁶

Of course, being either an oak bookshelf or a member of the Chicago Bears does *entail* certain similarities. For example, if x and y share this property, they must both be physical

⁵ The term “abundant” for this conception of properties comes from David Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 60. Lewis’s conception of abundant properties is in fact even more abundant than what I have just described; for Lewis, every set constitutes the extension of some property, and hence there are properties so complex and miscellaneous we would be unable to construct a predicate with which to express them. One might object that such purely miscellaneous disjunctive predicates do not actually name properties at all. But I will follow Lewis in using “property” in its maximally broad and permissive sense, and then distinguishing within that maximally permissive class a sub-class consisting of those “sparse” properties the sharing of which constitutes genuine similarity.

⁶ The reason I do not think it is possible to decisively prove that a property does or does not constitute a similarity has to do with Goodman’s riddle of induction (Nelson Goodman, “The New Riddle of Induction,” in *Fact, Fiction, and Forecast*, 4th ed. [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983], 59–83). If we define “grue” to mean “green before time t and blue after time t ,” and “bleen” to mean “blue before time t and green after time t ,” then two objects sharing the property *being grue before time t and bleen after time t* are similar in respect of that property, even though the linguistic expression we have used to express the property is disjunctive. Thus the mere fact that we have expressed a property with a disjunctive predicate does not prove that the property itself is disjunctive or that it is not the sort of property which renders the things that share it similar. Furthermore, the mere fact that oak bookshelves and members of the Chicago Bears seem (to me and to all of us) like completely unrelated categories does not decisively prove that *in themselves* they are completely unrelated categories, because by “similarity” I mean similarity as an objective feature of the world, which is thus distinguishable from our *perception* of things as similar. And so it seems logically possible that the class of oak bookshelves and members of the Chicago Bears might pick out a real similarity class in, so to speak, the noumenal realm, in some way we do not understand. Naturally I feel confident that this is not the case—but I cannot see any way to *prove* it is not the case.

entities, and must both consist largely of organic material, and *being a physical entity* and *consisting largely of organic material* do plausibly constitute respects in which two things may be similar. But that doesn't mean that *being either an oak bookshelf or a member of the Chicago Bears* also constitutes a respect in which two things may be similar. The property *being a physical entity* has in its extension all and only those things which are similar in that one particular respect, and so the property's extension defines what we might, for lack of a better term, call a "similarity class." *Being either an oak bookshelf or a member of the Chicago Bears* does not describe any such class. All of the genuine similarity classes we might name either include entities that lie outside the class of oak bookshelves and members of the Chicago Bears (as does the class of all physical entities), or leave out some of the things that *are* included within the class of oak bookshelves and members of Chicago Bears (as does the class of all oak bookshelves).

Thus, for convenience and for lack of a better term, I will say that any two things that are similar are similar in virtue of sharing some "S-property." An S-property is simply the sort of property that, if shared by some x and y , constitutes a respect in which x and y are similar. And I will speak of any such S-property as constituting "a similarity" when it is held in common by two things.

The reader might wonder why I have felt the need to invent the category of "S-properties," when there already exists a concept to play this role: that of "natural" properties. Whereas every set, no matter how miscellaneous, describes an abundant property, Lewis says,

The sparse properties are another story. Sharing of them makes for qualitative similarity, they carve at the joints, they are intrinsic, they are highly specific, the

sets of their instances are *ipso facto* not entirely miscellaneous, there are only just enough of them to characterise things completely and without redundancy.⁷

These “sparse properties” he also calls “natural properties.” Natural properties by definition constitute respects in which things are similar; indeed, much of the point of the concept of natural properties is to allow a way to speak about objective similarity as a feature of reality.

The trouble is that not all similarities consist in the sharing of Lewisian natural properties. As Lewis defines the term, only those most fundamental properties which cannot be analyzed down any further count as perfectly natural properties. And Lewis also takes the natural properties to be those properties which have an ineliminable role to play in scientific explanation. Thus, whatever the most natural properties are, they will be the sorts of things that are described in fundamental physics, and the best examples of natural properties that we know of are fundamental physical properties like *being a quark*. Jonathan Schaffer has argued that if natural properties are to do the work of carving nature at the joints and of grounding causal laws as Lewis intends them to, they must include higher-level physical properties like *being a molecule* and *being a mountain*, rather than only properties at the level of fundamental physics.⁸ But even Schaffer’s more inclusive conception of natural properties still includes only those properties immediately relevant to scientific laws.

Thus, natural properties are not equivalent to S-properties, because there are many ways for things to be similar besides sharing natural properties. Qualitative experiences, senses of humor, styles of visual art, stories, and institutional origins can be similar. Two stories can be similar in virtue of featuring 12-year-old protagonists, and two people can be similar by virtue of

⁷ Lewis, *Plurality of Worlds*, 60.

⁸ Jonathan Schaffer, “Two Conceptions of Sparse Properties,” *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 85, no. 1 (2004): 92–102.

having dry senses of humor. But while *featuring a 12-year-old protagonist* or *having a dry sense of humor* are both properties the sharing of which constitutes a similarity, these are not “natural” properties in the mainstream sense of that term. Since natural properties have to do only with *physical* similarity—where by that I mean “similarity in terms of physics,” and not “similarity between physical objects like cars and cats”—the sharing of natural properties does not exhaust similarity in general.

One might object that I’m treating the distinction between natural and non-natural properties as an absolute one, which it is not. Properties come in degrees of naturalness; *being an electron* is a more natural property than *being blue*, but *being blue* is nonetheless more natural than *being grue*. For Lewis, a property is more natural the fewer steps it would take to define it in terms of *perfectly* natural properties.⁹ Thus one might argue that the “non-natural” properties mentioned above are nonetheless not *absolutely* non-natural. It is not *actually* possible to define properties like *having a dry sense of humor* or *featuring a 12-year-old protagonist* in terms of perfectly natural properties, but one might think it must nonetheless be possible in *principle* to do so. And so perhaps in virtue of that, such properties could still count as (very weak) similarities.

One problem with the above response is that if *having a dry sense of humor* could in principle be analyzed in terms of purely natural properties, then *any* abundant property could be. By “in principle” we would have to mean that it could be done by a being with an infinite intellect and infinite time. But if *that* is all it takes for something to count as a similarity, then we seem to be saying that any abundant property counts as a similarity, which is a position we already rejected for good reason. Furthermore, *having a dry sense of humor* would have to be a

⁹ Lewis, *Plurality of Worlds*, 61.

less natural property by the Lewisian standard described above than *weighing either an ounce or five and a half tons*, because it would take fewer steps to define the latter in terms of purely natural properties than to so define the former. But intuitively, *having a dry sense of humor* does a far better job of naming a genuine respect in which two things can be similar than a purely disjunctive property like *weighing either an ounce or five and a half tons* does. Indeed, the latter does not seem to name a genuine similarity *at all*.

A particularly strict physicalist could at this point respond that natural properties really do constitute the only objectively real similarities. If so, then all of the purported similarities I have proposed which *don't* consist in natural properties are not genuine, objectively real similarities at all. From this perspective, the fact that natural properties give us a way of accounting only for *physical* similarity is, so to speak, not a bug but a feature. But this view would commit us to a radically skeptical position about nearly everything humans ever talk about. Of course it is true that which properties we emphasize and which properties we ignore in categorizing someone as having a dry sense of humor is a culturally conditioned matter. And such categories are obviously categories that humans have invented, not ones that are “given” by the natural world (if there are *any* such categories as that). But the mere fact that a similarity is one I am able to perceive only by virtue of a specific cultural background does not mean it is not an objectively real similarity. If there were not some actual similarity (or at least a set of family resemblances—i.e. a disjunctive set of actual similarities) shared by different dry senses of humor, we would not be able to perceive all dry senses of humor, including new and previously unseen examples, as falling into a common category. Thus to take the reductionist position that the only objectively real similarities are those which consist in the sharing of Lewisian natural

properties would entail such a radical skepticism about our ordinary perceptions and thoughts that it would undermine our ability to trust any purported perception of a similarity of *any* kind.

Thus, it does not seem fitting to describe similarity as the sharing of *natural* properties, at least as that term is commonly used.¹⁰ First, only the absolutely basic properties count as perfectly natural, but basicness is not relevant to whether, or to what extent, something counts as a similarity. The property *being a red sphere* is less natural than its component properties *being red* and *being a sphere*, but it is not less an S-property than its components.¹¹ (If anything, *being a red sphere* is *more* of a similarity than its components, because two things sharing the property *being a red sphere* are thereby more similar than if they share only one or the other of the component properties.) Second, the Lewisian concept of natural properties is not *just* the concept of those properties which render things objectively similar; it also involves additional theoretical commitments about the role those properties play in scientific explanation. For these reasons, it will leave less room for misunderstanding to simply invent a new term, and so I will speak of similarity as the sharing of “S-properties.”

In asserting that for two things to be similar is for them to share an S-property, I have not offered any genuine analysis or explanation of similarity. If it were intended as an explanation, it would be a circular one: “Whenever two things are similar, they are similar by virtue of sharing a

¹⁰ Lewis’s is not the only account of natural properties, of course, though it is the most influential. Peter Gärdenfors defines a natural property rather differently, as “a convex region of a domain in a conceptual space” (*Conceptual Spaces: The Geometry of Thought* [Cambridge, MA: Bradford, 2000], 71). Natural properties in *this* sense would in some respects be more like S-properties than Lewisian natural properties, because Gärdenfors’s definition does not privilege the minimal set of absolutely basic properties, and it respects the asymmetry (as at least some of Lewis’s statements do not) between disjunctions and conjunctions. However, Gärdenfors’ topic is “conceptual space,” i.e. *perceived* similarities and differences—not objective similarity.

¹¹ Lewis suggests that a property is more natural the fewer logical connectors it would take to describe it in terms of purely natural properties (*Plurality of Worlds*, 61). This seems to entail that disjunctiveness and conjunctiveness are equivalent in the degree to which they count against naturalness. But if what we are thinking about is objective similarity, there is clearly a great asymmetry between disjunctiveness and conjunctiveness.

property—but not just any property. It has to be a property which defines a ‘similarity class,’ which is to say a class whose members are all similar in a particular way.” What I would like is to be able to analyze similarity as the sharing of a specific kind of property, where that kind of property could be defined independently *without* appealing to the concept of similarity. But all evidence suggests that no such analysis is possible; this is one of the consequences of Goodman’s new riddle of induction. It seems that objective similarity is simply a fundamental concept which cannot be analyzed any further.¹² Because objective similarity is a fundamental concept, it is impossible to offer any general, non-circular criteria for determining whether something is an S-property.

However, while I cannot give exhaustive criteria for determining whether something is an S-property, *some* guidance is possible. First, sheerly disjunctive properties like *being either an oak bookshelf or a member of the Chicago Bears* are not S-properties. By “disjunctive properties” here I do not mean properties that are expressed by disjunctive predicates, because *any* property can be expressed by a disjunctive predicate. For example, the property *being blue* can be expressed through a predicate like “is either bleen before time *t* or grue after time *t*.” Rather, a disjunctive property is a property which picks out, not one class of things which are all similar in one particular respect, but instead two or more different similarity classes. Because we lack general criteria for whether something constitutes a similarity, we also lack general criteria for whether some property is truly disjunctive or not. However, we can safely reject obviously disjunctive examples like *being either an oak bookshelf or a member of the Chicago Bears*.

¹² This is not the moral Goodman draws from his own arguments, but it is the moral Lewis draws from Goodman’s arguments. See David Lewis, “New Work for a Theory of Universals,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 61, no. 4 (1983): 347-48 and Lewis, *Plurality of Worlds*, 176-77.

Any true disjunctiveness at all, even between two closely related things, renders them no longer S-properties, strictly speaking. Thus, the property *being either a goose or a duck* is not, strictly, an S-property, even if we grant that *being a goose* and *being a duck* are both S-properties, and also that *being a member of the family Anatidae* (the family that includes geese, ducks, and swans) is an S-property. The extension of the property *being either a goose or a duck* is a class of very similar things that share many S-properties, so if x and y share the property *being either a goose or a duck*, they are pretty similar. But their similarity is not due to their sharing the disjunctive property. It is due to their sharing the property *being a member of the family Anatidae*, and other associated non-disjunctive properties. And so *being either a goose or a duck* is not strictly an S-property.

If we accept this condition on S-properties, most of the things that in ordinary conversation we would take to constitute similarities will turn out not to be concepts of S-properties, strictly so-called. As has often been noted, many of our ordinary concepts are not clearly defined concepts with precise extensions, but instead are family resemblance concepts or prototype concepts. For example, *being an impressionist painting* might sound plausibly like a respect in which two things can be similar, i.e. an S-property. That is, “They are both impressionist paintings” would seem like a perfectly valid answer to the question, “In what respect are these two paintings similar?” But there are no strict criteria for when a painting counts as an impressionist painting. Instead, we seem to categorize paintings as impressionist either on the basis of their overall degree of resemblance to paradigmatically impressionist paintings, or on the basis of something like a disjunctive, weighted list of impressionist properties, any percentage of which over a certain threshold would be sufficient for us to label

the painting “impressionist.” Thus *being an impressionist painting* is a disjunctive property of some kind; it is not strictly an S-property.

However, there are a number of true S-properties *associated* with the category of impressionist paintings—properties like *featuring bright colors*, for example. For this reason, even if *being an impressionist painting* is not itself strictly an S-property, we can often informally treat it as one, because of the degree to which it (somewhat vaguely and ambiguously and disjunctively) indicates the true S-properties with which it is associated.

Similarly, to return to our earlier example, even *being a goose* and *being a duck* seem dubious as S-properties. Given the continuing process of evolution, species do not form clear, sharply-distinguished categories, and one could make the case that *all* zoological categories turn out to be disjunctive once we analyze them carefully enough. But if *being a duck* is not strictly an S-property, there surely are S-properties whose extension is at least very similar to the extension of the property *being a duck*, and for most purposes that is close enough.

For this reason, I will simply describe properties like *being a duck* as S-properties, even if there is reason to suspect that might not be strictly accurate. Even if *being a duck* is not strictly an S-property, it is nonetheless associated with many genuine S-properties. For this reason, we can treat the quasi-S-property *being a duck* as a stand-in for whatever *true* S-properties underlie our casual and not-entirely-rigorous category.

A second factor incompatible with something’s being an S-property is extrinsicity. An intrinsic property is one such that whether an object has that property depends solely on that

object and its parts.¹³ For example, *being composed largely of organic matter* is an intrinsic property, because whether an object has that property is determined solely by what it is like, and not by anything external to it. Correspondingly, for a property to be extrinsic is simply for it not to be (completely) intrinsic. Thus, most of the properties we ordinarily ascribe to things are extrinsic properties. For example, looking or tasting a certain way is an extrinsic property, because things can look or taste a certain way only with respect to certain kinds of perceivers. Weight is extrinsic because the same object would weigh less if located on the moon than if located on earth. One might even argue that the shape of an object is extrinsic, in that it depends on whether it is located in Euclidean space or not.¹⁴

By definition, any property which isn't purely intrinsic counts as extrinsic. Nonetheless, extrinsicality comes in degrees. For example, *being a brother* is a less purely extrinsic property than *being a sibling*, because the former differs from the latter by including the intrinsic criterion of being male.¹⁵ The property of loneliness, defined as the property of being the only thing in existence, is a *purely* extrinsic property.¹⁶ Whether an object is lonely has nothing at all to do with the object itself, but is determined entirely by considerations external to it. However, almost all of the extrinsic properties we ordinarily discuss are *impurely* extrinsic.

I take extrinsic properties *not* to be S-properties. This seems particularly appropriate in the case of the *purely* extrinsic properties, because by definition, ascribing a purely extrinsic property to an object tells us nothing about that object itself. Intuitively, knowing that some

¹³ For one explication of this concept, see David Lewis, "Extrinsic Properties," *Philosophical Studies* 44, no. 2 (1983): 197–200. The best analysis of intrinsicity is a matter of debate, but I take it that all analyses rest on something very close to this informal definition.

¹⁴ See Graham Nerlich, "Is Curvature Intrinsic to Physical Space?," *Philosophy of Science* 46, no. 3 (1979): 439–58.

¹⁵ Lewis, "Extrinsic Properties," 197.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 198.

object *o* is lonely would tell me nothing about what other things *o* would be similar to (if only they existed), because it tells me nothing at all about *o*.¹⁷ However, just as many properties which intuitively seem like genuine similarities are actually disjunctive and thus not *strictly* S-properties, many properties which intuitively strike us as genuine (intrinsic) similarities are actually partly extrinsic and thus not strictly S-properties. For example, just as *being a duck* may serve to roughly indicate real S-properties even if it is not strictly an S-property, *weighing five pounds* will ordinarily serve to indicate a real S-property: the property of having such-and-such a mass. So we need not be over-anxious about describing properties as S-properties merely because they have some element of extrinsicality. In *many* cases, partly extrinsic properties, which are for that reason not strictly S-properties, serve to (imperfectly) indicate true S-properties. In cases of what I'll call "approximate" S-properties like *being an impressionist painting* or *weighing five pounds*, we can legitimately describe the property as an S-property, and that description is justified insofar as the approximate S-property does in fact *approximate* (both intensionally and extensionally) one or more true S-properties.

Because similarity is a basic concept, there are no criteria by which we can judge whether or not something is an S-property. In actual practice, we just intuitively feel that certain properties, when shared, constitute similarities, and that others do not. Nonetheless, not *everything* which strikes one intuitively as a similarity is a real similarity. One might unreflectively think of two things as similar, but on reflection realize that they only *seem* similar for reasons having nothing to do with actual similarity. For example, I have an instinctive

¹⁷ One could argue, however, that two things that share an extrinsic property *are* similar with respect to that property—just extrinsically similar rather than intrinsically similar. To say something is "extrinsically similar" doesn't sound, to my ear, like a *contradiction*. So, while I use "S-properties" to include only intrinsic properties, this is intended simply as a definition, not as a substantial assertion to the effect that all similarity is intrinsic.

tendency to think that the feeling of physical warmth is similar to the personality of a “warm” person. But on reflection, this belief doesn’t make much sense. Lakoff and Johnson argue that the source of what they call the “Affection is Warmth” metaphor is an experiential association: from earliest childhood, affection is paired with physical warmth.¹⁸ This experiential association gives rise to the metaphorical use of “warm” for “affectionate” in English, and these experiential associations combined with the presence of the corresponding metaphor in my native language give rise to a vague sense in my mind that affection and warmth really are similar. If something like Lakoff and Johnson’s analysis is even approximately accurate, then this is a case in which experiential and linguistic associations have given rise to an *illusory* perception of similarity.

But my sense that *including a 12-year-old protagonist* seems like a respects in which things can be similar does not seem confused in this same way. My intuition that this is a similarity does not fall apart on reflection the way my intuition that *being warm (either physically or emotionally)* constitutes a similarity *does* fall apart on reflection. And while there is a plausible explanation for why I might mistakenly perceive *being warm (either physically or emotionally)* as a similarity even though it isn’t, I cannot think of any similar reason why I would mistakenly perceive *including a 12-year-old protagonist* as a similarity if it weren’t one.

Thus I will take as an S-property any property which seems, intuitively, to constitute a similarity. If something *seems* like a similarity, that is good enough reason to think it is one, in the absence of some specific reason to think otherwise.

¹⁸ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 50.

1.3 The relationship between proportional similarities and simple similarities

Having clarified some elements of the concept of similarity, I turn back now to the more complex concept of *proportional* analogy. As I have noted, any two things that are similar are similar in some particular *respect*, which is to say that they share some particular S-property. Proportional analogies are similarities between two relationships, and thus proportional analogies involve two *relationships* sharing some particular S-property.

More specifically, however, proportional analogies consist in two relationships sharing some common *relation*. If asked to explicate the proportional analogy “feathers are to birds as wing scales are to butterflies,” we might say things like “feathers are outgrowths of the bodies of birds, just as wing scales are outgrowths of the bodies of butterflies.” In other words, the salient S-properties shared by the two relationships are things like *including the relation of being outgrowths of the body of*. I’ll use the term “S-relation” for the sort of relation which, if shared by two relationships, constitutes a proportional similarity between those two relationships.

Not *all* similarities between two relationships constitute proportional analogies. For example, two relationships could be similar by virtue of sharing a property like *including a relation which is transitive*.¹⁹ The sharing of this property would not entail the sharing of any particular S-relation. For example, hamsters are smaller than cats, and mice are more plentiful than 5-carat diamonds, and both *being smaller than* and *being more plentiful than* are transitive relations. Thus one very minimal respect in which the relationship between hamsters and cats and the relationship between mice and 5-carat diamonds are similar is that both relationships

¹⁹ One might be tempted to think that two relationships could be similar by virtue of both *being* transitive. Recall, however, that a “relationship,” as I am using the word here, consists in the set of all the relations that hold between the two specified relata. While a relation is a two place-property, a *relationship* is not a property, of any adicity, and thus higher-order properties like *is transitive* do not apply to relationships.

have the property *including a transitive relation*. However, while sharing the property *including a transitive relation* constitutes a (very minimal) similarity between the two relationships, it does not constitute a proportional analogy—not even a very minimal one. One who asserts “hamsters are to cats as mice are to 5-carat diamonds” cannot cite, as explication or justification, the fact that hamsters are smaller than cats, mice are more plentiful than 5-carat diamonds, and both of those relations are transitive. That would never be accepted as an example of a proportional analogy. This fact demonstrates that proportionality as we ordinarily use that term consists not merely in any old similarity between the two relationships, but specifically in the two relationships sharing a specific *relation*.

This definition aligns with the traditional definition of proportional analogy inherited from Aristotle. For example, one of Aristotle’s examples of a proportional analogy (though he does not use that term for it here) is “as is a calm in the sea, so is windlessness in the air.”²⁰ Regarding this example, he later refers to “the sameness of a calm at sea, and windlessness in the air (each being a form of rest).”²¹ Thus, to explicate the proportional analogy between calm and the sea and windlessness and the air, Aristotle cites the *relation* that both relationships share: the relation *being a form of rest in*. Just as calm is a state of rest in the sea, windlessness is a state of rest in the air. Similarly, Kant defines proportional analogy as “a perfect similarity between two relations in wholly dissimilar things.”²² By “a perfect similarity between two relations” he can

²⁰ *Topics* 1.17 108a11-12. All quotations from *Topics* taken from Aristotle, “Topics,” in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, trans. W. A. Pickard-Cambridge, vol. 1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

²¹ *Topics* 1.18 108b25-26.

²² Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, trans. Gary Hatfield (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 4:357-58.

only mean that the *same* relation holds both between *a* and *b* and between the “wholly dissimilar” items *c* and *d*.

In many cases, what precise relation is shared in a proportional analogy may be difficult to pick out. But all similarity is similarity in some particular respect, and the only similarities we recognize as constituting proportional analogies at all are those that involve two different relationships sharing a relation. So wherever a proportional analogy exists, it can only be by virtue of some particular shared S-relation, however subtle, abstract, formal, or otherwise difficult to explicitly name that S-relation might be. Indeed, it is the very fact that relations are often difficult to directly describe which makes proportional analogies so useful. Speaking in terms of proportional analogies enables us to pick out a specific relation, not by directly describing it—a task which is often conceptually difficult—but instead by the indirect method of listing sets of relata whose relationships all have that relation in common.

I have emphasized the point that proportional similarities involve two relationships sharing a common relation because an important conclusion follows from it: while proportional analogies are similarities between relationships, they also entail similarities between the relata.

First, note that if there is a proportional analogy such that scales are to fish as feathers are to birds, it follows that there is some relation *R* such that both scales and feathers share the property of bearing *R* to *something*. For example, both scales and feathers share the property *being outgrowths of the body of something*. Whereas a simple, direct similarity takes the form of two objects sharing some S-property *P*, in a proportional analogy, objects *a* and *c* share the property of standing in S-relation *R* to some *x*.

This property *standing in S-relation R to some x* is not an S-property, because it is extrinsic. Indeed, the property of standing in a particular relation to something else is a paradigmatic example of an extrinsic property. However, a thing's having the property *standing in R to some x* will *entail* a certain intrinsic property: that of *being (intrinsically) able to stand in R to some x*. To return to the example above, both scales and feathers have the property *being outgrowths of the body of something*. This is an extrinsic property. However, their having this property entails that they also have the intrinsic property *being able to stand in the relation of being outgrowths of the body of something*. What exactly this property consists in would be difficult to spell out, of course. At the very least, in order for something to be able to be an outgrowth of the body of something, it must at the very least be a material object of some sort, and *being a material object* is an intrinsic property. We could come up with further criteria, depending on how we define "outgrowth" and "body." But in any case, while it would be difficult to spell out the criteria for having this property, all such criteria would be intrinsic, because it is an intrinsic property.

One might be tempted to think that a property like *being able to stand in the relation of being outgrowths of the body of something* must be extrinsic simply because it is *defined* extrinsically: the property is defined in terms of something external to the object that possesses the property. However, the fact that the property is, so to speak, "extrinsically denominated" does not mean that the property *itself* is extrinsic. Being the sort of thing that *could* stand in the relation of being an outgrowth of the body of something is a property a thing has entirely of itself. Whether it has that property is dependent only on what *it* is like, at least if we specify that

what we mean is that it could stand in that relation in some possible world and not that it could stand in that relation to some existing bodies in this world.

Thus, while a proportional relationship $a:b::c:d$ only actually *asserts* a similarity between the two named relationships, it does *entail* a particular similarity between a and c , and another between b and d . Being able to stand in similar relationships just *is* one way of being similar.

The term “analogy” originally referred only to proportional analogy, but it is now sometimes used to denote any sort of similarity at all.²³ This is especially clear if we think of what it means to “argue by analogy.” To argue by analogy is (roughly) to argue that since p is true of x , and x is relevantly similar to y , p or something similar to p is probably true of y too. When arguing from analogy, whether the similarity between x and y is a proportional similarity or a direct similarity does not particularly matter. In line with this general usage, I will use the term “ontological analogy” to refer both to proportional analogies and to other kinds of similarities.

1.4 Analogical thought

Discussions of “analogy” in the context of religion sometimes focus entirely on analogy in the ontological sense of similarity or proportionality I have just described. In particular, the term *analogia entis* or “analogy of being” is sometimes used in this straightforward ontological

²³ For example, John Maynard Keynes uses “analogy” to refer to relationships of similarity, further analyzing this into the “positive analogy” (those properties shared by both of the things in question) and “negative analogy” (those properties which differ between the two things). John Maynard Keynes, *A Treatise on Probability* (London: Macmillan, 1921), 223. This way of speaking has been taken up by some writing in the philosophy of science; see, e.g., Mary B. Hesse, *Models and Analogies in Science* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966), 8. And accordingly, some of those writing about analogy in the context of religion borrow this terminology: see, e.g., Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), 114. Not in this tradition but in a similar vein, G. F. Woods employs “the loose definition of analogy as meaning some kind of similitude” (“The Use of Analogy in Christian Theology,” *The Journal of Theological Studies* 7, no. 2 [1956]: 226).

sense to signify the claim that God and creatures are related via a proportional analogy.²⁴

However, most discussion of “analogy” with respect to God focuses on analogical *language* in speaking about God, not primarily on the ontological analogies between God and creatures. And it is this concept of analogical *speech* which is central to my project. However, to understand what it means to *speak* analogically requires that we first understand what it means to *think* analogically.

Analogical thought is thought in which ontological analogy plays an essential role. It is thought about or predicated on those similarities one perceives, or takes to exist, or posits, or hypothesizes. One kind of analogical thought involves inference. For example, from the fact that the fastest-flying birds have wings that curve backwards in flight, one might infer that a similarly swept-back shape in plane wings will enable faster speeds than a straight shape. From the fact that two things are similar in one way that I know of, I can infer that they are probably similar in some further way I have not independently established yet.

But not all analogy at the level of thought needs to involve analogical *inferences*. For example, I may simply think, “Fish scales are similar to feathers,” or “Fish scales are similar to feathers in that both are made of keratin.” This kind of analogical thinking involves *propositions* which *assert* a similarity. Alternately, analogical thought may involve neither inference nor proposition, but simply the mental acts of perceiving similarities, comparing things, modeling one thing on another, etc. There is a difference between thinking the proposition, “Scales are

²⁴ See for example Erich Przywara, *Analogia Entis: Metaphysics: Original Structure and Universal Rhythm*, trans. John R. Betz and David Bentley Hart (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2014). Many discussions of the *analogia entis* do not fall in this category of straightforward ontological usage, however, because that term is often taken to refer instead to the claim that the word “to exist” is “said analogically,” i.e. in different senses. That claim is clearly *related* to a claim about the ontological relationship of analogy between God and creatures, but it frames analogy as a feature of *speech*, not as an ontological matter.

similar to feathers,” and simply thinking of scales as feathers, or thinking of scales in light of their similarity to feathers. Mental life does not reduce to a series of propositions entertained and inferences drawn, and analogical thinking as a particular phenomenon within mental life does not either.

These three forms of analogical thought tend to come together: thinking of x as like y will usually also be accompanied by belief that x and y are in fact similar and by some tendency to draw analogical inferences on the basis of that perceived similarity. However, in considering religious language, my aim is to understand what believers mean when they *assert* things about God. So as I turn to the topic of analogical speech, I will focus on the second of the three categories of analogical thought just mentioned: I will be discussing analogical *claims*, not analogical inferences, nor mere perceptions of one thing as similar to another.

2. What is it to speak analogically?

Analogical *speech*, in the sense I will use that term, is speech which expresses analogical thought. But that definition requires substantial clarification, because a claim can be analogical in different ways. A claim can be analogical by virtue of expressing an analogical *proposition* (that is, by virtue of directly asserting that two things are similar), but it can also be analogical by virtue of expressing a (non-analogical) proposition in an analogical *way*. I will explain these two forms of analogical speech in turn.

2.1 Type 1 analogical speech: Assertions of analogy

The most obvious way a claim can be analogical is if it directly asserts some similarity.

Examples include the following:

- (1) Geese are like ducks,
- (2) Grapefruit are more similar to oranges than to lemons,
- (3) Scales are to fish as feathers are to birds,

and

- (4) Oranges and pumpkins are the same color.

(1) through (3) include explicit references to similarity in the words “like,” “similar,” and “as.”

But to say that two things are the “same color,” as in (4), also constitutes a Type 1 analogical claim, because colors are S-properties, and to assert that two things share a particular S-property is equivalent to asserting that they are similar in respect of that S-property.

Claims of similarity can also be expressed in ways that disguise or leave implicit the role the concept of similarity is playing. Consider the following example, uttered as advice to someone considering the purchase of domestic waterfowl and evaluating her different options:

- (5) Geese are just mean ducks.

The speaker of (5) assuredly does not mean that geese are literally just mean ducks; geese are not ducks. Instead, (5) probably means something like

- (5*) Geese are very similar to ducks, but unlike ducks, they are mean.²⁵

²⁵ One might hear (5) as a metaphorical utterance, and if it were a metaphor, the gloss I give it here would not be quite right. (I will say more about metaphors in Section 2.2.) But ducks and geese are too similar to make it really plausible to interpret this utterance as metaphorical.

Thus the proposition expressed by (5) in a normal context is an assertion of similarity, though it is disguised as an assertion of equivalence.

Often, one makes an analogical assertion not because one is interested in the similarity itself, but instead as a means of describing *one* of the two things being compared. For example, I could assert that oranges and lemons are similar simply in order to draw the listener's attention to their similarities. But if I am speaking to someone who is familiar with oranges but has never encountered a lemon, asserting that oranges and lemons are similar would serve quite a different function: it serves to communicate something about lemons.

It is this latter use of analogical speech which is of interest to us in understanding speech about God. Pointing out the similarities between x and y is only useful to the hearer if she already independently understands x and y . Thus, for the analogical claim "God is similar to a wise person" to function in the first way for us, we would already need to be in a position of understanding both what God is like and what the wise person is like. If that were our position, analogical speech about God would be quite inessential, because we would have enough understanding of God's nature to describe God *without* any appeal to analogy. Instead, analogical claims about God function in the second way: their purpose is to communicate information about something unfamiliar (God) in terms of something more familiar.

2.2 Type 2 analogical speech: Propositions asserted analogically

But not all analogical speech consists in propositions to the effect that there is a certain similarity, proportional relationship, or shared S-property among some specified set of things. It is possible for the proposition expressed by a sentence not to include the concept of similarity at

all, and yet for it to appeal to analogy in the way it is expressed. This what I will call Type 2 analogical speech.

The primary example of Type 2 analogical speech is a certain kind of metaphor. Not all metaphorical speech is analogical in my sense of the word, in part because not all metaphors are based on *similarity*. For example, as I noted in the previous section, “warm” (and related terms) are commonly used as metaphors for affection and kindness. But that metaphor seems to be based in an experiential association of comfort and affection with physical warmth, and not in any actual *similarity* between those two things. However, *many* metaphors are based on similarity, and those that are generally fall into the category of Type 2 analogical speech.

Judgments of similarity seem to play a crucial role in the most paradigmatic cases of metaphorical speech and metaphorical interpretation. For example, if someone wants help understanding what is meant by “Juliet is the sun,” I will say things like, “*Just as* all life on earth would die out if the sun wasn’t there, Romeo thinks he would die without Juliet.” That is, I will explain the metaphor by citing similarities between Juliet and the sun, or by citing proportional similarities between the relationship between Juliet and Romeo and the relationship between the sun and the earth. For this reason, metaphors have sometimes been interpreted as disguised similarity claims, such that “Juliet is the sun” really means something like “Juliet is similar to the sun.”²⁶ On this interpretation, metaphors are a bit like (5): they’re just disguised versions of Type 1 analogical speech.

²⁶ One theorist who holds this view is George A. Miller. See his “Images and Models, Similes and Metaphors,” in *Metaphor and Thought*, ed. Andrew Ortony (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 357–400.

However, this account of metaphor is now widely recognized to be deficient, even if we restrict our attention to metaphors which really are based on (presumed) similarity. Searle demonstrates this point with the following example. Suppose I assert,

(6) Richard is a gorilla.

and that in the context in which I utter it, which includes cultural stereotypes of gorillas as brutal and violent, the content of (6) can be roughly paraphrased as

(6a) Richard is fierce, nasty, prone to violence, and so forth.²⁷

If (6a) is the correct interpretation of (6), then (6) is true just in case Richard is violent and so on, and false if he is not. But if metaphors are to be interpreted as assertions of similarity, then (6) must be equivalent to some assertion of similarity such as

(6b) Richard is similar to a gorilla by virtue of the fact that both are fierce, nasty, prone to violence, etc.

or

(6c) Richard is similar to a gorilla in respect of temperament.

But now, note that while gorillas are often stereotyped as violent, they are in fact gentle and are not prone to violence. Thus (6b) is not true no matter what Richard is like, and (6c) will be true only if Richard is *not* violent. Thus neither (6b) nor (6c) has the same truth conditions as (6), and so neither accurately reflects the meaning of (6).

However, judgments of similarity often *do* serve as the *means* by which the propositional content of a metaphorical utterance is determined. Consider the metaphor

(7) The ship ploughed the sea.

²⁷ John R. Searle, "Metaphor," in *Philosophical Perspectives on Metaphor*, ed. Mark Johnson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981), 260.

On Searle's account, this is "very crudely" like saying

(7*) The ship does something to the sea (to figure out what it is, find a relationship like ploughing).²⁸

The propositional content of (7) is simply a claim about what the ship is doing, and it includes no claims of similarity. But similarity is involved in *determining* the propositional content of the sentence. And it is for this reason that (7) is an instance of Type 2 analogical speech. The proposition one asserts in saying (7)—the proposition that the ship does such-and-such—is asserted in an analogical way by virtue of the fact that it is asserted via a metaphorical use of the term "plough," where that metaphorical use is based on a relation of similarity (rather than, say, mere experiential association).

Josef Stern notes that many metaphorical expressions involve using the name of an exemplary possessor of a certain property in order to express that property.²⁹ Consider a metaphorical expression like "is a Kennedy," used to describe Bill Clinton. The metaphorical claim describes Clinton as falling into a certain category, but the expression used to refer to that category is the metaphorical expression "is a Kennedy." What's being asserted is neither that Clinton is *literally* a Kennedy, nor that Clinton is *similar* to Kennedy or to a Kennedy. Instead, "Bill Clinton is a Kennedy" asserts that Clinton has a certain property. One way to assert that Bill Clinton has that property would be to express it in literal terms, by asserting that Bill Clinton is a handsome, charismatic politician and so on. But another way to make this assertion is to choose an exemplary possessor of that property, namely Kennedy, and use the name of that exemplary member in order to express the property he exemplifies: "a Kennedy."

²⁸ Ibid., 272.

²⁹ See Josef Stern, *Metaphor in Context* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 156-69.

Many other metaphors work in a similar fashion. “Trieste is no Vienna” is not intended to assert that Trieste is, literally, not the city of Vienna. Instead, “Vienna” is an exemplary member of a *class* of cities, or an exemplary possessor of certain properties *qua* city. What “Trieste is no Vienna” asserts is that Trieste is not a member of that class and does not possess those properties. Aristotle’s metaphor “The ship ploughs the sea,” is another such exemplifying metaphor. What it asserts is that the ship moves through or relates to its environment in a specific way. A plough moves through the soil in that same way, and so exemplifies this kind of movement in relation to environment. “To plough” is thus used metaphorically to express this more general kind of movement which ploughing exemplifies.

Exemplifying metaphors like these can enable us to “refer to categories (or properties) for which we do not *at the time* have the capacity to articulate explicitly the conditions in virtue of which things belong to (or have) it.”³⁰ In some cases like “is a Kennedy,” a metaphorical expression might be merely a simpler, more colorful way of expressing something that it would be fairly easy to express, at least approximately, with a literal equivalent. But sometimes, exemplifying metaphors enable us to express properties we would not have known how to express literally.

Stern compares exemplifying metaphors to non-metaphorical expressions like “the table is *that shape*” accompanied by a pointing gesture, or “he broke the board *thus*” accompanied by the breaking of a twig.³¹ Such expressions enable one to refer *de re* to a certain property: rather than actually *describing* the shape of the table, or the manner in which an action was carried out, one can simply *point* to an object sharing that same property, or “point” to one’s own action. In

³⁰ Ibid., 192.

³¹ Ibid., 187.

doing so, one can successfully express a certain property *de re*, even if one does not know how to express it *de dicto* through a description.

This analysis is based on Kaplan's conception of directly referential terms. Contrary to Frege's assertion that reference occurs via sense, Kaplan points out that in some cases a word refers *directly* to its referent without the intervention of any description or conceptualized representation. Examples of such directly referential terms include indexicals and proper names. But as Stern points out, some expressions include directly referential features while *also* including some degree of conceptualization. For example, the phrase "that shape" accompanied by a pointing gesture involves *some* explicit description and conceptualization (in the word "shape") but within that conceptual constraint, the expression is directly referential: it refers to the *specific* shape it refers to only by direct reference and not by description.³²

Thus it is possible to refer to a property without being able either to describe it or to directly and literally name it. One can refer *de re* to properties that one does not know how to refer to *de dicto*:

Sometimes we possess a purely qualitative conceptualization of the property that enables us to denote it. At other times, as with many directly referential (singular) terms, it is only by employing our contextual relations to the property that we are able to express a proposition containing it. We may be able to express the property only by way of a sample that we demonstrate in context.³³

On Stern's account, exemplifying metaphors like "is a Kennedy" work in a similar way. Just as one can refer to a property *de re* by saying, "The table was *that shape*" and pointing to something in one's environment, in employing an exemplifying metaphor one says, "Clinton has

³² Ibid., 187-88.

³³ Ibid., 188.

that property” and points to Kennedy, or “A ship does *that*” and points to ploughing. Such metaphors refer *de re* to properties in something like the way demonstrative expressions do.

Stern notes that one of the implications of his account of metaphor is that, not only are metaphors *not* disguised assertions of similarity, but “it is . . . unnecessary to detour through an underlying judgment of similarity to determine [the metaphor’s] content.”³⁴ Not only is the propositional content of “Juliet is the sun” quite different from that of “Juliet is similar to the sun,” it’s also not the case that one needs to explicitly make the judgment that Juliet is similar to the sun in order to understand the utterance. Nonetheless, I take exemplifying metaphors like this one to be a type of analogical speech—that is, a type of speech that appeals to similarity. The reason is that “Juliet is the sun” describes Juliet by employing the name of something she is relevantly similar to, in order to ascribe to her those particular S-properties by virtue of which she is similar to it.³⁵ This feature of exemplifying metaphor is the source of the near-universal intuition that such metaphors are importantly rooted in similarity.

More specifically, a statement constitutes Type 2 analogical speech when it fulfills these criteria:

- (a) it involves a *de re* reference to a property or set of properties or category, whether via an exemplifying metaphor like “is a Kennedy,” or via pointing as in “The table is *that shape*,” and
- (b) that which is “pointed to” in order to fix the referent is *not* the same thing as that which is being spoken about.

³⁴ Ibid., 156.

³⁵ Or, since “Juliet is the sun” seems to indicate a proportional analogy more than a direct similarity, to ascribe to the relationship between Juliet and Romeo those particular S-relations it shares with the relationship between the sun and the earth.

To clarify the second of these two criteria: “*That color is pretty*” is not an analogical statement even though it involves a *de re* reference to a color, because the patch of color being pointed to is identical with the patch of color being spoken about. Thus in this case there is no appeal to similarity, because similarity involves two *different* things sharing an S-property. But if I assert, “My new shirt is *that color*” while pointing to a paint sample, this is a case of Type 2 analogical speech, because I am referring *de re* to the property I wish to ascribe to one object by pointing to a different object which exemplifies that property.

And so exemplifying metaphors involve an appeal to similarity for the same reason that other sorts of *de re* reference to properties involve an appeal to similarity. If I say that my curtains are yellow, my assertion appeals in no way to similarity. Of course, the claim that my curtains are yellow does *entail* claims of similarity—for example, it entails that my curtains are similar in respect of color to other yellow objects. But my description of my curtains describes them without reference to those other things. By contrast, if I say that my curtains are “*that color*” while pointing to a lemon, I am describing my curtains in terms of their similarity to something else, just as I do if I say they are “the same color as a lemon” or “similar to a lemon in respect of color.” This is why I take all such ways of speaking to be analogical.

Having outlined the concept of Type 2 analogical speech, I am largely going to cease explicitly considering it for the rest of this project. I’ve offered an account of Type 2 analogical speech because those who take themselves to speak analogically of God often speak in the Type 2 way rather than the Type 1 way. That is, rather than saying “God is similar to a wise person,” believers are more likely to simply say “God is wise,” but then explain that “wise” is not being used to refer to wisdom in the normal sense, but instead is meant metaphorically or analogically.

To simply interpret “God is wise” to *mean* “God is similar to a wise person” is usually a confusion.

However, in my discussions from this point on, I will stick to examples of Type 1 analogical speech whenever I need an example of speech that appeals to analogy, because Type 1 analogical speech is more straightforward and easier to talk about clearly. However, this partial focus should not undermine the general applicability of my account of analogical speech. While Type 1 and Type 2 analogical speech function quite differently at the semantic level, for our purposes what is really important is that both Type 1 and Type 2 analogical speech appeal to what the speaker takes to be similarities between God and creatures. Both “God is similar to a wise person” and “God is wise” (interpreted analogically) will be true only if God really is similar to a wise person, or has some property similar to wisdom. It is this reliance on similarity which is essential to my understanding of analogical speech.

2.3 Irreducibility

The claim I wish to defend in this dissertation is not merely that some claims about God are analogical, but rather that at least some are *irreducibly* analogical. What does this irreducibility amount to?

A particularly clear example of a *reducibly* analogical utterance is

(8) My new curtains are similar to a lemon in virtue of being yellow.

I could easily communicate the same propositional content by asserting,

(8*) My new curtains are yellow [and lemons are yellow].

The concept of similarity adds nothing to the content of (8), though it might be useful psychologically to help me connect my different pieces of knowledge. An appeal to similarity is trivially reducible in this way when the assertion of similarity between the members of some set T is limited to specified respects, and each of those respects is explicitly specified in terms of the S-properties the sharing of which renders the members of T similar in that respect. When these criteria are met, the assertion that the members of T are *similar* adds no propositional content to what has already been said by specifying that the members of T all share such-and-such properties.

An example which is not trivially reducible in this way is

(9) My new curtains are similar to a lemon in respect of color.

(9) does limit its assertion of similarity to one respect: color. But it does not specify that respect in terms of the *property* which the curtains and the lemon share. In order to do that, it would be necessary not merely to say that they are similar “in respect of color” but to specify what that color is. Thus, (9) is not automatically reducible independent of context the way (8) is. But in practice, it is reducible to the non-analogical claim “My new curtains are yellow,” because that is what (9) actually communicates to anyone who knows what color lemons characteristically are.

One main way for an analogical statement to be *irreducible*, if trivially so, is by being open-ended. For example,

(10) My new curtains are similar to a lemon

might express a determinate claim in a particular context in which certain kinds of properties (like color) have been highlighted as the relevant ones. But if asserted in a context that did not highlight any particular similarities as the relevant ones, (10) could not be reduced to a non-

analogical equivalent, because there would be nothing to determine which properties are being ascribed to the curtains. We could name some possible similarities, of course—both the curtains and the lemon are yellow, both are composed of organic material, etc.—but no such list could be exhaustive. However, this form of “irreducibility” is rather uninteresting: the only reason (10) is irreducible is that its propositional content is indeterminate.

Another form of irreducibility arises when one recognizes a property sufficiently well to refer to it *de re* but lacks a sufficiently well-conceptualized grasp of it to refer to it *de dicto*. In such cases, analogical utterances are one way (though not the only way) to refer to the property *de re*. In these cases, the appeal to similarity will be ineliminable so long as we continue to lack the ability to specify the property via a non-analogical *de dicto* description. Stern focuses on *metaphors* as the way to accomplish such *de re* reference, but non-metaphorical analogical expressions can perform the same task. For example, suppose I am trying to describe a certain perfume. Lacking the sophistication required to analyze odors, perhaps the best I can do is to assert,

(11) The perfume smells somewhat similar to lilacs,

The point of this claim is not to compare two things for the sake of comparison, but to explain *what the perfume smells like*. To properly describe the perfume *de dicto*, I would need to be able to ascribe to it specific olfactory properties which I understand independently from one another and independently of this specific context. If I am unable to analyze and describe the way the perfume smells in such a way, and unable even to recognize, in other contexts, what particular elements of the smell are making it smell like lilacs to me in *this* particular olfactory configuration, I can only say that it has some noticeable similarity to some other smell. This

appeal to similarity in (11) will be irreducible. However, (11) is irreducible only for me, given my current circumstances. The claim made in (11) is not irreducible *in principle*. Someone with a highly trained sense of smell and a sophisticated ability to analyze odors might be able to tell what properties I am really ascribing to the perfume in (11) and to name or describe them *de dicto*, with no appeal to similarity.

Claims about God are often taken to be irreducibly analogical in a much stronger sense than this, however—not merely to be irreducible for specific individuals at specific times, but to be irreducible in principle for all human beings. As Edwyn Bevan says,

When we speak of the love of God or the will of God, we know that we are speaking of something different from any love or any will we can know in men, and the ideas ‘love of God’, ‘will of God’, may in that sense be regarded as an element in the life of man taken to symbolise something unimaginable in the life of God. We cannot see behind the symbol: we cannot have any discernment of the reality better and truer than the symbolical idea, and we cannot compare the symbol with the reality as it is more truly apprehended and see how they differ. The symbol is the nearest we can get to the Reality.³⁶

On this view, which I share, at least some analogical descriptions of God cannot be reduced to non-analogical ones. The problem is not merely a lack of conceptual clarity, or a lack of capacity for discrimination and analysis. Instead, the analogical descriptions of God are ones that we are *in principle* unable to reduce or “see behind.” Thus analogical claims about God are irreducible in the strongest possible sense. I will have more to say in later chapters about how such in-principle irreducibly analogical speech might work.

Irreducibility, on this account, is the result of ignorance. If I knew what S-properties God possesses, I would not need to rely on analogical assertions to the effect that God is *similar* to a wise person; I could instead simply ascribe to God, in a *de dicto* manner, those properties he in

³⁶ Edwyn Bevan, *Symbolism and Belief* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1938), 257.

fact possesses. Thus to assert that believers speak analogically of God is to assert that, as I. M. Crombie says, “the religious man does not suppose himself to know what he means by his statements.”³⁷ Of course in one sense, believers who take their religious assertions to be analogical *do* know what they mean: they mean that God is similar to a wise person, or has a property similar to wisdom, or has some property exemplified by wise people, etc. However, in another sense, believers do not know what they mean: they do not know what actual S-properties God has which make it true that God is similar to a wise person.³⁸

3. The shortcomings of the “different but related senses” definition of analogy

3.1 Analogy as polysemy

By the definition I have offered, analogical speech is speech which either directly asserts or implicitly appeals to similarity. In the chapters that follow, it will become evident why this category is such an important one. But one might wonder why I have not adopted the rather more common definition of analogical speech as the use of words in different but related senses.

This latter conception of analogical speech, like the quite different concept of *proportional* analogy, has its roots in the works of Aristotle—but not, in this case, because Aristotle actually used the term *analogia* that way. In the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle states that there are words which can be said in “many senses,” where these senses are related and thus not

³⁷ I. M. Crombie, “Arising from the *University* Discussion,” in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1955), 124.

³⁸ One might object that surely the property God shares with wise people is *wisdom*, and thus we do know what property God shares with wise people. In some sense this is right: if God actually *is* similar to a wise person (in some way he *isn't* similar to a foolish person), then there must be some S-property God shares with wise people which renders them similar. And if we're going to refer to that property, the most sensible name for it is surely “wisdom.” However, if we are speaking irreducibly analogically, we do not take ourselves to know what that property actually *is*.

merely homonymous.³⁹ Aristotle never uses the term *analogia* to describe this phenomenon, but among medieval thinkers, Aristotle’s concept of words said in different senses came to be called “analogy,” perhaps because Aristotelian *analogia* (that is, proportional analogy) often gives rise to or is expressed by the use of the same word in multiple related ways. Less ambiguously, the phenomenon Aristotle describes is sometimes described among modern scholars as “focal meaning,”⁴⁰ because Aristotle takes each such term to have a central, primary meaning from which the other, secondary senses are derived.

Following Aristotle’s talk of words said in different senses, it is most common for linguistic analogy to be cashed out as a mid-point between univocity and mere equivocity. On this account, to speak analogically is to use a word neither in the same sense, nor in completely unrelated senses. The best-known proponent of this conception of analogy is Aquinas, who describes analogical use of words as one which “lies somewhere between pure equivocation and simple univocity.”⁴¹ Defined this way, “analogy” corresponds to what linguists call “polysemy”: the use of a single word in multiple related senses. For example, the term “healthy” can be used to describe an animal, or a diet, or a sample of urine, but these things are “healthy” in different senses of the word, and therefore these are “analogical” senses of the word.

³⁹ *Metaphysics* 4.2 1003a32. Unless otherwise noted, quotations from *Metaphysics* are taken from Aristotle, “Metaphysics,” in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, trans. W. D. Ross, vol. 2 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

⁴⁰ This term is coined by G. E. L. Owen, “Logic and Metaphysics in Some Earlier Works of Aristotle,” in *Aristotle and Plato in the Mid-Fourth Century*, ed. I. Düring and G. E. L. Owen (Göteborg, 1960), 184.

⁴¹ *Summa Theologiae* 1 q. 13 a. 5 resp. All quotations of the *Summa Theologiae* taken from Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae, Questions on God*, ed. Brian Davies and Brian Leftow (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), henceforth *ST*. It should be noted that what exactly Aquinas *means* by describing analogy as a way of speaking which is neither univocal nor sheerly equivocal is a problematic matter, because his philosophy of language was different from that of contemporary philosophers. For Aquinas, univocity and equivocity seem to be as much about *ontology* as about *language*. He even applies the term “univocal” directly to ontological relations, for example by speaking of “univocal causes” (*ST* 1 q. 13 a. 5 arg. 1). Thus, while Aquinas does at least superficially define analogy in terms of univocity and equivocity, it’s not obvious that his concept of analogy was a straightforward example of the linguistic conception I am discussing here.

Unlike analogical speech as I defined it in Section 2, analogy in the sense of polysemy does not necessarily have anything to do with analogy in the ontological sense of similarity or proportionality. For example, the term “healthy” is a polysemous word, but the different senses of that word are not related by virtue of any *similarity*, either direct or proportional, between the analogues.⁴² There is of course *some* non-trivial relationship between the two senses of “healthy”—if there were not, they would be sheerly equivocal senses of the word rather than instances of polysemy. But that relation is not one of similarity; for urine to be “healthy” is for it to have properties which are *symptoms* of animal health or which are *caused by* animal health, not for it to be *similar* to a healthy animal. As another example, Roger White notes that the term “railway” is polysemous in that it can refer either to the actual railway, or can function as an adjective in such phrases as “railway ticket” or “railway track.”⁴³ But the reason we describe a railway ticket as a *railway* ticket obviously has nothing to do with the ticket’s *similarity* to a railway. So polysemy need not reflect any ontological analogy. The reverse is also true: an ontological analogy, even when described, need not express itself in the polysemous use of any particular word. The sentence “Fish scales are like feathers” describes an analogy between two things, but without using any words in new “analogical” senses.

However, some instances of polysemy *are* based on ontological analogies. For example, the similarity of plane wings to bird wings is what originally led us to *call* plane wings “wings”; the word used for bird wings was applied in a new, related sense.⁴⁴ Similarly, while “Fish scales

⁴² Some Thomists have felt driven to deny this, on the basis of the fact that Aquinas uses the “health” case as an example of analogy, and thinks analogy involves similarity. I address this issue in Chapter 3.

⁴³ Roger M. White, *Talking about God: The Concept of Analogy and the Problem of Religious Language* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2010), 78.

⁴⁴ Today, the word “wing” can refer to anything with certain aerodynamic features, in which sense it applies equally well to both bird and plane wings. However, a perusal of the OED entry for the word indicates that this sense of the term is a late invention. See *OED Online*, s.v. “wing, n.,” accessed July 21, 2014, <http://www.oed.com>.

are like feathers” describes a similarity without any special non-standard uses of words, this observation could lead me to refer to fish scales as “feathers,” either as a deliberately poetic expression, or because I don’t know the word “scale” and don’t know how else to refer to them. As the “railway” and “healthy” examples demonstrate, words acquire new senses on the basis of a wide variety of conceptual relationships. In the “railway” example, the relation of the secondary sense of “railway” to the primary sense is that of *has to do with*; in the “healthy” example it is that of *being a cause of* (in the case of diet) or *being a sign of* (in the case of urine). But one of the most common relations grounding the polysemous extension of a word’s meaning is *being similar to*, or *being proportionally analogous to*, and in these cases, linguistic “analogy” and ontological “analogy” co-occur.

3.2 Analogy as polysemy plus an ontological criterion

Linguistic analogy is sometimes defined as any kind of polysemy whatsoever.⁴⁵ But if our goal is to explain how we can meaningfully speak about God, the mere concept of polysemy is too thin and superficial to be of much use. Suppose, for example, that the word “wise” is said “analogically” of God, and that what this means is simply that it is a non-univocal word—that it has a different sense when said of God than when said of a human being. If that is all it means to say that words are said of God “analogically,” then the claim, “God is wise” could mean almost anything. The one thing we could decisively rule out is that “God is wise” means that God is

⁴⁵ For example, John Deely takes the term “analogy” to cover absolutely all cases in which words develop new shades of meaning or connotation, no matter how superficial or accidental the process by which that occurs. He even cites as an example of analogy the fact that the term “niggardly” is now easily mistaken for an offensive term by virtue of its superficial similarity to an etymologically unrelated slur. John Deely, “The Absence of Analogy,” *The Review of Metaphysics* 55, no. 3 (2002): 548. James Ross’s account similarly includes absolutely all forms of “diverse but related same-word meaning.” James. F. Ross, *Portraying Analogy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 1.

wise (in the familiar sense of that word). And we could rule out that “wise” means something *in no way related* to the normal sense of “wise,” else they would be mere homonyms rather than two senses of the *same* word. But this still leaves the claim far too weak to be of any use.

Thus an account on which words are said of God “analogically,” where that means “non-univocally with their creaturely senses,” at the very least needs to be supplemented by additional conditions on those special senses. It is not enough to know that God is something not altogether unrelated to wise, not if that leaves open interpretations on which “God is wise” means nothing more than “God is a smart aleck” or “God is aloof” or “God provokes the feeling of being wise in those that contemplate him.”

A tempting solution is to restrict the term “analogy” to those instances of polysemy which are grounded in *ontological* analogies. On this thicker, “polysemy plus” conception of linguistic analogy, the use of the term “healthy” for both animals and diet is *mere* polysemy, and not an example of analogy (Aquinas’s use of that example to the contrary). But the use of the term “wing” for both bird wings and plane wings would be a clear case of an analogical word, since the polysemous use of that word is founded on a similarity at the level of the things themselves. And the claim that “God is wise” is said analogically would mean that there is *some* relevant similarity—perhaps one which is completely unknown to us, perhaps one specifiable only proportionally and not directly, perhaps a purely formal similarity—which renders it appropriate to use the same word for human “wisdom” as for divine “wisdom.”

Any satisfying account of what it means to say “God is wise” must at a minimum involve the claim that there is *some* form of similarity between “wisdom” as said of creatures and “wisdom” as said of God, even if it is only a proportional or formal similarity. Someone who

does not think that creaturely wisdom is in *any relevant way* similar to what is called “wisdom” in God, or who does not think that some such resemblance is the proper basis of the application of the word “wisdom” to both, would be much better off abandoning the claim “God is wise” altogether rather than keeping that claim but insisting that it is said “analogically.”⁴⁶

However, cashing analogy out in the way I have described above, as a form of polysemy or even polysemy plus an ontological criterion, is problematic for several reasons. I don’t think this traditional definition of the term is altogether useless, and once I have clarified certain key points I myself will, where appropriate, talk of the words in an analogical claim as having “different senses” than they normally do. But it is a mistake to locate the real force of the doctrine of analogy in the claim that words are said of God and creatures in different senses.

3.3 Sameness of sense as indeterminate

The first problem with defining analogy as the use of a word in different senses is that, as Roger White points out, there is no context-independent way of determining whether two related uses of a word have the “same sense” or not.

White makes this point about proportional analogies in particular. Consider one of Aristotle’s examples: “As wavelessness is in the sea, so is windlessness in the air.”⁴⁷ This proportional analogy can be used to pick out a particular relation (that relation which wavelessness bears to the sea and windlessness bears to the air), and it can be used to define a

⁴⁶ One might object that even if there is no similarity of any sort between God and a wise creature, it might still be worth saying “God is wise” in religious contexts, in order to promote certain attitudes or emotions. However, to take such a position would not be to take God to be wise “analogically.” It would be to take God *not* to be wise, but then to assert “God is wise” as a fiction, or as a poetic expression of an attitude, or something else of that sort.

⁴⁷ *Metaphysics* 8.2 1043a24. This is White’s translation (*Talking about God*, 56).

term—say, “calm”—to express that relation. A waveless sea is calm, windless air is calm, and furthermore, White notes, a crowd can be calm, and one’s mind can be calm, and many other things as well. These different uses of the term “calm” are proportionally related to one another: wavelessness is to the sea as windlessness is to the air, and windlessness is to the air as a peaceful state is to the mind. Thus the term “calm” picks out a set of properties which are *ontologically* analogous to one another. But is the term “calm” used in different *senses* in these different cases?

Roger White’s answer is that

in a case like this there is no principled answer to the question ‘is the word “calm” used in only one sense or in many?’ That is to say, on the one hand, we could begin with a sense of the word ‘calm’ that was restricted in its application to the weather, and then think of the word as acquiring other senses by analogical extension, but on the other hand, we could think of the word ‘calm’ as having only one sense, namely a sense in virtue of which it is applicable to any phenomena that satisfy the underlying analogical pattern. What this example shows is . . . that the question ‘does a word used analogically have more than one *sense*?’ is an unhelpful question.⁴⁸

The mere fact that a word applies to proportionally related things does not entail that it is said in different *senses*. Instead, it is equally reasonable to hold that the word has a single, *proportional* sense. We seem to recognize a *general* sense of the term “calm” which is defined not by any of its particular applications (to the sea or to the air, for instance) but which instead defines a relational property: that relation which calmness of the sea bears to the sea, and which calmness of the mind bears to the mind, and so on. We have a proportional concept of a particular kind of relation which applies both to calm people *and* to calm weather, so there is nothing to decide whether “calm” is being said in more limited senses and hence equivocally of people and

⁴⁸ White, *Talking about God*, 57.

weather, or is being said in a general, proportional sense and hence univocally of people and weather.

It must be admitted that it is rather difficult to spell out a definition of what “calmness” consists in which applies equally well to both the weather and people. For example, “Stillness” seems properly applied to the air but metaphorical if applied to a person’s mental state, and “peaceful” sounds to my ear properly applied to a person but metaphorical or in some other way derivative if applied to the weather. Because it is difficult to arrive at a clearly literal and univocal definition of the term “calm,” this might seem to suggest that the word “calm” really has no literal and univocal sense which applies both to people and to the weather.

But in recognizing the proportional analogy “calm weather is to the air as a calm mind is to a person,” we just *are* recognizing these two relationships as having something in common. The fact that we recognize a proportional relationship underlying our varied uses of the word “calm” *proves* that we recognize some relation common to those different uses, because a proportionality just *is* a shared relation between two relationships. The difficulty is just that this “something in common” is rather abstract. I propose the following as an initial stab at a univocal analysis: something which is calm displays fewer major changes in a given time period than average for the sort of thing it is. If we didn’t implicitly recognize *something* like this abstract similarity between calmness of minds and calmness of seas, we would not recognize those things as proportional at all. And given that we do recognize some common relational property between the different things described as “calm,” there is no reason not to simply take the word “calm” to *mean* that relational property. Thus, as White argues, we can univocally refer to calm people and calm weather, despite the fact that our concept of “calm” is based on proportional analogy.

However, White is not arguing that there are *no* cases in which we can distinguish between univocal and equivocal uses of words. It's just that this distinction can only be made within a particular context which determines the matter. For example, the word "wing" originally referred to a part of the body of a bird or other flying animal. We now use the word "wing" to refer to analogous structures on planes, and to any structure with certain aerodynamic properties, such as the wing on a maple seed. Sometimes, a particular context of discussion *does* fix a determinate sense of the word. For example, if I am speaking of a plane's "wing," then unless I am speaking figuratively, the word does not have the sense "the organ of flight in an animal," and if I say that the wings are my favorite part of a chicken to eat, my use of the term "wing" does not imply that these structures have the aerodynamic properties characteristic of wings in the functional sense of that term. Thus, the word "wing" is used equivocally between those two contexts. But if I tell a child that the robin's wings are what enable it to fly, nothing determines whether I am saying "wing" univocally or equivocally with the sense in which a plane's wings are what enable it to fly, because either interpretation of my utterance makes sense. And so there is no determinate answer to the general question of whether the word "wing" as said of a bird has the same sense as the word "wing" as said of a plane. The question can be answered in some particular contexts, but it is fruitless to ask independently of any particular context whether the word "wing" is said univocally of plane wings and bird wings.

White makes the above point specifically with respect to cases of supposed polysemy grounded in proportional analogies. However, the same point applies equally well to any case of polysemy grounded in similarity, whether proportional or simple. It is more difficult to find a real-world example illustrating this point in the case of simple similarities, because simple

similarities generally entail proportional similarities, and hence there are few examples of truly non-proportional similarities. But consider this invented example: Suppose a given society has words for “red” and “yellow” but has no word for “orange,” and in fact no one in this society has ever seen anything orange. They have never mixed red and yellow things together to produce the color orange, and for some mysterious reason, even the sky over their homeland never displays the color orange at sunrise or sunset. Then one day someone carries in an orange object and asks these people what color it is. Suppose that some people answer, “red,” and that the linguistic practice that arises once orange objects become commonplace is to call orange objects “red.”

We can interpret this practice in one of two ways. On one interpretation, the Orange-Deprivees’ normal use of the word “red” has the same sense as our word “red,” but since they originally lacked a word for orange, they began to use the word “red” in a new, derivative sense to mean “orange,” on the basis of the similarity this new color bears to the color red. Thus, when they use the same word for orange things as for red things, they are speaking equivocally. On the other interpretation, the Orange-Deprivees’ word “red” now means the entire spectrum of color from red to orange, and so their use of the word “red” does *not* have the same sense as our word “red.” Instead, they use their word “red” univocally for both red and orange things, but equivocally with our use of the word “red.” Outside of some particular context which could settle the matter, there is no principled way to decide between these two interpretations of the Orange-Deprivees’ use of the word “red.”

The upshot of this story is the same as in the case of “calm.” If the relation between the two purportedly different senses of a word is a relation based on *similarity*, whether proportional or simple, then it must be based on some particular *respect* in which the things referred to by

those two purportedly different senses of the word are similar, i.e. on some shared S-property. And if this is so, it is equally plausible to interpret that word as having, not two related senses, but *one* sense which applies to all things which share that S-property.⁴⁹ In cases of polysemy in which the relationship between the different senses is *not* grounded in similarity, but in some other relation—for example, in the case of the word “healthy” as said both of animals and of a diet which is such as to promote animal health—we can distinguish clearly different senses. But if the ontological relation which grounds the use of the same word for two things is one of similarity, then we can interpret those uses of the word as univocal, or at least could construct a sense of the word which applies univocally to both.

Thus whether a purportedly “analogical” word is in fact analogical or simply univocal can only be determined in some particular context in which something hangs on that distinction. If in the course of one argument, I at one point take something’s being a “wing” to denote a certain property *p*, and then a little while later I take something’s being a “wing” to denote a different property *q* which is incompatible with *p*, then we can conclude that I have used the word in two different senses. But we can answer the question of whether the word is being used univocally or equivocally only when it is being employed in such a context. And this will be so for all cases in which a word’s different senses are related by virtue of similarity.

What this seems to entail is that there is no answer to a question of the general form, “Is ‘W’ said univocally of God and creatures?” As I noted earlier, if we are to take a claim like “God is wise” to be an analogical claim, it must be in some sense that entails an actual *similarity* (even

⁴⁹ In fact, all else being equal it is more reasonable to interpret such words as having one sense rather than two, by virtue of the Gricean principle that one ought not unnecessarily multiply senses. See Paul Grice, “Further Notes on Logic and Conversation,” in *Studies in the Way of Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 47-50.

if a proportional rather than direct one) between God and wise creatures. Thus if words like “wise” have different senses when said of God than they have when said of creatures, these different senses must be related by virtue of similarity. But as I have just argued, whenever a word has two different senses which are related by virtue of similarity, it is possible to instead posit *one* sense of that word which *univocally* applies to all things which are similar in that particular respect. And so this suggests that the whole idea of claiming that certain words are *in general* said non-univocally of God and creatures is confused.

However, one might object that the case of speaking about God is supposed to be rather special, because, as I have already noted, many theologians and philosophers have wanted to say that some or perhaps all of the things believers say about God are *irreducibly* analogical. As David Burrell notes,

the most promising of the traditional statements on “analogy” emphatically deny the presence of a single common property, for the usage they sought to explain could not be restricted by a “something common” clause. We need not imply that God and Socrates share any features when we call them both just. If we could find anything identifiably common, analogy would prove superfluous.⁵⁰

The claim that we speak analogically of God would be trivial and uninteresting—and hence quite useless for solving any serious theological or philosophical difficulties—if all that meant was that we *tend* to speak analogically of God, but could explain our analogical claims non-analogically if we wanted to. If the doctrine of analogy is to have any force, it must consist in the claim that at least some of the things believers want to say about God *cannot* be said other than analogically.⁵¹

⁵⁰ David Burrell, *Analogy and Philosophical Language* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), 19.

⁵¹ By describing an analogy as “irreducible,” I mean in particular that its *cognitive content* cannot be expressed non-analogically. Paraphrasing an analogical claim non-analogically will of course alter other aspects of its significance, such as its associative and connotative content, its motivational or emotional force, and the like.

Thus, one who takes “analogically” to mean “non-univocally” should assert that certain words said of God have senses irreducibly non-univocal with any creaturely sense. For example, if “wise” is one such irreducibly analogical word, then not only does “wise” have a different sense when said (truly) of God than it ever has when said (truly) of any creature, but the divine sense of the word cannot be explained or paraphrased except in other terms which are also non-univocal with their creaturely senses.

Once we note that words said analogically of God are supposed to be *irreducibly* analogical, it might seem that White’s objection no longer applies. The problem described above was that the question of whether a given word has the same sense or different senses when said of some x and y has no general answer. Instead it will have the same sense when said of x and y in some contexts, a different sense when said of x than when said of y in some other contexts, and will be indeterminate between those interpretations in still other contexts. But if there is such a thing as *irreducible* analogy—that is, such a thing as irreducible *non-univocity*—then there are cases in which the answer to that question is not context-dependent in this way. If the word “wise” as said of God is irreducibly non-univocal with its creaturely senses, then there *will* be a general answer to the question of whether “wise” is said in the same sense of God and anything else, because no matter the context, the sense will *always* be different when applied (truly) to God than when applied (truly) to anything else.

3.4 The impossibility of irreducible non-univocity

The problem with the above response is that it is not possible for any word or predicate to be irreducibly non-univocal.⁵² And so, if our topic is to be *irreducible* analogy, we had best not define analogy as a form of non-univocity.

Consider a claim of the form “God is P.” The expression P could be either a single word or a longer predicative term like “creator of the universe.” Of course, there are predicative statements about God which do not take the form “God is P”—for instance, the sentence “God created the universe”—but any such statements can be rephrased to take the form “God is P” (e.g. “God is the creator of the universe”).

On what seems to me the most natural interpretation, ‘P’ is non-univocal⁵³ in the sentence “God is P” if

Criterion 1: ‘P’ has one or more creaturely senses, and none of its creaturely senses applies *truly* to God.

Two clarifications: First, by “creaturely sense” here I mean any sense a word has which applies truly to any non-divine thing. Second, one could hold that words cannot be predicated even *falsely* of God in their creaturely senses, but instead that they are *meaningless* or nonsensical when applied to God by virtue of constituting some kind of category mistake. I will not attempt

⁵² Alston argues that it is not possible for any word or predicate to be irreducibly *non-literal* in “Irreducible Metaphors in Theology.” Given the way talk of analogy and metaphor often confusedly overlap in theological and philosophical discussions, my claim here might thus sound familiar. But in fact, my topic is rather different. Alston shows that it is impossible for any claim to be irreducibly metaphorical, because any concept can in principle serve as the *literal* meaning of a word, and thus the only way for a metaphor to be irreducible to literal expression would be for it to lack conceptual content. However, Alston’s point does not prove that irreducibly *non-univocal* claims are impossible. For a term to be non-univocal is for it to have a different sense, when said of God, than when said of any creature. Thus, if we formulate a concept which applies only to God, but not to any creature, the word used to express this concept will be non-univocal, even if it is being employed literally.

⁵³ That is, non-univocal with any of *p*’s *creaturely* senses. When discussing words said of God, I will use “non-univocal” as a shorthand for “non-univocal with any creaturely sense.”

to settle which of those two views is correct; on the above definition ‘P’ will count as non-univocal if its (univocal) application to God results either in falsehood or in meaninglessness.

Given this definition of non-univocity, ‘P’ is then *irreducibly* non-univocal if it also meets this second criterion:

Criterion 2: It is impossible to paraphrase ‘P’ in a way which preserves its propositional content except via expressions which are also non-univocal.

Suppose a given word like “wise” is said non-univocally of God. What it means to assert that this non-univocity is irreducible is that it is either impossible to paraphrase or explain what it means to say “God is wise” at all, or that it is impossible to paraphrase or explain what it means to say “God is wise” except by using *other* terms which are *also* said non-univocally of God and creatures. If I think the claim “God is wise” is irreducibly non-univocal, I could allow that it is possible to somehow analyze or paraphrase it in other terms—perhaps as “God knows all truths perfectly and is perfectly just.” But I will be committed to thinking that any such paraphrase still includes some words (perhaps “knows” or “just”) which are themselves being used in senses different from any of their creaturely senses, and that there is no way to analyze such claims down far enough that we can escape this reliance on the uses of creaturely words in something other than their creaturely senses.

The above account seems to me the most natural account of what it could mean to say that a certain claim includes a word which is irreducibly non-univocal. But no claim or word could be irreducibly non-univocal in the way I have just described. The reason is that for any claim of the form “God is P” combined with the qualifier, “but ‘P’ is not said univocally of God,” it will be possible to paraphrase that claim univocally by working the qualifier into the main claim.

For example, suppose that when I say a word is said non-univocally of God, what I mean is that the word is said “analogically” as defined by Richard Swinburne. On Swinburne’s definition, a word ‘W’ used analogically has its meaning broadened, so that to be ‘W’ in an analogical sense, something need not meet all the normal criteria for being ‘W,’ and as a result, not all the inferences that normally follow from something’s being ‘W’ are valid. Nonetheless, things (correctly) called ‘W’ in this new sense must still resemble the standard examples of ‘W’ things more than they resemble the standard examples of ‘not-W’ things.⁵⁴ Thus for any statement “God is P” which we take to be analogical in the above Swinburnean sense, we can clarify our assertion “God is P” with something like the following qualifier:

. . . but the word ‘P’ in that sentence has a loosened meaning, such that a thing said to be ‘P’ in this sense does not need to meet all the normal criteria for being ‘P,’ but only needs to resemble standard examples of ‘P’ things more than standard examples of not-‘P’ things.

Once I have thus specified what I *mean* by saying that a certain word is being said analogically, I am now in a position to reduce any analogical statement to univocity by the simple procedure of working the Swinburnean qualifier directly into the assertion. What I mean by saying, “God is wise, but ‘wise’ in that statement is analogical,” is

(13) God may not meet all the normal criteria for being wise, but God resembles the standard examples of wise things more than standard examples of not-wise things.

If one is committed to thinking that God is wise, but that the word “wise” is said analogically of God, and *if* one accepts the Swinburnean account of what it means for a term to be used analogically, then (13) asserts *precisely* the same thing that “God is wise” asserts on a Swinburnean analogical interpretation. But (13) uses the term “wise” only in its ordinary,

⁵⁴ Swinburne, *Coherence of Theism*, 58-60.

creaturely sense. By building the qualifiers from the account of analogical meaning directly into the claim about God itself, I make it possible to assert the same claim *without* using any word non-univocally.

Nor does this method work only if we are using a substantial analogical conception like Swinburne's. For example, suppose that when I qualify my utterance by adding that the term "wise" in "God is wise" is said non-univocally with any creaturely sense, what I mean by that is that the word "wise" does not have any of its creaturely senses—and that is all. That account of the "non-univocal" nature of speech about God would of course render the claim "God is wise" completely empty of content, but that is not the point. The point is this: once I have specified what I mean by saying that "wise" is non-univocal, it is now possible to reduce the claim to univocity simply by factoring that qualifier about what is meant by "wise" directly into the claim about God. On the above contentless account, what "God is wise" means is

(14) God is characterized by some predicate which is not that of being wise [in any creaturely sense of the word 'wise'].

or perhaps

(14*) God is something other than wise.

Again, all of the words in that sentence are being said in creaturely senses. Thus we have reduced the purportedly irreducibly non-univocal claim "God is wise" to univocity.

One might object that *other* words in the above paraphrases fail to apply truly to God in any of their creaturely senses—perhaps, for example, it is inappropriate to refer to God as "something." But if this is so, then that problem can be avoided either by more careful word choice or by a second application of the same strategy to the remaining problematic words. If there are cases in which neither of those strategies will work—if for example it is fundamentally

wrong to describe God as meeting some but not all criteria for belonging in a category, as Swinburne's definition requires—then that would be a problem with the Swinburnean account of analogy, and not a problem with my strategy of reduction.

The point is that *if* one wishes both to assert certain claims about God *and* to assert that some words in that claim one has asserted are non-univocal, one will need to have (at least implicitly) some position on what one *means* by the qualification that these words are said non-univocally of God. That position may be the Swinburnean one, or the minimalist one I describe, or neither of those but something else entirely. But *whatever* account one offers, that account will then enable us to paraphrase the non-univocal statement in univocal terms by incorporating the qualifiers built into the account of non-univocity back into the original claim about God. The only way to argue that *no* paraphrase of the sort I have offered above will suffice to reduce “God is wise” to non-univocity would be to assert, “God is wise,” and to assert that “wise” is said non-univocally in that sentence, but then to insist that there is no possible account to be given about what the claim that “‘wise’ is said non-univocally in that sentence” amounts to. But then either “God is wise” or “‘wise’ is said non-univocally in that sentence” fails to be a real assertion at all and is just empty babbling.

One may be tempted to respond as follows:

We do not *know* how to cash out the claim that words said of God are non-univocal any more concretely than “words said of God are non-univocal.” We know that ‘God is wise’ is not a purely empty claim, but we do not know what the relation *is* between the sense ‘wise’ has when said of God and the sense ‘wise’ has when said of creatures. So we cannot give any positive account of the meanings of words said non-univocally of God. But we know that we are to assert and believe that God is wise, and we should trust that those words in some way hint at the truth about God even if ‘God is wise’ is not strictly true if the word “wise” is taken in any of its normal senses.

In this way, one might attempt to reject my demand for an account of what the qualifier “. . . but the word ‘wise’ in that statement is said non-univocally” amounts to. However, any such objection would really just be positing yet a new alternative account of what it means to say that a word is said non-univocally of God. Our new account, as described by my imagined objector above, is that a predicate like “is wise” is not strictly true of God if taken any of its creaturely senses, but that the claim “God is wise” in some way “hints at” the truth about God and is what “we are to assert and believe.” But, having seen this, we can again reduce “God is wise” to univocity simply by incorporating this qualifier back into the claim. That will look something like this:

(15) It is not strictly true that God is wise [if the word “wise” is taken in any of its normal senses], but the claim that God is wise in some way hints at the truth about God, and it is to be asserted and believed.

This claim, or some more fully elaborated version of it, has the same cognitive content as the claim “God is wise” does on my imagined objector’s account of how that sentence should be interpreted, but all of the words in it are being said in their creaturely senses.

A second objection one might pose is that the above discussion assumes that it is only particular words or predicates within a claim that are non-univocal when applied to God. If that is the only problem, then it turns out that it is possible to paraphrase claims about God in a way which preserves their cognitive content but in which those words or predicates are being used univocally. However, one might object that the problem runs deeper than this. Perhaps it is impossible to speak univocally about God not merely because individual words or predicates applied to God have different senses than when said of creatures, but instead because it is wrong to predicate anything of God *at all*. Some medieval scholars argue that because God is radically

simple, *any* predication applied to God is inappropriate or strictly false because the application of predicates to God implies a distinction between subject and attribute which does not exist in God.⁵⁵ If this is so, then perhaps no predicate could possibly be univocal with its creaturely senses when applied to God. But if that is so, it seems that there is no possible way to eliminate such non-univocity, in which case the strategy I have outlined above would necessarily fail.

But even the radical medieval position just described could not undermine the possibility of univocal paraphrase of any meaningful claim made about God. For instance, the claim

(16) It is not true that God is wise, but the claim ‘God is wise’ bears some resemblance to a truth about God.

does not involve any direct application of a predicate to God (except in the first clause which *denies* the truth of such an application). But it would have the same content as the claim “God is wise” on a certain plausible interpretation of what that means. The only way to block any possibility of any such paraphrase would be to insist that even purely negative claims like

(17) It is not the case that God is wise

and indirect claims like

(18) Wise people bear some resemblance to God by virtue of their wisdom

are all necessarily false, even though they do not positively apply any predicate terms to God. Perhaps one might think such claims are still problematic because they *imply* the application of predicates to God even though they do not explicitly apply any predicates to God. But if one were to press the view that far, it would no longer be correct to say that the problem with our sentences about God had anything to do with words being said *non-univocally*. If even sentences like (17) and (18) are inappropriately said of God, it cannot be because words said of God are

⁵⁵ This is Maimonides’s view; see, e.g., *The Guide of the Perplexed* 1:50.

said in *different senses* than their normal creaturely senses. No, on this radical divine simplicity view, anything said of God will always in principle be false and would be no matter what senses the words had, even if those senses were senses inconceivable by human minds. On this view, the problem is not with creaturely senses of words; the problem is with predication itself. And so this view is no objection to the claim that all cases of non-univocity can be reduced to univocity.

The strategy for “reduction” I have outlined above would likely sound foolishly superficial if employed as a refutation of someone’s claim that the word “wise” is irreducibly analogical when said of God. By following the procedure I have described, one may eliminate the need to use any particular *word* non-univocally, but there is an intuitive sense in which the procedure does absolutely nothing to reduce the fundamentally analogical nature of what is being expressed. A claim like “It is not strictly true that God is wise, but the claim that God is wise bears some resemblance to the truth about God” seems intuitively like a paradigm case of an analogical assertion—and certainly the heart of the claim is an assertion of analogy in the ontological sense (i.e. similarity). But the superficiality of my method is part of the point. The superficial strategy of reduction described above can successfully eliminate non-univocity because non-univocity is a superficial criterion—too superficial, it seems to me, to be the ultimate criterion for capturing what it means to say that someone is “speaking analogically,” or for addressing non-superficial problems such as how it is possible to speak truly about God.

Nonetheless, the failure of the account of “irreducible non-univocity” attempted above may suggest a second possible way to make sense of the idea of irreducible non-univocity. In my discussion above, I assumed that for a predicate to be irreducibly non-univocal, it would have to be said of God in some sense other than any of its creaturely senses, and would also have to be

unable to be paraphrased except in ways which also included at least one word said in some sense other than any of its creaturely senses. If that is what “irreducible non-univocity” means, then there is no such thing. But perhaps there is a different way to interpret the phrase.

It’s worth noting that when I reduced the claim “God is wise” to univocity in (13) through (15) above, I was still forced to use the word “wise.” I reduced the claim to univocity by arranging things so I could use the word only in its normal sense, but I was not able to *eliminate* the word “wise” from the sentence. There does not seem to be a way to paraphrase the sentence “God is wise” by my reductive method without using this word “wise,” despite the fact that we are taking that word not to apply to God in any creaturely sense. So I have shown that we can express what is meant by “God is wise” without using any word in anything other than its creaturely sense—but it remains true that we are forced to *use* a word like “wise,” which does not apply univocally to God, in expressing that truth about God. The fact that we can rephrase the sentence so it is not *directly* applying that word to God (non-univocally) seems less important than the fact that the word itself *does not apply univocally*, and yet is essential to the assertion.

And this rather striking fact suggests an alternative criterion and an alternate possible account of irreducible non-univocity. Rather than defining irreducible non-univocity as a case in which we cannot eliminate *the application of a word to God in a sense not univocal with any creaturely sense*, we can instead define it as a case in which we cannot eliminate *the use of a word which does not apply to God in any univocal sense to describe God*. On this second account, these are the criteria for some predicate ‘P’ being irreducibly non-univocal when said of God:

Criterion 1: ‘P’ has one or more creaturely senses, and none of its creaturely senses applies *truly* to God.

New Criterion 2: There is a claim believers wish to make about God which cannot be made without using 'P' or some synonym for 'P' constituting part of the content of what is being said about God.

On this second definition, we have kept Criterion 1, but altered Criterion 2, which is the criterion which defines the *irreducibility* of irreducible non-univocity. By this new definition, my paraphrases in (13) through (15) would *not* count as having reduced the claim "God is wise" to univocity, because they all continue, by necessity, to employ the word "wise" in their paraphrases of the claim "God is wise," despite the fact that (we'll assume for the sake of argument) the word "wise" does not apply to God in any creaturely sense.

But in fact, it is a simple matter to reduce this second kind of non-univocity to univocity as well, because the word "wise" *can* be done away with. All we need to do is to invent a new word—say, "argledorf," and define it as meaning "wise, in a sense non-univocal with any of its creaturely senses," or "not strictly speaking wise but resembling the standard instances of wise things more than standard instances of non-wise things" or "a property which is not wisdom, but which is similar to wisdom, in unknown respects," etc. Whereas my first strategy for reduction involved working the qualifiers from the account of analogical meaning into the proposition we were asserting about God, this second strategy for reduction involves working those same qualifiers into the *definition* of a new word, which will then be used to describe God.

One might object that this method has not truly eliminated the use of the term "wise" since one must still use that term (or a synonymous word or phrase) in order to define or fix the meaning of the term "argledorf." But the mere fact that the definition of a given word must necessarily appeal to some other term (or at least to a synonym of it) does not make it a non-univocal word. I could not define the term "helmet" without appealing to the word "head" (or

some synonym, or some other way of referring to the head), because a helmet is by definition something worn on the head, but that doesn't make "helmet" a non-univocal term.

Furthermore, it is not even true that the term "wise" (or some synonym) would need to be used in order to fix the meaning of our new word "argledorf." We can imagine that rather than people first establishing the word "wise" and then defining the term "argledorf" in terms of the word "wise," it would be possible for a society to instead begin with the term "argledorf." In every case in which we now might use the term "wise," we would instead say that the person was "such as to faintly resemble the argledorfness of God." Only God, it will be said, is argledorf; no human being is argledorf at all—not even a little bit. But human beings with a certain quality, which we can teach others to recognize by pointing out examples, are said to very faintly resemble God's argledorfness in a way we do not understand. In this scenario, the word "argledorf" is not being used non-univocally of God in our second sense. Of course, even in this scenario, there is still a *conceptual dependence*: even if the term "argledorf" has never been defined in terms of "wisdom," it is still the case that one's conception of the property of argledorfness would have to be based on a prior, more immediate understanding of the human property which we call "wisdom" and on the claim that there is some relation of similarity between that and argledorfness. But conceptual dependence is not non-univocity.

The word "argledorf" is not being used non-univocally in the above example; it has only one sense, and that sense applies properly to God. One might feel vaguely that this term *seems* non-univocal, but if so, that is merely because talk of non-univocity has often, in discussions of religious language, stood in for a different concept: conceptual dependence on the concept of similarity.

3.5 A continued role for the concept of non-univocity

Thus there is no such thing as irreducible non-univocity. For any non-univocal use of a word, there is some fact about the relation it has to other uses of the word, and we can replace the non-univocal use of the word with a univocal expression simply by incorporating into it a description of that relation. For this reason, defining analogical speech as a form of non-univocity can be misleading and can introduce numerous unnecessary confusions into the topic.

However, so long as we are self-conscious about the limitations of this way of speaking, we don't need to reject talk of analogy as non-univocity altogether. Although there is no such thing as irreducible non-univocity, we can still formulate a coherent and useful concept of "irreducible analogy" which employs a criterion of non-univocity. We can define irreducibly analogical uses of words as words which are used non-univocally, where that non-univocity cannot be reduced or eliminated *except* by appeals to similarity such as those I describe in my own original definition of analogy. On this definition, if the only way I can reduce the claim "God is wise" to univocity is by paraphrasing it as (for example) "God is such that wise creatures resemble him by virtue of their wisdom," then while that claim can be reduced to univocity, it is still irreducibly analogical, because the only way to reduce it to univocity involves making explicit the appeal to similarity which was previously implicit. This definition of irreducible analogy is equivalent to my own preferred definition of irreducibly analogical speech as speech which makes an irreducible appeal to similarity.

A claim which is said non-univocally, where that claim cannot be reduced to univocity except by adding an explicit appeal to similarity, is an irreducibly analogical claim. If we thus supplement the notion of univocity with this idea of irreducible appeal to similarity, we can now

sensibly speak of cases in which a certain word simply *has* a different sense when said of God than when said of anything else. The argument I developed on the basis of White's point suggested that it makes no sense to ask whether a word is said in a different sense of *x* than of *y* in general, because that question can only be answered within specific contexts. However, if some words said of God are *irreducibly* analogical, then it will be true in *all* contexts that those words have a different sense when said of God than when said of any creature, and White's point will pose no problem for that way of speaking. So as long as we recognize the essential role played by appeals to similarity in the concept of analogical speech about God, we can still sensibly say that "wise" is said in a different sense of God than of creatures, *in general*.

The reason this works is that talk of non-univocity often serves as a stand-in for talk of appeals to similarity, and it works fairly well as such a stand-in. To say that God and Socrates are wise "in different senses" is generally meant to indicate that the property God has is not the *same* property we ordinarily call "wisdom," but instead a property which is importantly *similar*. If God had the *same* property "wisdom" that we ascribe to Socrates when we call Socrates "wise," then God would be wise in the *same* sense—and so if we could describe God as "wise" *without* any appeal to similarity, then God would be wise "in the same sense" as Socrates is wise. On the other hand, if the believer didn't take God to have a property (even if only a proportional or abstract or formal property) *similar* to the one we ascribe to Socrates when we call Socrates "wise," then it wouldn't make sense to describe God as "wise" at all. And thus talk of "different senses" or of "non-univocity" serves pretty well in general to indicate analogical speech—that is, to indicate speech that appeals implicitly to claims of similarity. As I have shown above, this talk of "different senses" or of "non-univocity" does not *perfectly* indicate the phenomenon of

analogical speech. When we press on that traditional “different senses” definition of analogy, problems arise, and the concept turns out not to be fully adequate for our purposes. But so long as we bear in mind that talk of different senses is really shorthand for more rigorous talk of appeals to similarity, it will do no harm to use it as a shorthand.

It may seem surprising that I want to make space for talk of analogy in terms of non-univocity at all, given how much time I have spent criticizing the definition of analogical speech which makes it primarily a matter of non-univocity. The best and most perspicuous way to talk about analogical speech in the context of religion is as speech that appeals to similarity; appeals to non-univocity are *at best* roundabout ways of getting at the same thing. However, now that we have cleared away all the potential confusions associated with the common definition of analogy as non-univocity, the truth is that it is simply very convenient to talk of words being said of God and of creatures in different senses, especially since that is such a common way of speaking. So, since there is a way to employ that way of speaking clearly and consistently (given a few caveats), I will use it.

It is also useful to realize that my own account of analogical speech as speech that appeals to similarity turns out not to be extremely different from the traditional account of analogical speech as a mid-point between univocity and equivocity. Analogy as non-univocity has sometimes served as a slightly confused or imprecise way of talking about analogy in *my* sense of the term, but it has only been *able* to serve that role because it has commonalities with my definition. The analysis I offer above is an analysis about what we would *have* to mean if we wanted to cash analogy out as a matter of non-univocity but also still also take there to be such a thing as irreducible analogy. As such, I think the analysis I offer above is an analysis of the

conception implicit in much talk of analogy which cashes it out as a matter of non-univocity. And that conception turns out to be essentially equivalent to my own similarity-based account of analogical speech. I, and others⁵⁶ who cash analogy out as a way of speaking which appeals to similarity, are not discussing a different *topic* from those who cash it out in terms of univocity—at least, not in many cases.

4. Conclusion

On the account I have offered, analogical speech is speech which either directly asserts or implicitly appeals to a claim of similarity. It's not the use of a word non-univocally that makes a claim analogical; rather, it's a dependence on an appeal to similarity which makes a claim analogical. Furthermore, to say that words said of God are analogical is *not* to deny that there are shared properties between God and creatures: there must be shared S-properties between God and creatures, or else God and creatures would not be similar at all, and then it would not be possible to speak either univocally *or* analogically about God. Thus, in asserting that at least some claims about God are irreducibly analogical, what I am asserting is not primarily a linguistic claim, and it is also not primarily an ontological claim. Rather, it is most fundamentally a claim about our *epistemic* situation: it is the claim that human beings cannot understand God as he is, but only in terms of other things God is said to be similar to.

⁵⁶ See for example William Alston, who defines an analogical account of speech about God as one according to which “the literal meaning of the terms bear some analogy to what is true of God, but . . . we are unable to say explicitly just what the respect(s) of analogy are.” William P. Alston, “Religious Language,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion*, ed. William J. Wainwright (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 239. Woodbridge O. Johnson similarly takes analogy to involve speaking about one thing in terms of its similarity to something previously known. Woodbridge O. Johnson, *Analogy and the Problem of God's Personality* (Parkville, MO: Park College Press, 1955), 15-22.

Ultimately, the source of irreducible analogy in speech is *ignorance* or *incomprehension*. If I understand what something is, and what I wish to say about it, I can express my meaning non-analogically. If I speak analogically, but understand fully what I am saying, I will be able to eliminate the appeal to similarity by simply naming the S-properties I want to ascribe to my subject directly. Where appeals to similarity are irreducible, it is because we believe there is a similarity but do not know, or perhaps are not even able to conceive of, the property in virtue of which that similarity holds.

Chapter 2: Why Analogy?

Although the doctrine of analogy has remained central to Catholic theology, appeals to analogy have waned in popularity outside of Thomistic circles. Arguments within the philosophy of religion generally assume, either explicitly or implicitly, that almost all claims about God are either said in their ordinary well-understood senses, or else can be explained using other words in their ordinary well-understood senses. Where analytic philosophers *do* appeal to analogy, it is usually in a way which gives analogy a minor, peripheral role. For example, Richard Swinburne asserts that those terms attaching *personal* attributes to God must be understood as irreducibly analogical. But, Swinburne cautions, “The ‘analogical sense’ card is a legitimate one . . . but it must not be played too often.”¹ Accordingly, the core of Swinburne’s description of God is a long list of univocal predicates.

Similarly, William Alston acknowledges a certain role for analogical speech, but on his view, the work of theology largely takes place in the realm of *reducibly* analogical or partially univocal claims which we can analyze into clearly understood terms. He then acknowledges that there is something “left over,” and hence that there is some call for “metaphorical, symbolic, model-dependent speech” even after the functionalist reductions he proposes.² Like Swinburne, Alston appeals to analogy as something of a last resort, at the edges of a theological account whose fundamental core is univocal.

My project in this dissertation is not the theological project of arguing that many claims about God *are* irreducibly analogical, but only the more abstract philosophical project of arguing

¹ Swinburne, *Coherence of Theism*, 70.

² Alston, “Religious Language,” 242.

that that theological claim is a coherent one which would not destroy the possibility of contentful religious faith. But particularly in light of the willingness of so many who write about God to do *without* that theological claim, we need some sense of why one might want to assert it at all.

Why ought a theist to think that all, or any, claims about God are irreducibly analogical?

The reasons why one ought to adopt an analogical interpretation of one's theological claims depends on what sort of theology one accepts. Classical theism, on which God is understood as the absolute source of reality, absolutely simple, impassible, timeless, and necessarily existent, is generally taken to entail a strong version of the doctrine of analogy.³ But while classical theism still has its adherents, especially among philosophers in the Thomistic tradition, contemporary philosophers of religion and contemporary religious laypeople alike are more likely to hold to a "personalist" or "individualist" theology⁴ on which God is a concrete individual being, is not radically simple in any paradoxical way, does not exist necessarily, has a temporal rather than timeless existence, and perhaps even changes and experiences emotions.

Accordingly, I will follow a two-pronged approach in arguing for the value of an analogical theology. First, while I do not wish to defend every aspect of the classical tradition, I will argue that the widespread contemporary rejection of certain key doctrines of classical theism

³Generally, but not universally: John Duns Scotus is surely a classical theist, but he insists that the main claims made about God are all univocal. He secures this outcome in part by a more moderate interpretation of certain classical doctrines, especially the doctrine of simplicity. He also, it seems to me, overlooks some of the very serious reasons even his own theology would offer for thinking that univocal language will not cut it—but it would take me too far afield to discuss that here.

⁴Classical theism has other competitors, of course, perhaps most notably the process theism of Whitehead and Hartshorne. But to avoid overcomplication, the argument in this chapter will be aimed at those forms of non-classical theism currently popular among analytic philosophers of religion, i.e. individualist forms of theism. However, the process theist's conception of a God who undergoes change over time and who is affected by creatures has had a major influence on the development of "open theism," a particularly strong form of individualist theology. My criticisms of certain ideas central to open theism will thus implicitly serve as criticisms of process theology as well, though I will not spell those connections out explicitly.

has been a mistake, and that there are important religious reasons to retain those doctrines. If we do so, we will then be committed to a strong doctrine of analogy on which almost everything said about God is irreducibly analogical. Second, recognizing that not every theist will be convinced by my defense of a classical or quasi-classical conception of God, I will argue that even the individualist theist has good reason to think that some of the things we say about God are irreducibly analogical.

1. A global argument for analogy: The classical conception of God

Classical theism conceives of God as the absolute source of all reality, simple, timeless, necessarily existent, immutable, and impassible. This picture was dominant during the medieval era in Christian, Jewish, and Muslim theology alike. Today, many theologians and philosophers have abandoned classical theism in favor of more individualist theologies, but classical theism still has its proponents, especially (though not exclusively) among Catholic scholars writing in the Thomistic tradition.⁵ The fundamental premise of classical theology is that God is the absolute source of everything that exists and is dependent on absolutely nothing for his own existence and nature. I will follow Plantinga in calling this the “sovereignty-aseity intuition.”⁶ From this premise, the other more specific doctrines of classical theism can be derived.

⁵ A few of the contemporary scholars whose work argues for broadly classical theological views are David Burrell, Brian Davies, Norman Kretzmann, Brian Leftow, Katherin Rogers, Eleonore Stump, Kathryn Tanner, and Mark Wynn.

⁶ Alvin Plantinga, “Does God Have a Nature?,” in *The Analytic Theist: An Alvin Plantinga Reader*, ed. James F. Sennett (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), 231. Plantinga takes this initially appealing intuition to lead to incoherence, and thus argues that we should reject it, at least in its strong form. I will address the accusation of incoherence in a later section.

For example, one central doctrine of classical theism is the doctrine that God exists necessarily. One thing this doctrine entails is that God's existence is not caused by anything outside himself and does not depend on anything outside himself, and that God neither began to exist nor can ever cease to exist. But more than that, to say that God exists necessarily entails that God could not but have existed. If we comprehended God's nature, we would be able to deduce from that nature that any being with that nature *must* exist. The ontological argument takes this principle a step further and actually performs this deduction from truths about God's nature to the conclusion that God exists, but one need not think such a deduction is possible in order to accept the doctrine that God exists necessarily.⁷ The claim that God exists necessarily is the claim that it is metaphysically impossible for God not to have existed, or to put it in a modern idiom, that there is no possible world in which God does not exist.⁸

That God exists necessarily follows from the sovereignty-aseity intuition.⁹ By the principle of sufficient reason, all contingent things have some cause or explanation for their existence. If God's existence were contingent, then the fact that he exists would have to be

⁷ For example, Aquinas takes God to be a necessary being, but does not think the ontological argument is sound (*ST* 1 q. 2 a. 1 ad. 2). Aquinas argues that we could prove God's existence from his nature only if we first understood God's nature, but that we do not have such an understanding: "we cannot know what God is" (*ST* 1 q. 3 pr.).

⁸ Depending on how one interprets possible-world talk, this idiom may be inadequate or misleading here. David Armstrong, for example, defines possible worlds in such a way that there is no such thing as a completely empty possible world, i.e. a possible world in which there are absolutely no existing things (*A Combinatorial Theory of Possibility* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989], 63-64). This conclusion comes merely as a result of his particular framework for understanding possible worlds, which he conceives as fictions; it is not the conclusion of any metaphysical proof of the *impossibility* of there having been nothing whatsoever. And so, even if we were to agree that there are no "possible worlds" in which God does not exist, on an Armstrongian framework, that would still seem to leave open one possibility: that there had existed nothing whatsoever, including God. If God exists necessarily, this too is impossible. I take the nominalist position that possible-world talk is simply a convenient way of talking about possibility, so in saying that there is no possible world in which God does not exist, I mean to rule out as metaphysically impossible a world in which nothing whatsoever exists.

⁹ The sovereignty-aseity intuition is perhaps not the only reason for holding that God exists necessarily, however. An equally important basis for this claim comes from the kalam cosmological argument for God's existence, which deduces the existence of a necessarily existing being from the existence of contingent beings. See Peter Adamson, "From the Necessary Existent to God," in *Interpreting Avicenna: Critical Essays*, ed. Peter Adamson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013) for an analysis of this argument in the philosophy of Avicenna.

caused or explained by something other than himself, in which case God would be dependent on that other thing. And a being dependent on something else for its existence is no God at all. Thus God's existence must be necessary, and not by virtue of anything outside himself, but solely in virtue of his own nature.¹⁰ Contemporary readers might, to avoid this conclusion, prefer instead to abandon the principle of sufficient reason and posit that God's existence has no cause or explanation of any kind.¹¹ But this position seems also to involve at least a weakening of the sovereignty-aseity intuition, as it means that there is at least one existing thing that God is not the source or explanation of: himself.

A second key doctrine of classical theism is the doctrine that God is absolutely simple. This doctrine too derives from the sovereignty-aseity intuition: God *must* be simple if he is not to be dependent on something other than himself for his existence or nature. At the very least, God cannot have physical parts, or his existence would depend on the existence of those parts, and God cannot have a distinction between form and matter, or his existence would depend on the existence of the matter which made him up.¹² Famously, many classical theists go further than that, and assert that there is no compositionality of any kind in God—that there is no distinction in God between essence and existence, or between subject and attribute, or, accordingly, between different attributes.¹³ Avicenna's reason for denying this latter form of composition is that any

¹⁰ See *ST* 1 q. 3 a. 4, in which Aquinas gives essentially this argument for why God's existence and God's essence must be the same. This claim amounts to the claim that God exists necessarily, for if God's essence *is* his existence, then his nature quite obviously necessitates that he exists.

¹¹ This is the position taken in John Hick, Alvin Plantinga, and Richard Swinburne. See John Hick, "God as Necessary Being," *The Journal of Philosophy* 57, no. 22/23 (1960): 725–34; Alvin Plantinga, "Necessary Being," in *The Analytic Theist: An Alvin Plantinga Reader*, ed. James F. Sennett (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 214–24; and Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*, 267. I will discuss this position in more detail later in this chapter.

¹² See Avicenna, *Metaphysics* 1.7.

¹³ Among medieval scholars, this doctrine is affirmed by Augustine (*City of God* 11:10), Avicenna (*Metaphysics* 7.4), Aquinas (*ST* 1 q.3), Maimonides (*Guide* 1:50), and Anselm (*Monologion* 17), among others. Others affirm that God is simple, but do not embrace the more radical interpretation of that claim described here. For example, Duns

form of multiplicity in a being requires a cause: if for instance God were *both necessary and* had some other attribute, and these were different properties, the fact that those two different things were united in one being would require a cause.¹⁴

The other doctrines distinctive of classical theism as opposed to personalistic theology also seem to follow, or at least seemed to medieval scholars to follow, from God's independence and aseity. That God is impassible—that God is not subject to emotions or pain—follows directly from the premise that God is not in any way dependent or contingent on anything other than himself. Augustine, among other medieval thinkers, argues that God must be timeless because time is one of the things God creates: to think that God had a temporal existence would render God's existence dependent on something other than himself, namely time. Contemporary readers might perhaps doubt that "time" constitutes an independently existing entity, such that it makes sense to speak of God as dependent on it, but even if we reject that particular implication of Augustine's argument, to think of God as having temporal existence causes other difficulties for the sovereignty-aseity principle. For example, if God exists in time, he presumably knows what time it is right *now*, for God is omniscient.¹⁵ But if so, this would mean that the contents of

Scotus argues that there is no *real* distinction in God, but argues that we must allow formal distinctions in God on pain of incoherence. See *Ordinatio* 1 d. 8 pt. 1 q. 4. Moreover, Averroes describes God as simple, but Barry Kogan argues that he cannot mean by this that God is a radically undifferentiated unity. Instead, in describing God as simple, Averroes primarily intends to deny that God is material, changeable, or composed of matter and form; he does not necessarily mean that there are no distinctions of any kind within God. See Barry Kogan, *Averroes and the Metaphysics of Causation* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985), 238-40.

¹⁴ Avicenna, *Metaphysics* 7.4; see also Adamson, "Necessary Existent to God," 182 for an analysis of this argument. Augustine offers a different argument for simplicity: if God were not identical with his attributes, he would have those attributes by *participation* the way creatures do, which would then render God both ontologically dependent on and simply inferior to those attributes themselves (Augustine, *De Trinitate* 5.11).

¹⁵ The question of whether God knows what time it is now comes from A. N. Prior, "The Formalities of Omniscience," *Philosophy* 37, no. 140 (1962): 114-29. Prior argues that God cannot be both omniscient and timeless, because a timeless being cannot know what time it is right now. But as William Lane Craig points out, God *could* be both omniscient and timeless so long as the B-theory of time is true. On a B-theory of time, all times are equally metaphysically real, and the "present" is simply the time one happens to be located at. If the B-theory is correct, God's failure to privilege the moment in time we now call "now" over all others would not be a failure of

God's knowledge change from moment to moment, and are dependent on the current status of things in the world. Thus only a timeless (and thus necessarily also immutable) being can be independent in the way the sovereignty-aseity intuition requires.

On the classical theistic understanding, God is radically transcendent and radically different from his creatures. The classical God is not merely the *first* being to exist, and one who did not need a cause the way other beings did. And the classical God is not merely *maximally* good and powerful in contrast to the limited goodness and power of creatures. If that were what God is, we would be able to speak of him univocally. But for classical theists, God is more absolutely transcendent in a way that seems to require that everything or almost everything we say about God must be said analogically—at best.¹⁶

Consider for example the doctrine of simplicity. If this doctrine is true in the stronger form endorsed by Augustine, Avicenna, Maimonides, and Aquinas, it rules out any possibility of speaking univocally about God. As Aquinas argues,

when we say that a man is wise, we signify his wisdom as something distinct from the other things about him—his essence, for example, his powers, or his existence. But when we use 'wise' when talking about God we do not intend to signify something distinct from his essence, power or existence. When we predicate 'wise' of a human being we, so to speak, circumscribe and define the limits of the aspect of human beings that it signifies. But this is not so when we predicate 'wise' of God So, it is clear that we do not use 'wise' in the same sense of God and people, and the same goes for all other words.¹⁷

When I say that some human being is wise, I am ascribing to her some distinct quality, and if I say that she is powerful, I am ascribing to her a different quality. But God does not have distinct

omniscience, but a natural consequence of it. William Lane Craig, "God and Real Time," *Religious Studies* 26, no. 3 (1990): 335–47.

¹⁶ Maimonides goes even further and insists that everything said about God is not merely analogical but entirely equivocal (*Guide* 1.56).

¹⁷ *ST* 1 q. 13 a. 5 resp.

qualities, and so I am not ascribing two different qualities to God if I say that God is wise and that God is powerful. The only way to make sense of this is to assert that “wise” and “powerful” do not mean the same thing when said of God as they do when said of anything else. Thus if God is utterly simple, no positive claim ascribing an intrinsic property to God could ever be both univocal and true. And so to accept the doctrine of simplicity commits one to the position that we can never speak about God except by analogy. For that matter, there is an interesting question about whether even *negative* or *extrinsic* claims about God could be both univocal and true if God were absolutely simple—but I will not pursue that question.

I have been rather hasty in both my explanation of the traditional doctrines of classical theology, and in my explanation of how this theology renders a doctrine of analogy necessary. I have also largely omitted from consideration the works of contemporary philosophers such as Eleonore Stump, Norman Kretzmann, Brian Davies, Brian Leftow, to name only a few, who have striven to re-interpret the classical doctrines and classical arguments in ways that do not rely on neo-Platonic metaphysical premises which are now widely rejected, and in ways more likely to harmonize with contemporary philosophical intuitions. The reason for this omission on my part is that, even were I to consider all the ways in which these arguments can be made more thorough and convincing, they would still not convince many contemporary theists. The classical theistic doctrine of analogy follows from the classical theistic doctrines about the nature of God, and the fundamental and controlling ideas about the nature of God in classical theism are those encapsulated in the sovereignty-aseity intuition. But personalistic and individualistic theists reject the sovereignty-aseity intuition, at least in the strong form in which it is endorsed by

classical theists. And most of the classical arguments about God's nature get no grip at all on anyone not strongly committed to that initial intuition.

Thus, in what follows, I will pursue a different strategy in arguing for a classical theism. I will offer several considerations which, to my mind, give ordinary contemporary religious believers a good reason to believe in certain elements of a classical theology. (I will not attempt to defend *all* of the classical doctrines.) My goal is to offer reasons which do not depend on one's having a prior commitment to some fairly abstract theological principle like the sovereignty-aseity intuition. Instead, I will offer some considerations which strongly suggest that the *religious adequacy* of a monotheistic conception of God depends on, or at least is greatly furthered by, adopting a theology on which God is radically transcendent in the way the classical theist takes him to be and the personalist theist does not.

In order to condense the discussion, it will be helpful to argue for one focal doctrine of classical theism rather than attempt to argue independently for several different doctrines. Accordingly, I will focus my argument on the key claim that God does not share any ontological category with any creature. That may seem like a peculiar focus, but as we will see, this claim serves effectively as a sort of crossroads: many paths of classical theological reasoning lead *to* this claim, and many classical theological claims can be derived *from* it, including, crucially, the claim that God can be spoken of only, or almost only, by analogy.

1.1 The focal claim: God does not fall under our ontological categories

The claim I wish to argue for is that God does not fall within any of our most basic ontological concepts. This claim is complicated, however, by the fact that philosophers disagree

widely about fundamental ontology. First, there is disagreement about what the most fundamental ontological categories *are*. And second, there is disagreement about the status of those categories: do they describe distinct “ways of being,” or do they merely classify different *species* of existing thing? My theological arguments will not depend on any one particular answer to those questions, so I aim to argue for my position in a way that, as much as possible, does not tie my view to one particular ontological theory.

For Aristotle, and hence for most medieval philosophers, the most important ontological distinction is that between *substance* and *accident*, or substance and that which is predicated of substance.¹⁸ However, most contemporary metaphysics assumes a different fundamental distinction: that between *concrete objects* and *abstract objects*. What I wish to assert is that God is not accurately captured by any of those four categories.

Two of these categories can be ruled out quite easily from the start. Aristotelian substances are by definition those things which are ontologically self-standing, and accidents are those things like quantity, quality, and relation which exist only “in” substances, or which are predicated of substances. Given this distinction, God cannot possibly be an Aristotelian accident, because on any remotely mainstream theism, God is ontologically independent. If God *did* belong to one of the Aristotelian categories, it would be as a substance, not an accident.

Similarly, if the basic ontological distinction is that between concrete and abstract objects, we can rule out God’s being abstract. There are two major competing definitions in contemporary philosophy for what it is that renders something concrete. On one account, to be concrete is to be spatial and/or temporal, and to be abstract is to be non-spatial and non-temporal.

¹⁸ Aristotle names ten categories, of course, not only two, but nine of those categories distinguish different kinds of accident; it is the substance-accident distinction which is most fundamental (*Categories* 1b25-2a19).

On the other, to be concrete is to be the sort of thing that can be causally efficacious, and to be abstract is to be the sort of thing that has no causal powers.¹⁹ Thus concrete objects include things like tables and chairs (and immaterial souls, if they exist) which causally interact with one another. And likely (though not uncontroversial) candidates for status as abstract objects include such things as propositions, sets, numbers, concepts, and properties, which cannot act on other things. (If one *were* to think that concepts or properties can act on other things, this would be because one was understanding them as in some way concrete rather than abstract.)²⁰

Thus to understand God as an abstract object would rule out an understanding of God as a creator or as having power. It's imaginable that someone could embrace a theology on which God is abstract, but anyone who did that would *already* be committed to thinking that almost everything theists traditionally say about God is at best analogical (and at worst straightforwardly false and misleading). An abstract object cannot create the universe, cannot be powerful, cannot be in any way personal, cannot love, cannot know, and so on. So, while I don't deny that such a theology would be possible, I will set it aside for the purposes of my argument. My goal is to argue that theists have strong reason to adopt the doctrine that almost everything they say about God is irreducibly analogical, so I will target my argument at those more standard theologies for which that conclusion cannot *already* be assumed. In any case, those who *do* take

¹⁹ It used to be more common to offer an account of concreteness on which to be concrete is to be non-abstract, and to be abstract is to be *abstracted* from something concrete. Karl Potter, for example, defines the abstract as "something from which an element has been left out in thought" in Karl H. Potter, "An Ontology of Concrete Connectors," *The Journal of Philosophy* 58, no. 3 (1961): 57. This way of drawing the concrete/abstract distinction is no longer common, however, and I will set it aside.

²⁰ For example, a Platonist about concepts takes them to be causally efficacious. But, while Plato and the neo-Platonists did not employ the concrete/abstract distinction, from a contemporary perspective the Platonist view is best expressed by saying it takes the forms to be concrete beings. Similarly, Nicolas Wolterstorff has noted that things like essences which are taken to be abstract by contemporary philosophers function as concrete objects in medieval thought. Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Divine Simplicity," *Philosophical Perspectives* 5 (1991), 541.

God to belong to one of the fundamental ontological categories invariably take God to be concrete, not abstract.²¹

Thus, I will rule out of consideration from the start the possibility that God is an abstract object or an accident; if God can be accurately described as falling under one of our fundamental ontological concepts, it will be as a concrete object and/or a substance. However, if God were a substance, he would thereby be concrete: nothing is more paradigmatically concrete than a substance, and something's being an abstract object would be sufficient grounds for concluding that it was not a substance.²² Thus, if I wish to argue that God cannot be captured by any of our fundamental ontological concepts, I can effectively do so simply by arguing that God is not a concrete being (in any sense we understand). That claim entails that God is not a substance, and God's being an abstract being or an accident are already intuitively ruled out, so the other three main possibilities do not need to be separately addressed.

However, I have said nothing yet about whether God *exists* in the same sense that creatures do. The classical way to cash out the claim that God does not share any ontological category with any creature is to say that God does not "exist" in the same sense of the word that any creature exists, and hence is not a "being" in the same sense that any creature is. This claim

²¹ For example, Plantinga argues against the doctrine of divine simplicity precisely on the grounds that it would, in his view, render God an abstract object ("Does God Have a Nature?", 235). Brian Leftow's defense of the doctrine likewise assumes that if divine simplicity *did* imply that God was abstract, that would be sufficient grounds to disprove it (Brian Leftow, "Is God an Abstract Object?," *Noûs* 24, no. 4 [1990]: 581–98). Similarly, I. M. Crombie notes that the main reason so many contemporary philosophers of religion have abandoned the doctrine that God is "outside time" is that it seems to entail that God is not concrete, and "the theist wants to maintain that God is a real being, an Aristotelian first substance, a 'concrete' rather than an 'abstract' being" (I. M. Crombie, "Eternity and Omnitemporality," in *The Rationality of Religious Belief: Essays in Honour of Basil Mitchell*, ed. William J. Abraham and Steven W. Holtzer [Oxford: Clarendon, 1987], 169).

²² The reverse inference may not follow, however: as Peter van Inwagen points out, events seem concrete, but they are not substances. Peter van Inwagen, "A Materialist Ontology of the Human Person," in *Persons: Human and Divine*, ed. Peter van Inwagen and Dean Zimmerman (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), 202-3.

about God presupposes a more general claim about existence: that the word “existence” has multiple senses corresponding to the different “modes” or “ways” in which things exist. This view can be traced back to Aristotle’s assertion that “there are many senses in which a thing may be said to be.”²³ For Aristotle and his many medieval followers, including Avicenna and Aquinas, each fundamental ontological category (such as substance and quality) constitutes a distinct way of being, and to say of things in different categories that they “exist” is to speak analogically. I’ll follow Jason Turner in calling this view “ontological pluralism.”²⁴

The claim that God exists in a different sense than any creature does not automatically follow from the view that “to exist” is a non-univocal term, but at least within a Thomistic framework, it is a short step from the latter claim to the former. For Aquinas, God transcends all ontological categories, even that of “substance.”²⁵ And since the meaning of “to exist” varies by category, if God does not share any ontological category with any creature, it follows that God “exists” in a different sense of that word than any creature. (That does not, of course, prevent Aquinas from affirming that God exists—any more than his view that “good” is said analogically of God prevents him from affirming that God is good.)

However, while ontological pluralism of the sort affirmed by Aquinas has its contemporary defenders, it is still rejected by almost all metaphysicians today. The orthodox position among contemporary metaphysicians is that everything that can rightly be said to exist

²³ *Metaphysics* 4.2 1003a32.

²⁴ See Jason Turner, “Ontological Pluralism,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 107, no. 1 (2010): 5–34, Kris McDaniel, “A Return to the Analogy of Being,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 81, no. 3 (2010): 688–717, and Kris McDaniel, “Ways of Being,” in *Metametaphysics: New Essays on the Foundations of Ontology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 290–319 for defenses of ontological pluralism.

²⁵ Aquinas says in *ST* 1 q. 3 a. 5 that God belongs to no genus. He applies this point to substance in a. 6, asserting that “God is not first in the genus of substance” (because he does not belong to that genus) but “is still first with respect to all being, transcending all genera” (*ST* 1 q. 3 a. 6 ad. 2).

at all exists in the *same* sense of that word. The different ontological categories which the pluralist takes to correspond to different senses of “to exist” are interpreted by the ontological “monist”²⁶ as simply different *species* of existing thing. Thus, whereas Turner takes there to be two distinct senses in which we can speak of something existing—that whereby we speak of a concrete object “existing” and that whereby we speak of an abstract object “existing”—most contemporary philosophers take it that *if* both concrete and abstract objects genuinely exist, they exist in the *same* sense of that word. If both abstract and concrete things exist, they are clearly very different kinds of existing thing, but for two things to be different *kinds* of existing thing is precisely not for them to “exist” in two different senses of that word.²⁷ A Labrador retriever and a poodle are different kinds of dog, but this does not entail that they are “dogs” in different senses of that word; on the contrary, to say they are different kinds of dog presupposes that “dog” names *one* (univocal) category to which both species belong.

On the monist view, the claim that God is outside all the fundamental ontological categories (as we understand them) can be made by asserting that God is *not* a concrete being (in the normal sense of that term), but a monist must assume that God does *exist* in the normal sense of that word. For an ontological monist, if it is correct at all to say that God exists, it must be in the same univocal sense in which anything else exists.²⁸ On the pluralist view, the claim that God

²⁶ I am not using “monist” here in its usual sense, of course, but instead to name the position opposed to pluralism—the position that there is only one sense of “existence.”

²⁷ See Gareth B. Matthews, “Senses and Kinds,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 69, no. 6 (1972): 149–57. Matthews’ target in this essay is the “sense-kind confusion,” i.e. the tendency among many philosophers to equate or conflate the claim that two things are different kinds of *x* with the claim that two things are *x* in different senses. But in fact, these claims are not merely distinct, but “incongruent”: they cannot both be true at the same time in the same language (150).

²⁸ Presumably one could assert that “exists” when applied to God means something like “is an imaginary being which many people believe in,” and that this constitutes an analogical sense of the term “exists.” I will have more to say in Chapter 6 about how a theory of analogy about divine predicates can rule out *that* kind of analogical interpretation of a claim about God. For now, I will simply note what seems intuitively clear: Someone who thinks

is ontologically fundamental would instead be expressed by saying that God does not “exist” in the same sense that any creature does. In what follows, what I will argue is that God is not a “concrete being” in any sense we understand. If the monist is right, this will be so because God is not “concrete” in the univocal sense; if the pluralist is right, this will be so because God is neither “concrete” in the univocal sense *nor* a “being” in the univocal sense.

Thus the claim I will argue for in what follows is “God is not a concrete being in any univocal sense”—i.e., in any creaturely sense, or in any non-analogical sense we can grasp. This formulation will not commit me to any particular position with respect to the monist/pluralist debate, or with respect to most debates over fundamental ontology.

Two final clarifications: First, one might argue that we can define “substance” simply to mean “not an accident,” or “concrete” simply to mean “not abstract.” After all, these two sets of categories are intended to be jointly all-encompassing: ordinarily, if an existing thing isn’t an accident, that means it’s a substance, and if it isn’t abstract, that means it’s concrete. And if we define “substance” and “concrete” that way, then God surely *is* a concrete being and a substance, since he’s surely not an accident or an abstract object. I must admit that if “concrete” is defined in this *purely* negative way, such that *all* we take to be entailed by calling God “concrete” is that God is not abstract, then the term must indeed apply properly to God, since God is surely not abstract. However, that would not show that any of our *positive* conception of what it means to

God “exists” only in senses of “exists” like “exists as an *imaginary* being” is someone who does not believe that God exists. Even the ontological monist will have to admit that the word “exist,” like any word, can be made to take different senses. The difference is that the monist takes there to be only one properly existential sense (for lack of a less question-begging phrase), and that if a thing does not exist in *that* sense, then it simply does not exist. By contrast, the pluralist thinks there are multiple properly existential senses, in which case thinking that none of the senses of “exists” that we can grasp apply to God does not entail that God simply does not exist.

say something is a concrete being applies properly to God. What I will argue is that God cannot be a concrete being in any *positive and non-analogical* sense.

Second, as I noted earlier, “concrete” is sometimes defined to mean “spatio-temporal” and sometimes to mean “causally efficacious.” The causal definition of concreteness is the more appealing one for our purposes, because some theists take God to be neither spatial nor temporal, and yet concrete,²⁹ and so the spatio-temporal definition of concreteness does not seem like the relevant one for this particular debate. But my arguments support the conclusion that God is concrete in *neither* of the two ways the term is standardly defined. God is neither spatial nor temporal, being both incorporeal and timelessly eternal. And while God must of course be the creator and the ultimate cause of everything that exists, believers should think that God does not cause anything in the sense that any creature does.

1.2 If God is not a concrete being, what is he?

If God is *not* a concrete being (and not by virtue of being an abstract being or an accident instead), what else could God be? The simplest answer is that I don’t know, because whatever that is is something beyond human comprehension. But if I am to argue *against* the claim that God is a concrete being in the normal sense, I must have some alternative to offer, even if that alternative is by necessity somewhat mysterious.

One way of characterizing what God could be, if God is not simply a concrete individual in the normal sense, is to say that God is pure being, or subsistent existence itself.³⁰ As Aquinas

²⁹ Brian Leftow, for example, takes God to be neither spatial nor temporal, but also asserts that God is concrete (*God and Necessity* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012], 299-300). Leftow naturally uses the term “concrete” in its causal sense.

³⁰ *De ente et essentia* 4.6.

expresses it, whereas other beings *have* existence, God *is* his existence.³¹ This claim sets God radically outside all categories of existing things, since our concepts of existing things are precisely concepts of things that “have” existence. Similarly, Tillich argues that God is “Being itself” and hence not *a* being at all.³²

However, the claim that God is existence itself must itself be an analogical description. No sense can be made of the claim if we interpret it as non-analogical. One way the word “existence” is sometimes used is to indicate *everything that exists*, but the claim that God is existence itself is not to be interpreted as the pantheistic claim that God is the totality of existing things. The other alternative is to take “existence” to simply be the nominalized form of the verb “to exist,” in which case what it means will depend on one’s favored account of what it means to say that something exists. On one account, existence is something like a property possessed by existing things and not by non-existing things. Frege and Russell instead take existence to be a sort of second-order property which characterizes those properties which are instantiated and not those that aren’t. Alternatively it might be tempting to think of “existence” as a name for a maximally general abstraction, an abstraction from all instances of existing things. And on the view advocated by Quine and most commonly held by contemporary metaphysicians, the meaning of the word “existence” is fully captured by the existential quantifier, or equivalently by phrases like, “There are . . .”

But God is surely not a property, nor a meta-property, nor an abstraction, nor anything like that.³³ Nor has anyone ever taken God to be simply that which is expressed by the existential

³¹ Ibid.

³² See Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 176-85.

³³ I know of no one who would think it acceptable to identify God with a property. Plantinga criticizes the doctrine of simplicity for purportedly entailing that God is a property, but defenses of the doctrine of simplicity against this

quantifier. And while the above list of accounts of existence is surely not exhaustive, it does not seem plausible that *any* account of any ordinary meaning of the word “existence” would produce something that any theist, classical or otherwise, would want to call “God.” Indeed, Aquinas himself insists that God is not “that universal being by which everything formally exists.”³⁴ It is difficult to know exactly what it *does* mean to say that God is existence, and those who have asserted the slogan seem to have meant different things by it, but it at any rate does not mean that God simply is “existence” in any sense of the word “existence” we might use in any other context. Thus the claim that God is existence itself must be understood as an analogical expression and not as a way of defining “God” as a synonym for “existence” on any sense of that term we know. Thus, defining God as “existence itself” cannot serve to justify the doctrine of analogy; it is *predicated* on the doctrine of analogy.

I take the essential significance of the claim that God is existence itself to be that God is *absolutely ontologically fundamental*. By this I mean not *merely* that God is the cause of the existence of everything else that exists, and that God depends on nothing outside himself, though it does include those ideas. What I mean is that God is something like what Tillich evocatively calls the “Ground of Being”—the foundation of all being. As Tillich argues, it makes no sense to think of the foundation of everything as a being alongside other beings.³⁵ If God were a being in the same sense that a creature is a being, then God would stand in need of a foundation in the

argument have denied that entailment as obviously unacceptable. See, e.g., Brian Davies, “Classical Theism and the Doctrine of Divine Simplicity,” in *Language, Meaning and God: Essays in Honour of Herbert McCabe OP*, ed. Brian Davies (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1987), 51–74 and Brian Leftow, “Is God an Abstract Object?” However, sometimes one does hear people in ordinary, non-philosophical contexts saying that God is something like an abstraction—that is, that God is just an idealized concept abstracted from the best features of human beings. But to take God to be *merely* an abstraction is to take God not to really exist; such a position is not a theistic one.

³⁴ *De ente et essentia* 5.2, translation taken from Thomas Aquinas, *On Being and Essence*, trans. Armand Maurer, 2nd ed. (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1968).

³⁵ Tillich, *Courage to Be*, 184.

same way that creatures do. Thus either one thinks of God as a being alongside other beings, or one thinks of God as the ground or foundation of all beings, but one cannot have it both ways. To think of God as the Ground of Being, as Tillich does, is to conceive of God as immediately and intimately connected to every creature; God is not separated from creatures in the way that would be required if God were a *being*.

Katherin Rogers employs a different analogy, arguing for “theistic idealism,” on which the relation between God and his creatures is analogous to the relationship between a mind and its ideas.³⁶ For Rogers, we are to God as the character Hamlet is to the mind of Shakespeare. One might object that this position amounts to pantheism, because ideas are merely modes or aspects or parts of the mind they belong to. Rogers argues, however, that ideas have some modest degree of independence which renders them more than just modes of the mind: while Hamlet, prior to dissemination of the play, is entirely dependent on Shakespeare for his existence and exists only in Shakespeare’s mind, it is nonetheless not the case that every proposition about Hamlet can simply be reduced to a proposition about Shakespeare. Hamlet has enough independent existence that he can be the irreducible subject of a proposition.³⁷ I would argue that Rogers’ account is best understood as an analogical one.³⁸

One point of both of the above analogical accounts is to emphasize the intimate connection between the being of creatures and the God on whom our existence depends. Both

³⁶ Katherin A. Rogers, *Perfect Being Theology* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 109-18.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 111.

³⁸ Rogers herself takes no position on whether theistic idealism is a literally and non-analogically true description of the relation between God and creatures, or merely the best available analogy for that relation (*Ibid.*, 110). However, I cannot make much sense of the position that I am, literally and non-analogically, nothing but an idea. So only the latter position seems viable to me.

emphasize that we exist “in” God, so to speak, not merely alongside him. To borrow the words of the apostle Paul, God is that “in [whom] we live, and move, and have our being.”³⁹

All of the above explications of the idea that God is “ontologically fundamental” are transparently analogical, and I know of no positively contentful way to cash out the notion of the “ontologically fundamental” without appealing to analogy. So in what follows, instead of trying to defend any positive version of the claim that God is existence itself, I will focus instead on the implied *negative* claim: that God is *not* a concrete being in the same sense as any creature, and thus that God does *not* fall under any of even our most basic ontological concepts. Because these are negative claims, it will be possible to understand and argue for them without any question-begging appeal to analogy. However, the account I recommend as an alternative is something along the lines of the metaphorical accounts above, and I will appeal to these accounts occasionally in arguing for the superiority of a classical approach. If the latter part of this dissertation is successful, I will have demonstrated that irreducibly analogical claims about God such as the ones made above by Tillich or Rogers are not necessarily rendered useless or otherwise unworthy of belief merely because they are irreducibly analogical.

One final note: If God is not a concrete being in the univocal sense, that does not mean it is wrong for the believer to speak of God as a concrete being by, for example, describing God as just and merciful, and ascribing actions and intentions to him. Such ways of speaking about God can be entirely appropriate so long as we recognize that they are analogical, and that our ways of speaking about God are inadequate and imperfect.

³⁹ Acts 17:28 (KJV).

1.3 Argument #1: The problem of competition

One problem with conceiving of God as a concrete being in the ordinary sense of those words is that it causes there to be competition between things that, for the believer, there ought not be competition between. Mark Wynn notes in his argument for a more classical conception of God,

While God continues to be conceived as an individual, there is a risk that relationship to God will remain one relationship among others, and accordingly a risk that the believer's happiness will be tied in part to relationship to God, but also and independently to relationship to other individuals. Such an account seems to admit the possibility of a conflict between commitment to God and commitment to creatures; and that possibility is surely excluded by the traditional claim that there is an internal relation between love of God and love of creatures.⁴⁰

If God is a concrete being in the ordinary sense, then it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that one's commitments to God at least potentially compete with one's commitments to one's fellow creatures. But it is tempting to think that this difficulty can be gotten around. In what follows, I aim to show that it cannot.

1.31 Individualist option #1: Simple hierarchy

One way one could understand the relationship between one's commitments to God and one's commitments to creatures is to simply take them as two completely separate things. If so, then it is surely at least possible that these two distinct commitments will sometimes conflict. And in those circumstances, the devout theist will of course take her commitment to God to have priority over her commitment to creatures. Something like this position might seem to be suggested by the wording of the two great commandments: Jesus says that the first

⁴⁰ Mark Wynn, *God and Goodness: A Natural Theological Perspective* (London: Routledge, 1999), 174.

commandment is to love God with all one's heart, mind, soul, and strength, and that the second is to love one's neighbor as oneself. Thus, one's commitment to God takes priority and is absolute in character, whereas one's commitment to one's neighbor is second in priority and limited. Something like this position is also sometimes taken as the moral of the story of Abraham's binding of Isaac: at least on the surface, what the story seems to teach is that one ought to be willing to ignore even the strongest of human bonds and even the most fundamental of one's obligations to fellow-creatures, if God commands it.

But to see commitment to God and commitment to fellow-creatures as two distinct and hierarchically ordered priorities is an ethically troubling and generally unappealing perspective. The story of the binding of Isaac is widely taken to be deeply troubling and mysterious precisely because of its apparent implication that devotion to God could license murder, and that is why both Jewish and Christian scholars have long striven to interpret the story in a way which does *not* entail such a dangerous picture of the relationship between one's duty to God and one's duty to others. The above way of thinking seems to contribute to actions such as religiously-motivated terrorism and genocide, or in less extreme cases, to persecution of those who don't share one's religious beliefs, to casting one's teenage children out of one's home for being gay, or to covering up even horrific crimes committed within a church in an attempt to protect the reputation of the faith. Now, one might very reasonably argue that *none* of those actions could possibly be done out of genuine love for or obedience to God. But it seems undeniable that many people have mistakenly but sincerely believed otherwise.

If one begins with the premise that one must love God absolutely, and that one must love other people separately but only to the extent that doing so does not compete with love for God,

this position implicitly treats love for one's fellow human beings, or one's ordinary obligations to them, as a possible temptation leading away from one's duties to God. Now, love for a *particular* human being can indeed be a temptation: the needs of a child or spouse or dear friend can tempt one into doing what is really wrong. It is perfectly acceptable to understand that one's love for and commitment to certain people can function as a temptation to do what is wrong with respect to other people. But on the position described above, it is one's moral duties *in general* which are conceived as a possible temptation from one's more important duty to God. And that is a dangerous and undesirable theological position.

1.32 Individualist option #2: Unity in virtue of obedience

But of course, almost no one really takes commitment to God and commitment to one's fellow creatures to be *completely* distinct and unrelated. At the very least, all the theistic religions assert that God commands us to treat our fellow human beings in certain ways. Given that, there is at least some sense in which fulfilling one's duties to creatures is simultaneously an act of obedience to God and hence an expression of commitment to God. Love for God is thus expressed *through* love for one's fellow creatures, and fulfillment of one's obligations to creatures is simultaneously a fulfillment of one's duties to God, rather than fulfillment of a set of separate and competing duties.

However, to take obedience to be the *sole* factor binding commitment to God and commitment to creatures would not be much of an improvement over taking them to be completely distinct commitments. To treat other people well *because God commands it* seems to entail that one is not treating them well for their own sakes. And to love someone because God

commands it seems actually impossible: if one truly loves the person, one will not need an outside command to motivate it, and if one's motivation does stem from an outside command, then what one has is not love. Thus, if we take God to be a concrete individual being, the fact that God commands ethical actions poses an unpleasant dilemma. On the one hand, the believer can choose to act out his commitments to his fellow-creatures out of obedience to God, thus instrumentalizing his fellow-creatures and failing to have the proper ethical stance. On the other hand, he can choose to disregard the fact that God commands certain actions and instead act well to his fellow-creatures for their own sakes and not for God's, thus adopting a good ethical stance. But this would come at the cost of having to actively treat God's commands as irrelevant to his actions, since to treat them as relevant to how he acts would force him back into the first position.⁴¹ The believer would thus be forced to choose between undermining his ethical relation to other people, or undermining his religious devotion to God.

1.33 Individualist option #3: Unity in virtue of imitation

A better option for the believer who takes God to be a concrete individual might be one based on *imitation* rather than *obedience*: one who is devoted to God will naturally wish to imitate God, insofar as it is possible and appropriate for a human being. God is just and

⁴¹ Simone Weil seems at times to propose something like this second solution: her position is that the Christian is called to love others truly, which means loving them for their own sake and not (at least in any explicit or intentional way) for God's. Thus when a man encounters a person in need, "it is not the time to turn his thoughts toward God . . . There are times when thinking of God separates us from him." Simone Weil, "Forms of the Implicit Love of God," in *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (Perennial Classics, 2001), 93. This advice to refrain from thinking of God when helping other people is prevented from undermining religious devotion only in the context of Weil's broader theological framework in which God is encountered in the suffering creature; it is that encounter, and not mere obedience, which serves to unite commitment to God and commitment to others.

compassionate, and therefore the believer will also show justice and compassion towards her fellow creatures.

But this approach does not seem like a very great step forward. If the believer is deliberately treating others with justice and compassion in order to imitate God, that would be no less instrumentalizing than treating others with justice and compassion in order to obey God: it would involve treating others well not for their own sakes, but for the sake of someone else entirely.

On the other hand, we might posit that the imitation is not an intentional matter. Perhaps it is just that the believer *comes to be more like God* simply as a result of her devotion, and in this way becomes more just, compassionate, and so on. On this picture, the believer's justice and compassion really are aimed at her fellow human beings and motivated by sincere commitment to them; imitation of God is something like the *cause* of the character traits in her which lead her to treat others well, but it is not her reason or motivation for the way she acts. This option seems to me like an improvement on the previous possibility, but it entails that commitment to God and commitment to creatures are not unified in the mind of the believer herself, even if they are causally connected. If the believer herself tries to understand how her commitments to God ought to relate to her commitments to creatures, she must either understand them as competing (as in the first option discussed above), or understand them as united in virtue of the fact that her commitment to God constitutes a reason for or endorsement of her commitment to her fellow creatures (as in the second option discussed above). Thus, while an appeal to imitation may somewhat improve our overall conception of the harmony between commitment to God and

commitment to creatures, it does not do anything to avoid the problem posed for the believer herself in her first-person evaluation of her own commitments to God and to creatures.

1.34 The classical option

In contrast to all of the above approaches, within Christianity it is traditional to take love for God and love for others to be intrinsically unified. God and one's neighbor are not the same, of course, and so it cannot be the case that love for God and love for neighbor are absolutely identical. But love for God and love for one's neighbor are also not simply two distinct loves which are aimed in different directions (so to speak), by virtue of having different objects. Rather, the best kind of love for one's neighbor is also simultaneously directed towards God and constitutes love for God.⁴²

This doctrine is supported by I John:

Let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love . . . if someone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen.⁴³

John asserts that it is impossible to love God without loving one's brother, and also that it is impossible to love God without having been "born of" God and without "knowing" God. He does not go so far as to say that to love one's brother is thereby to *love* God, but it is to at least come close: if God is love, to love others is thereby to be implicitly oriented towards God. The relation between the two loves that John describes is not merely some external relationship, as it

⁴² For examples of this position see Aquinas, *ST* 2-2 q. 25 a. 1, and Karl Rahner, "Reflections on the Unity of the Love of Neighbour and the Love of God," in *Theological Investigations*, trans. Karl-H. Kruger and Boniface Kruger, vol. 6 (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1969), 231–49.

⁴³ I John 4:7-8 and 4:20 (NASB).

would be if he claimed that anyone who loves God will therefore love his brother out of obedience to or out of a desire to imitate God. Rather, for John, love for God and love for others are immediately and internally bound up together.

But the above understanding of love for God and love for others, on which they do not compete but instead constitute a unity, requires a theology on which God is not a concrete individual being in a univocal sense. John, in the passage quoted above, does not speak of God as a concrete individual being, for he asserts that “God is love,” and love is not a concrete individual. One might argue that John is speaking figuratively or hyperbolically, and that what he really means is something like “God is a perfectly loving being” or “God is the perfect exemplification of love.” But the logic of John’s argument in the passage quoted above requires that we take his statement literally. John reasons that because God *is* love, one who does not love does not know God. To love is also to “know” love—I take “know” here to have the sense of knowledge by immediate acquaintance—and thus to know God; one who does not love is not acquainted with love and therefore does not know God. This bit of reasoning makes fine sense if we take John’s assertion that God is love seriously. However, if we interpret “God is love” to mean only something like “God is a perfectly loving being,” and understand God to be, univocally, a concrete individual being, John’s reasoning no longer holds: one could know a perfectly loving concrete individual being without thereby loving anyone. Thus charity requires us to take John’s precise wording seriously: he seems to be operating on a conception of God as at best only analogically a concrete individual being.

The position that commitment to God and commitment to creatures are intrinsically unified is not only traditional within Christianity, but it also seems in general like a far more

appealing view for the theist than the alternatives discussed previously. If we understand love for God and love for creatures to be united, such that the believer can be simultaneously loving God and loving others through one act of love to a neighbor, then this serves to encourage and support both love for creatures (by asserting that this love for creatures is simultaneously love for the highest and best possible object of love) and love for God (by identifying that love with the most morally valuable attitudes we know). The alternative is to take love for God and love for creatures as independent and thus at least potentially competing. As I have already shown, this has the effect of undermining or devaluing either one or the other.

But it is not possible to conceive of the relation between commitment to God and commitment to creatures as unified in such a way except on something like the classical theistic account. If God is a concrete individual being, then to love God and to love creatures is to love two entirely different beings. These loves cannot be internally unified; they can at best be externally unified through something like obedience or imitation.

By contrast, on a classical theist account, God is “subsistent being itself” in some sense. As I have already argued, that cannot mean that God is simply *existence* in the generic sense of that word. But what it does mean is that God does not stand to his creatures as one being to a group of other beings. Rather, God’s creatures *participate* in God, and in God’s perfections. Thus in recognizing the value and importance of one’s fellow human beings, one is simultaneously showing respect and devotion to those perfections one’s fellow human beings instantiate—which is to say, one is simultaneously showing respect and devotion to God.

1.35 Individualist option #4: Unity through resemblance of creatures to God

The individualist might object at this point that a similarly satisfying approach is available to the individualist theist as well. Biblical religion teaches that human beings are made in the image of God, and this seems to entail that all of God's creatures faintly resemble their Creator. One might argue that this resemblance alone is sufficient to unify commitment to God and commitment to creatures, even on an individualist conception of God. One who is devoted to God must necessarily love God's attributes: one could not love God while hating goodness, for example. Thus, one who is devoted to God must necessarily also love any creature in which these attributes are displayed. Since all creatures resemble God to some extent, one who loves God perfectly will value every created thing to some extent. But it is appropriate to value more highly those things which resemble God more—namely, human beings, who are “made in his image” in a particularly strong sense. And so, to be committed to God necessarily entails compassion and respect for every other human being. This entailment is not a purely external one, as in the obedience and imitation cases, in which one is committed to creatures for reasons having nothing to do with the creatures themselves. Rather, in this case what unifies the loves is the fact that both God and creatures are good, though God is infinitely so and creatures only finitely so.

The above approach may seem like an improvement on the obedience or imitation methods for unifying commitment to God and commitment to creatures, because it at least means that the believer values creatures for their own sakes, rather than solely as a means to an end. But as Mark Wynn points out, it also has unpleasant consequences:

An account which works primarily in terms of the idea of resemblance seems likely to suggest that mundane things constitute a kind of inferior imitation of

God, and such a view seems, potentially, unhelpful from a spiritual point of view. For instance, it might encourage the thought that we should love God *rather than* creatures. (Similarly, given the opportunity of viewing an original Van Gogh, we might not wish to give any attention to copies of it.)⁴⁴

On the resemblance option, one is to be committed to creatures because of the degree to which they possess certain intrinsically valuable properties, and one is to be committed to God because of his (infinitely greater) possession of those same properties. This picture has the overall effect of making creatures seem like nothing more than shoddy imitations of certain features of God. If this is what they are, what is the point of there even being created beings? One who has the perfect original gains no benefit from also having extremely poor imitations of it. Some religious writers have sometimes spoken as if the virtues of creatures are only appealing to those who do not yet know God, because one who knows God knows something of such infinitely greater value that all creaturely things will then seem worthless. But surely conceiving of God's creatures as (even comparatively) worthless is neither morally beneficial nor complimentary to the creator.

One who accepts the classical conception of a God who is not a concrete individual being takes the resemblance between God and creatures to be more than mere (terribly inadequate) resemblance of one set of individual beings to another, distinct individual being. Creatures do resemble God, on the classical account, but this resemblance is simultaneously a case of the creatures' immediate participation in the perfections of God. Conceived this way, it is impossible to scorn the perfections of creatures without this scorn also being aimed at God. Likewise, one

⁴⁴ Wynn, *God and Goodness*, 183. Mark Wynn's proposed alternative to resemblance is "complementarity": rather than conceiving of each creature as like a shoddy imitation of a Van Gogh painting, one instead conceives of each creature as like a very small, but somehow representative, section of the original Van Gogh painting. This is a broadly classical conception; it is a way of understanding creatures as participating in God.

literally and immediately encounters God *in* creatures, because God underlies the reality of all things, and thus one's love for creatures is in some sense aimed at God as well, at least if it is the right sort of love. Thus the classical account is the sole account which enables us to truly unify commitment to God and commitment to creatures.

The problem of competition does not affect only our conception of human relationships, but our conception of creation in general. Mark Wynn argues that the conception of the world as God's creation has suffered from the shift to a conception of God as a concrete individual being. In the contemporary context, he argues,

arguments for design have tended to rely upon a broadly scientific, evaluatively neutral conception of the world. Notably, they have been impressed by the world's regularity over space and time, and have taken this sort of merely empirical datum as their starting point. But unless it is supplemented by other images, this understanding of the import of human experience is ultimately inimical to religious belief, because it diminishes the world, by representing it in merely mechanical (or at any rate in regular and value-free) terms; and hence it diminishes God, who comes to be understood merely as a kind of celestial engineer. Thus the argument from design, as formulated in recent centuries, has had the effect of undermining the very conception of the world which is the soil for a religiously rich sense of the attractiveness of God.⁴⁵

On a classical conception, God is not *merely* the creator of the universe in the sense in which an artist is the creator of a painting, nor even *merely* its sustainer and upholder at every moment. God is furthermore the "ground" or foundation of the existence of the universe, and the universe expresses God's nature immediately simply in virtue of the fact that it exists at all. This way of understanding the world allows to see it as wonderfully and wildly good, and means that seeing the beauty and goodness in the world *supports* devotion to God rather than *competes with* devotion to God. While a conception of God as a concrete individual being naturally lends itself

⁴⁵ Wynn, *God and Goodness*, 195.

to the disenchantment and de-valuation of all things that are *not* God, a classical conception of God, on which God is *not* simply a concrete individual being, but something more ontologically fundamental, provides a basis for a healthier, richer and more integrated religious devotion.

1.4 Argument #2: Necessary existence and worship

A second reason why a conception of God as a univocally concrete being is inadequate is that any religiously adequate conception of God must involve the claim that God is a *necessary* being. That God exists necessarily is yet another of the doctrines of classical theism, and as was the case with some of the other classical doctrines discussed earlier, the traditional arguments for this doctrine often do not have the persuasive force for contemporary philosophers of religion that they had for medieval philosophers. But the underlying intuition of the claim that God exists necessarily is one central to theistic faith. As J. N. Findlay argues, “we can’t help feeling that the worthy object of our worship can never be a thing that merely *happens* to exist, nor one on which all other objects merely *happen* to depend.”⁴⁶

However, the idea that God exists necessarily came under criticism in the modern era. Hume’s Cleanthes objects that “There is no being . . . whose non-existence implies a contradiction,” because the existence or non-existence of a thing is a “matter of fact,” and matters of fact are always contingent.⁴⁷ He therefore concludes, “The words . . . ‘necessary existence’ have no meaning; or, which is the same thing, none that is consistent.”⁴⁸ Now, if we direct our attention to things like numbers, rather than to concrete objects, many philosophers

⁴⁶ J. N. Findlay, “Can God’s Existence Be Disproved?,” *Mind* 57, no. 226 (1948): 180.

⁴⁷ David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Richard H. Popkin, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998), 9.5, p. 55.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.6, p. 55-56.

today would reject Hume's conclusion. We do speak of numbers as existing, in utterances like "There exists a prime number between 5 and 11," and if numbers do exist, they exist necessarily. But this not the kind of "necessary existence" that the classical theist takes God to have; God is not a number or other abstract object. If we restrict Hume's point to *concrete* beings, then his conclusion is rather difficult to argue with. The existence or non-existence of a concrete thing seems like the very paradigm of a contingent matter; for any concrete thing, there are logically possible worlds in which that thing does not exist.

Attempts to make sense of the claim that God exists necessarily, if what that means is that God's existence is logically necessary or that God exists in all possible worlds, seem doomed to failure if God is understood as a univocally concrete being. Some have argued, however, that we can retain the view that God exists necessarily without relying on the indefensible claim that God's existence is *logically* necessary.

Richard Swinburne, for example, offers the following gloss on the claim that God "exists necessarily":

To say that 'God exists' is necessary . . . is to say that God does not depend for his existence on himself or on anything else. No other agent or natural law or principle of necessity is responsible for the existence of God. His existence is an ultimate brute fact. Yet being the sort of being which he essentially is, everything else in the universe depends on him, and must do so—for he is by his nature the ultimate source of things. Hence his existence is not merely *an* ultimate brute fact, but *the* ultimate brute fact.⁴⁹

For Swinburne, what it means to say that God exists necessarily is that God is eternal, not dependent on anything else, and is the only being with that status. But one moved by Findlay's intuition—that if God is to count as God at all, he can't just *happen* to exist—will not find this a

⁴⁹ Swinburne, *Coherence of Theism*, 267.

compelling gloss on the doctrine of God's necessary existence. Swinburne affirms God's eternity and causal independence, and these are crucial aspects of God's necessity on the traditional account. But Swinburne is committed to thinking that God's existence is, ultimately, a brute fact—something for which there is no cause or explanation. And so on Swinburne's view, God really *does just happen* to exist.

Plantinga, like Swinburne, also accounts for God's "necessity" in terms of eternity and causal independence. But Plantinga's account goes further, in attempting to offer some explanation for the intuitive appeal of saying that God exists necessarily. There is a reason, Plantinga thinks, why believers have so often felt compelled to say that God exists necessarily rather than *merely* saying that he is not causally dependent:

It is a necessary truth that if He has no cause, then there is no answer to a question asking for His causal conditions. The question "Why does God exist?" is, therefore, an absurdity. And in this respect there is an important analogy between the statement that God exists and any analytic statement such as "All vacuums are empty." In each case, the question "Why is it that . . . ?" cannot arise. A person who seriously asked why all vacuums are empty would betray failure to understand; in the same way someone who seriously asked why God exists would betray misapprehension of the concept of God. And this characteristic is one which the statement "God exists" or "There is a God" shares with necessary statements alone⁵⁰

On Plantinga's account, as on Swinburne's, God's existence is ultimately a brute fact. But Plantinga thinks there is a reason why believers have been drawn to saying that God exists "necessarily" rather than merely asserting that God exists independently. The reason is that, as with logically necessary assertions, one cannot ask "why" about the assertion that God exists without betraying a misunderstanding.

⁵⁰ Plantinga, "Necessary Being," 223.

Plantinga's argument for this claim centers on the fact that God is, by definition, uncaused by anything else, and that God, by definition, could not possibly be caused to exist by anything else. It is on this basis that Plantinga concludes that to ask "Why does God exist?" is confused, and thus he seems to take the question "Why does God exist?" to be equivalent to "What caused God to exist?" Plantinga is right that this latter is, at least on an orthodox theistic account, a confused question. But "Why does God exist?" is a demand for an explanation, not for a cause, and there are other ways to explain a thing than to name its (efficient) cause. Now, one might conceivably hold that there is no answer to the question "Why does God exist?" which is cognitively accessible to *us*. But the question does not seem automatically illegitimate or confused in the way "What caused God to exist?" is.

To sum up the discussion so far: Theistic believers have traditionally asserted that God exists "necessarily," where that means that God couldn't possibly *not* have existed, that something about what God is *necessitates* that God exists, that God exists in all possible worlds, or that God's existence is not caused by anything else but is also not merely a brute fact. However, if we suppose that God exists as a *concrete being*, in the normal sense of those words, we must abandon this strong view of divine necessity. One cannot coherently assert that God's existence is logically necessary if one takes God to be a concrete being. Plantinga and Swinburne *do* conceive of God as a concrete being, and they attempt to reinterpret the doctrine of God's necessary existence in some way which enables them to affirm it despite that position. However, neither of their accounts seems particularly satisfying, because both still render God's existence a brute fact. There is simply no way to understand a concrete being as *necessary* in the strong and appealing sense put forth by Findlay.

But while Findlay expresses what I take to be a strong theistic intuition, one might nonetheless conclude that this intuition is mistaken, and that the theist should abandon Findlay's demand. Perhaps the sort of necessity offered by Swinburne and Plantinga is "religiously adequate," as Plantinga puts it,⁵¹ and we ought to embrace a view on which the fact that God exists is just an extremely fortunate brute fact.

One reason one might resist that response is that taking God's existence as a brute fact means giving up on the ultimate intelligibility or explicability of the universe. One of the benefits of theism is that it seems to offer an explanation of that which would otherwise be forever and fundamentally inexplicable: why does the universe exist at all? If God created the universe, there is an explanation for why the universe exists, when otherwise we would simply have to take it as a brute fact. But if God is a concrete being whose existence is a brute fact, then explaining the universe by saying God made it will not be much of an advance in terms of explicability. The question, "Why does anything at all exist, rather than nothing?" would in the end have no more answer for the theist than for the atheist.

But this reason for rejecting the brute-fact view of God's existence does not seem particularly forceful to me. The point of belief in God is not merely or primarily to offer us a way to answer metaphysical questions. While the claim that God's existence is a brute fact means we cannot take the universe to be explicable, it's not clear that that would have any negative impact on the *religious* adequacy of our concept of God. And even if God is necessary, *how* his existence is necessary is totally incomprehensible to us. So even if the doctrine of God's necessary existence in *some* sense means that there is an answer to the question, "Why does

⁵¹ Plantinga, "Necessary Being," 214.

anything at all exist, rather than nothing?” that answer is still probably not one cognitively accessible to us.⁵²

Mark Wynn offers a more compelling reason why a brute-fact view of God’s existence should be unacceptable for the theist: if God’s existence were a brute fact, it would not make sense to think that God would want or expect to be worshiped, nor would it be appropriate for us to offer worship. Wynn considers a Swinburnean picture on which God is a personal being who exists as a brute fact rather than by necessity. On this account, Wynn argues,

We ought to attribute to such a God some of the following attitudes. First of all, such a God will surely feel gratitude for his existence, recognising the improbability of his existing, and that he has done nothing to earn it. In turn, if God views his own existence in these terms, then he will surely understand his creative activity as a matter of sharing with others the ‘gift’ of life which he has himself received. Such a God, we may think, will create in a spirit of wonder before the fact that anything at all exists, and in a spirit of gratitude for his own existence.⁵³

On a brute-fact account of God’s existence, God must find his own existence an unearned and inexplicable gift, just as each of us finds our own existence to be. If God were a concrete personal being, as Swinburne takes him to be, then the natural conclusion is that God would respond to the gift of his own existence in the way a morally perfect person would.

What would it mean to respond to one’s own existence as an unearned gift? Among human beings, this recognition has a strong ethical component. If my existence is an unearned gift, so are my basic capacities, those I simply started out with and did not acquire by my own

⁵² On the other hand, John Leslie, Hugh Rice, and Mark Wynn all, in different fashions, argue that there *is* an answer cognitively available to us to the question “Why does God exist?”—namely, that it is *good* for God to exist. These arguments are predicated on a broadly classical conception of God. See John Leslie, “A Proof of God’s Reality,” in *The Puzzle of Existence: Why Is There Something Rather Than Nothing?*, ed. Tyron Goldschmidt (New York: Routledge, 2013), Hugh Rice, *God and Goodness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), and Wynn, *God and Goodness*.

⁵³ Mark Wynn, “Simplicity, Personhood, and Divinity,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 41, no. 2 (1997): 92.

effort. These capacities too are things I should view with humble gratitude. If there are other people who depend on me for some benefit, I myself am dependent upon my initial endowment of gifts for my capacity to help those who depend on me. And so, when I help others, I am merely sharing with others the possibilities which were inherent in my initial endowment. And since this endowment was not of my own making, it would be inappropriate to make the dependence of others on me—to whatever extent it exists—the basis of a relationship of dominance or subservience.⁵⁴

For a human being, it is appropriate to help other people freely, and inappropriate to take the dependence of others as an excuse for subordinating them to one's will. It seems, then, that the same ought to be true of God if God's existence is a brute fact. God's existence, God's perfections, and God's abilities, including the ability to create, are not things he earned or is in any way responsible for, on Swinburne's account. Would not a morally perfect being, in this scenario, respond by treating those he created as fellow lucky existers, with whom he has shared the gift he received, rather than as beings who owe him worship or absolute obedience?

Wynn's argument relies on *more* than just the premise that God is a concrete being; it relies additionally on the premise that God is a person. But most theists who take God to be concrete do so because they take God to be a person. Furthermore, it's hard to imagine a substantial religious commitment to a concrete, non-necessary being which is *not* personal. One can relate religiously to a personal God, and one can relate religiously to an impersonal God who is Being itself and thereby intimately bound up with each of us as that "in which we live and

⁵⁴ Ibid., 93-94.

move and have our being,” but a God which is neither personal nor bound up with our existence is religiously unappealing as an object of worship.

This, then, is our current position: If we take God to be a concrete being, we are forced to conclude that (at best) God’s existence is an uncaused brute fact. And if we take this view of God, we almost assuredly will follow Swinburne in also positing that God is personal and morally good, lest God cease to constitute any plausible object of worship at all. But, as Wynn has pointed out, it makes no sense to think that a morally perfect personal God whose existence is a brute fact would expect our worship or find it appropriate. To posit that God’s existence is a brute fact but that God expects our worship, obedience, and devotion is to take God to behave in a way that we would find morally imperfect in the same position.

However, Swinburne himself does have available a sort of response to Wynn’s objection. For Swinburne, worship of God is appropriate for two reasons. First, God is our “ultimate benefactor” on whom we are dependent, and second, God has “incomparable greatness.”⁵⁵ By virtue of God’s greatness and of our dependence on him and his benefaction to us, we owe God the “peculiar kind of respect” which is worship. Swinburne thus takes worship to be the maximal version of the sort of respect shown to human beings who are great or virtuous, or on whom we are dependent. Worship is specifically defined as respect “towards one acknowledged as *de facto* and *de iure* lord of all.”⁵⁶ But worship of God is justified on the same basis that ordinary human respect is justified. Different beings deserve differing degrees of respect, and worship is simply the highest possible degree of respect.

⁵⁵ Swinburne, *Concept of Theism*, 288.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 287-88.

Thus Swinburne takes the proper basis of worship to be God's greatness, moral superiority, and beneficence to us, and our dependence on him. And Wynn's argument has said nothing to undermine *those* factors, and so Swinburne would presumably maintain that nothing Wynn has said renders God any less worthy of worship. For Swinburne, a God who recognizes his own existence as an unearned gift would still be worthy of worship and would expect worship as his rightful due from us.

But such a response would be unsatisfying, because it would require us to reject the deep moral insight in Wynn's account—and one of the deep moral insights that theism, in general, has to offer us. That insight is that each of us should see our own fundamental capacities as unearned gifts for which we ought to be humbly grateful, and which we ought not take as grounds for ensnaring others in a relation of subservience to us, or even expect others to admire us for. The defense I suggest on Swinburne's behalf would require that we abandon this insight, and instead accept that subservience and subordination are the appropriate responses to a relationship in which one being is dependent on another, and in which one being has superior innate capacities. To take this approach would wed theism to a morally unattractive way of thinking about respect, power, and authority. The Swinburnean defense I suggest of the claim that a God who is a concrete being deserves worship would commit us to a highly authoritarian picture of what *human* relationships should look like.

A classical conception of God as something other than a concrete being allows a far more satisfactory and religiously adequate conception of God. First, the claim that God exists necessarily (in the strong sense intended by classical theists, not in the weakened senses proposed by Swinburne and Plantinga) is only incoherent if one takes God to be a concrete being

in the univocal sense. The doctrine is not incoherent on a classical conception of God. Part of the point of the classical conception of God is that God is in some way bound up with (so to speak) the nature (so to speak) of existence. This, I take it, is what is fundamentally at issue in the traditional claim that God is “being itself” or that God’s essence is the same as his existence.

If God were univocally a concrete being, greater than and prior to all other beings but nonetheless a being alongside his creations, possessing existence just as they do, then that would mean that there was something ontologically more fundamental than God: the fact that anything (including God) exists at all. The basic and most profound intuition of classical theism is that this cannot be so. Whatever that ontologically most fundamental principle is, God *is* that, or includes it. One way this idea is expressed is by the assertion that God is existence itself; another way it is expressed is by the assertion that God exists necessarily. Only a classical theism allows the believer to assert that God exists necessarily, and thus only a classical theism can fulfill the theistic intuition described by Findlay, that in order to be God at all, God can’t just *happen* to exist. This is already a strong point in favor of a classical theism.

But what’s more, as Wynn points out, the conception of God as a concrete individual being whose existence is a brute fact is problematic as an object of worship. There is something intrinsically odd or unappealing about the idea that one might worship a being who just happens to exist, and to take the worship of such a God to be appropriate has unfortunate moral implications. By contrast, on a classical conception of God, God is not worshipped merely because he is better than us and we are dependent on him, and worship is not merely an extreme version of the respect owed to any being which is better than us and on whom we are dependent. The classical theist conceives of God as not merely good, but as “goodness itself,” and so to

worship God is simultaneously to worship goodness itself. Worship of God, conceived in this light, is justified on other grounds than mere dependence and superiority, and so does not have the unfortunate moral implications that Wynn highlights.

Some individualist theists might protest at this point that “goodness itself” is an unappealing object of worship because it is an impersonal abstraction. But the classical theist does *not* take goodness itself (or perhaps better, “subsistent goodness”), in the sense that serves as a description of God, to be merely an impersonal abstraction. For the classical theist, God is goodness itself *and also* the ground of all being *and also* he who spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai. How these claims fit together is certainly mysterious—and I will need to say more eventually to justify my belief that such a theology could be coherent—but most of the classical theists take God’s transcendence to be consistent with God being (analogically) personal and intimately involved in human history.⁵⁷

On the contrary, all evidence suggests that there is much in the human heart that is prepared to take goodness itself as an object of worship. Iris Murdoch rejects belief in God, thinking it no longer tenable by reasonable people. But she sees a strong moral need to put the Good, conceived as “a single perfect transcendent non-representable and necessarily real object of attention,” in place as a partial replacement for the concept of God.⁵⁸ We have a natural capacity and desire, she thinks, to love Good, and to turn our attention to Good in the way religious believers turn their attention to God in prayer.⁵⁹ Murdoch does not describe this as

⁵⁷ It must be admitted that some classical theists, following a neo-Platonic tradition which conceives of the divine as impersonal, do *not* understand God to be personal and intimately involved in human history except in a purely metaphorical way. Maimonides is perhaps the most striking example.

⁵⁸ Iris Murdoch, “On ‘God’ and ‘Good,’” in *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge, 2001), 54.

⁵⁹ Murdoch asserts that prayer is properly “simply an attention to God which is a form of love” (Ibid., 53-54).

worshipping Good, but what she proposes is obviously quite close to that. Nor is Murdoch unique in finding this a powerful and compelling idea. I once had a student tell me that he had never seen any point in religion until he read Plato, but upon being introduced to the concept of the Form of the Good, he was able to see why someone might believe in God. While I recognize that not everyone shares with Murdoch, or with my student, an intuitive attraction to the concept of God as goodness itself, it is certainly at least coherent that one might worship goodness itself. And this is a basis of worship which seems deeper and purer than a conception of worship on which it is aimed at a being merely in virtue of our dependence and its superiority.

1.5 Argument #3: God as the invincible tyrant

Tillich raises a worry somewhat similar to Wynn's as a reason to take God as "Being itself" rather than as a being among others. It is worth quoting at length:

The God of theological theism is a being beside others and as such a part of the whole of reality. He certainly is considered its most important part, but as a part and therefore as subjected to the structure of the whole. He is supposed to be beyond the ontological elements and categories which constitute reality. But every statement subjects him to them. He is seen as a self which has a world, as an ego which is related to a thou, as a cause which is separated from its effect, as having a definite space and an endless time. He is a being, not being-itself. As such he is bound to the subject-object structure of reality, he is an object for us as subjects. At the same time we are objects for him as a subject. And this is decisive for the necessity of transcending theological theism. For God as a subject makes me into an object which is nothing more than an object. He deprives me of my subjectivity because he is all-powerful and all-knowing. I revolt and try to make *him* into an object, but the revolt fails and becomes desperate. God appears as the invincible tyrant, the being in contrast with whom all other beings are without freedom and subjectivity He becomes the model of everything against which Existentialism revolted. This is the God Nietzsche said had to be killed because nobody can tolerate being made into a mere object of absolute knowledge and absolute control. This is the deepest root of atheism.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ Tillich, *Courage to Be*, 184-85.

The precise argument Tillich is making here is somewhat hazy at points. But I think the thought is something like this: Suppose there were a person who could see everything I did, and could even perceive all of my private thoughts. This is an extremely unpleasant thought. Suppose furthermore that this person had absolute power over me and my environment (whether he used that power or not). This is now not merely unpleasant but terrifying. And suppose then that this person is also perfectly good and benevolent. This renders the thought experiment less terrifying, but it is still intuitively hateful. To such a being, I can only be a thing to be watched and controlled, whose own subjectivity is irrelevant. To be in a relationship in which two people mutually know one another, mutually love one another, and are mutually dependent on one another, can be a wonderful thing. But to be absolutely known by and absolutely dependent on a being who has no reciprocal dependence on me is an awful idea. Swinburne argues—I think rightly—that we owe respect to people on whom we are dependent. Nonetheless, one in a state of absolute and one-sided dependence on some other person would reasonably wish to *escape* that state if possible.

Some readers may not share Tillich’s intuition that existing in relation to such a being would be intolerable. But it seems to me like a forceful intuition. And if God is a univocally concrete being, our position *is* precisely that of the thought experiment I have just described. For an individualist theist, God really just *is* a person who knows everything we do, perceives everything we think, and has absolute power over us and our environment. Some individualist theists argue that God voluntarily gives up his control over our actions in order that we might have free will, but mere free will does not solve the problem. True, Tillich does suggest that if God were a being, all other beings would be “without freedom,” but I do not think we need to

interpret him as meaning by this that we would lack free will. The posit of a God who has complete power over us does not become much less horrifying merely because we are assured that God refrains from determining our actions. All that means is that the “invincible tyrant” relates to us as ants in an ant farm who carry out our own actions while he watches, for as long as he allows, rather than as toy soldiers whom he himself moves where he wants us to go. Neither role is appealing. Thus, belief in God as a concrete being—if we really take seriously the idea that God is a concrete being in the univocal sense—seems intuitively dreadful.

The classical conception of God as subsistent being itself, or as at any rate as *not* merely a concrete being in the univocal sense, is not vulnerable to the objection Tillich raises. The feature of “theological theism” that Tillich particularly objects to is its claim that God is an individual concrete being. If God is a concrete being in a univocal sense, then the conclusion that he is “an ego which is related to a thou” and thus a subject to whom we are objects is inescapable. By contrast, for the classical theist, God is not a concrete being in the univocal sense, and God is not “bound to the subject-object structure of reality.” Since God is that *in* whom we live and move, he is not a distinct and separate individual from us, but instead is intimately bound up within our own being. Thus the classical God is not truly a subject for whom we are objects, nor an object for whom we are subjects—or at least is not *merely* that.

Nonetheless, the classical theist may also conceive of God as personal, all-knowing, and all-powerful, and may conceive of God as a subject with whom one can have an interpersonal relationship of a sort. Tillich himself endorses a conception of God and humans as interpersonally related. However, the classical theist understands all such conceptions of God to be analogical. God is *something like* an all-knowing and all-powerful person who watches over

us benevolently, but he is not that *simpliciter*, and the unpleasant implications of that picture of God should be written off as respects in which the analogy doesn't hold.

1.6 Why taking God not to be a concrete being requires a doctrine of analogy

I noted in my earlier discussion that classical theism, as traditionally understood, seems to entail a strong doctrine of analogy. In particular, if God is radically simple, then when we say that God is wise, we are not ascribing to him a quality distinct from his essence, and so whatever it means to say that God is wise, it does not have any creaturely sense or any sense we can comprehend. However, it's not clear that my *own* arguments for a classical theism—meaning by this merely a theism on which God is understood as something more ontologically fundamental than a concrete being—necessarily commit us to the traditional doctrine of simplicity. So in what way does the classical or quasi-classical theism for which I have argued require us to adopt the doctrine that everything or nearly everything said about God is said analogically?

One reason Aquinas offers for thinking that everything said about God is analogical is that nothing can be said univocally of things that do not share a category:

God is more distant from any creature than any two creatures are from each other. Now, there are some creatures so different that we can say nothing univocally of them (when they differ in genus, for example). Much less, therefore, can we say anything univocally of creatures and God.⁶¹

For Aquinas, God stands outside all of our fundamental ontological categories (and *a fortiori* outside all of our more specific ones too). And he takes this to straightforwardly entail that it is impossible for us to speak univocally about God.

⁶¹ *ST* 1 q. 13 a. 5 s.c.

However, as we saw in Chapter 1, Roger White demonstrates that the mere fact that two things belong to different genera does not make it impossible to speak univocally about them.⁶² The word “calm,” for example, can be ascribed univocally to crowds, seas, and minds, because the meaning of the word “calm” is a *proportional* meaning. We can understand there to be one abstract relationship which holds between the calmness of a crowd and a crowd, the calmness of a sea and a sea, and the calmness of a mind and a mind. Given that, there doesn’t seem to be much reason to accept Aquinas’s view that we can speak univocally only within a genus.

However, we understand (to some extent) both seas and minds, and we understand what it means to say that a sea is calm, and that a mind is calm, and we are able to perceive the proportional analogy between these relationships. That is why we are able to take that proportional concept to constitute the real conceptual content of the word “calm.” But in the case of God, we do not know what it could mean to describe something that is not a concrete being as “just” or “wise” or *anything else*. We know what it means for a concrete being to be just, but what it could mean for a non-concrete being to be just is not something we can fathom.

Something that is not a concrete being in the sense we understand, but also not just an abstract being, is something we can form no positive conception of at all, except via metaphors and other transparently analogical descriptions. And we can form no conception of what it could mean to apply a concept like “wise” to something that is not a concrete being. Of course, if it is right to say that God is “wise” even analogically, there must be some important similarity (either direct or proportional) between God and wise creatures. But lacking any positive understanding of the nature of God, we are not in a position know what the property is in virtue of which that

⁶² See pp. 53-55.

similarity holds. The most we can do is to believe that it is (a) not wisdom in the sense we understand, but (b) somehow relevantly similar to wisdom. That is why the classical conception of God I have argued for here entails that almost everything we say about God must be taken analogically.

However, there are *some* exceptions to the rule that “everything we say about God” must be taken analogically. If God cannot be accurately described as falling into any of our creaturely concepts, what that entails is that all claims about God that are *positive, intrinsic, and true* are analogical. A purely negative claim need not be interpreted analogically: God is literally and univocally *not a banana*. Similarly, attributions of purely extrinsic properties to God—if there are any properties purely extrinsic to God—could also be literally and univocally true, because a purely extrinsic property is by definition one that has nothing to do with the actual nature of the being that has it. And of course one can make positive, intrinsic, non-analogical claims about God that are *false*—e.g., “God is a banana” (interpreted univocally).

2. Local reasons for appealing to analogy

My primary argument in this chapter has been that theists have good reason to think all true, positive, intrinsic claims about God are analogical, on the grounds that theists have good reason to adopt something like a classical theology rather than an individualist one, and a classical theology commits one to thinking that all such claims are said analogically.

However, I am sadly aware that not everyone will be convinced by the defense of classical theism I have just offered. And the individualist theist does not take God to be the kind of radically transcendent being that classical theists do. An individualist theist takes God to be a

concrete individual being, and may also take God to be, in some univocal sense, a person who knows and wills and acts. Nonetheless, it is not only the classical theist who has good reason to appeal to analogy. Even without the “global” reasons for analogy that the classical theist has, there are numerous “local” theological difficulties which may beset the individualist theist, which can best be solved by interpreting certain theological claims analogically. In what follows I will focus on one particular case: the ascription of *emotions* to God. However, this one example should serve as a model of the general way that an appeal to analogy can enable a more satisfactory resolution to a local theological debate.

Early and medieval Christian thinkers almost unanimously agreed in conceiving of God as impassible—that is, as not subject to emotion or suffering, or more generally to being affected by anything outside himself. In recent decades this traditional claim has come under attack by those who argue that the impassibilist conception of God renders him aloof and unloving and is thus incompatible with the biblical portrayal of God. There are good reasons to take the position that we should think of God as being affected emotionally by what creatures do or by what happens to them, at least on any individualist conception of God. Some *classical* theists may be content to conceive of God as entirely impassible, but as I have already demonstrated, classical theism depends on a global doctrine of analogy for *other* reasons. So I will set the classical theistic perspective aside for the remainder of this chapter, and instead address the topic of emotions from an individualist perspective.

First, theists take God to be loving, but love seems to require emotion. To love someone is, among other things, to be distressed by their misfortunes, to rejoice at their joys, to be happy in communion with them, and to suffer from their rejection. Of course, medieval philosophers

would have rejected this interpretation of God's love. Aquinas, for example, interprets God's love as consisting simply in benevolence: what it means to say that God loves us is to say that he wills our good and provides for us, not that he has the *emotions* of love for us. However, this way of cashing out God's love seems unsatisfactory to many contemporary believers. After all, it is possible to act benevolently towards someone *without* loving them. What the believer wants is not mere benevolence, but love. And to conceive of a being who feels nothing in response to anything we do or anything that happens to us is to conceive of a being who does not love us.⁶³

Second, individualist theists conceive of God as one to whom they can personally relate. At the very least, we must conceive of God as one to whom it makes sense to pray and express gratitude. But, as Creel argues on behalf of the passibilist, paraphrasing a line of thought he finds in Hartshorne's writing,

If [God] were emotionally impassible, it would be a waste of time to express gratitude to him because he would not be affected by it in any way [D]evotion and service to God would be as meaningless as devotion and service to a stone because, being impassible, God's feelings would be unaffected by whatever we do, whether we do good or evil But surely God must be thought of in such a way that devotion to him is meaningful and appropriate.⁶⁴

The thought that God might be unaffected by what we do need not necessarily dismay a *classical* theist. As I noted earlier, the classical theist may identify God with "Goodness itself," and there is a clear sense in which Goodness itself can be worshipped without one imagining that the object of our worship is personally or emotionally affected by that. By this I don't mean that the classical theist *cannot* or *ought not* conceive of God as personally or emotionally affected—

⁶³ This argument is made by Charles Hartshorne (*Man's Vision of God and the Logic of Theism* [Hamden, CT: Archon, 1964], 111) and Marcel Sarot (*God, Passibility and Corporeality* [Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1992], 80-102). It is also discussed at length (though rejected) in Richard E. Creel, *Divine Impassibility: An Essay in Philosophical Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), chapter 7.

⁶⁴ Creel, *Divine Impassibility*, 114.

merely that it seems possible for the classical theist to conceive of God that way without her belief in God losing all purpose and existential force. But for the individualist theist, God is conceived first and foremost as an individual being. If this individual being is not a being to whom we stand in something like a personal relation, then what we have is at best deism, not a religious theism. And so for the individualist theist, to think that God is entirely unaffected by what we do seems to render worship of God irrelevant and pointless. Even Creel, who in the work just quoted sides with the impassibilist position, is swayed enough by considerations such as these to concede to the passibilist that God must be to *some* extent affected by what creatures choose.⁶⁵

However, despite these reasons which, from an individualist perspective, speak persuasively in favor of conceiving of God as emotionally affected by what we do and experience, there are also strong theological reasons to *deny* that he is so affected.

First, while many individualist theists reject the classical theistic doctrine that God is unconditioned by anything outside himself, positing that God can be made to suffer because of the actions of creatures seems to render God truly vulnerable in a way that God ought not be. Suffering is a bad thing, and for God to suffer seems to render him imperfect—not *morally* imperfect, but imperfect qua being.

Furthermore, Creel argues, the thought that God suffers in his love for creatures has some disturbing implications. On the one hand, some passibilists take the position that God is affected

⁶⁵ Creel's specific solution is to assert that God's happiness is affected "extensively, not intensively" by the choices of creatures, which is to say that the precise character of God's happiness can be affected by creatures, but not its intensity or depth (Ibid., 145). Creel later shifts yet further in the direction of passibilism, and in a more recent article argues that God is "touched" but not "crushed" emotionally in response to our actions and experiences; see Richard Creel, "Immutability and Impassibility," in *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Philip L. Quinn and Charles Taliaferro (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 318.

emotionally to an extreme. Charles Hartshorne, for example, describes God as “the cosmic sufferer, who endures infinitely more evil than we can imagine.”⁶⁶ After all, the reason for saying that God is emotionally affected is that this seems like a necessary condition of God’s loving us. But God is not merely loving, but infinitely or maximally loving. And so, if we follow the passibilist line of thought, it seems as if God must eternally suffer more than any other being has ever suffered, because of his great love. But if we take passibilism to its natural conclusion in this way, the result is one that undermines religious faith. For one thing, as Creel points out, such a suffering God would be the “highest object of pity,”⁶⁷ but “surely pity cannot be an appropriate feeling toward God unless our notions of God’s majesty and self-sufficiency are shown to be illogical.”⁶⁸ If one truly believed God to be in such a state of suffering, one would want to pray for him—but to whom could one pray in order to pray for God? What’s more, it would be possible for creatures to deliberately wound God, by doing things they know will make God suffer, and to be victorious in this aim.⁶⁹ All of this seems contrary to an adequate conception of God as the object of worship.

If we try to address this problem by taking a more moderate passibilist stance, one on which God need not become an object of pity, that solution gives rise to other problems. Some passibilists argue that God does suffer, but temper this claim by asserting that this suffering is in some way transmuted into joy, or that it is drowned out by God’s perfect happiness, or else that God does suffer but only to a modest extent. The problem with all such views is that it undermines the entire point of passibilism. If the reason we felt forced to describe God as having

⁶⁶ Hartshorne, *Man’s Vision of God*, 331.

⁶⁷ Creel, *Divine Impassibility*, 124.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 123

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 126

emotions was in order to be able to understand God as genuinely loving us, then to double back and say that God nonetheless possesses perfect bliss, or that his sufferings are minor and calm, would seem to entail that God genuinely loves us, but not very much.⁷⁰

Most of the literature on the question of whether God is emotionally affected by what creatures do and experience takes one of three approaches. Some like Hartshorne endorse a strong doctrine of passibilism, thus allowing for a full conception of God as loving and personally involved with creatures, at the expense of rendering God an object of pity. Others like Richard Creel in his earlier work endorse a strong doctrine of impassibilism, arguing that God is capable of loving his creatures serenely without suffering, existing in his blissful certainty that all will be as it should in the end. This approach preserves a conception of God as perfect and self-sufficient, but at the cost of making God seem aloof and insensitive to our sufferings. The third approach is to take a compromise position somewhere in the middle, attempting to avoid the downsides of both extremes, but any such approach will thereby also avoid the *advantages* of both extremes. None of these three approaches is really satisfactory.

A far more satisfactory solution is available, however, if one is willing to appeal to analogy. Even for the individualist theist, the nature of God is far beyond our limited human comprehension. And so it seems reasonable to think that some of our claims about God ought to be interpreted analogically. An individualist theist could take something like the following position:

I should conceive of God as being affected emotionally by what creatures do and experience, insofar as such a conception is necessary for me to conceive of God as deeply loving and caring about creatures, and insofar as it is necessary for me to relate appropriately and devotedly to God. However, I should not think that God has literal emotions in any sense I understand. Rather, what I think is that a

⁷⁰ Ibid., 132-39.

description of God as being emotionally affected by what happens to creatures has *some important analogy* to the actual truth about God. I should trust that there is something fundamentally appropriate about conceiving of God in emotional terms, and on the basis of that trust, I will continue conceiving of God as being affected emotionally in certain respects, for certain purposes. But I will also hold in mind that it isn't literally true that God has emotions in any sense of the term I understand, and hence that not all of the things which a statement like "x loves me" entails actually apply in the case of God.

If one is committed to the view that appealing to analogy should be avoided at all costs, then the position outlined above will seem unacceptable. In that case, one must simply bite the bullet and accept one of the other not-entirely-satisfactory positions with respect to God's passibilism. But there is nothing incoherent about the position just described. It is my aim in this project to argue that theologians and philosophers of religion should *not* see appeals to analogy as intellectually disreputable, or as something to be avoided at all costs. If I am right that the standard worries about appealing to analogy can successfully be addressed, then the analogical position with regard to God's passibility seems far more satisfying than any of the alternatives.

The case of God's passibility or impassibility is just one example of a case in which an individualist theist would benefit from appealing to analogy. One other plausible set of examples I will not consider in detail here are the famously paradoxical Christian doctrines of the trinity and the incarnation. To my knowledge, all interpretations of either doctrine of which any clear sense can be made have been ruled out as heretical by the early church, and are also still widely considered unacceptable today.⁷¹ Augustine deals with this problem in part by a set of clever metaphysical distinctions, but also, crucially, by insisting that his words could not be truly

⁷¹ For example, two interpretations of the doctrine of the trinity of which clear sense can be made include the claim that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit constitute three different beings (the heresy of tritheism), or the claim that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit constitute merely three different aspects of God (the heresy of modalism). But this is far from exhausting the heretical possibilities.

appropriate to God and so must be taken as imperfect gestures in the direction of the truth rather than as strictly accurate.⁷² For contemporary Christians who do not wish to abandon the tradition orthodox doctrine of the trinity, appealing to analogy may be the only solution.

3. Conclusion

Thus, there are strong reasons for Christians in particular and theists in general to think that at least some claims about God are irreducibly analogical. First, there are significant advantages to a classically theistic conception of God, and such a conception renders almost everything we say about God analogical. Second, even an individualist theist is likely to face some or other *local* reason to appeal to analogy at some points in their theology.

⁷² See especially Augustine, *De Trinitate* 7.3.

Chapter 3: The Problem with Analogy

I have argued that there are substantial benefits to accepting a doctrine of analogy about religious language—that is, a doctrine on which at least many and perhaps all of the positive, intrinsic, and true claims believers make about God are irreducibly analogical. Furthermore, the doctrine of analogy plays a role in the religious traditions of all three Abrahamic religions, including both Catholic and Protestant traditions within Christianity, and has something to offer both individualist and classical forms of theism. Why, then, might one hesitate to rely on analogical claims in theology?

1. Unspecified similarity claims

The most important or threatening objection to a doctrine of irreducible analogy has to do with the fact that analogical speech involves unspecified similarity claims. As I have defined it, analogical speech is speech which either explicitly makes or implicitly appeals to a claim of similarity. *Irreducibly* analogical speech is that in which the speaker has no non-analogical grasp on the cognitive content of her utterance, because she lacks the knowledge of how to specify (non-analogically) the particular respects in which that similarity holds. Thus, to make a claim which is irreducibly analogical is to appeal to a claim of similarity without knowing what that similarity actually is.

The problem is that it seems as if any claim meeting the above definition of irreducible analogy must therefore be essentially empty of propositional content. Suppose I say,

(1) x is similar to a lemon.

This could mean that x is yellow, that x is a citrus fruit, that x is a concrete object, or (since proportional similarities also entail simple similarities) that x stands in a relationship to some y which is similar in some particular respect to the relationship that a lemon has to some z . For any two things x and y , there will be *some* S-properties that both share, but if I do not specify any *particular* respect in which x is similar to a lemon, the actual content of what I have said about x is completely indeterminate. As David Burrell puts it, “Careful attention to language would note that ‘ x is similar to y ’ is an ellipsis which must furnish ‘in respect z ’ on demand.”¹ To assert that x is similar to y is not yet to have properly asserted anything about x or about y , unless a particular respect in which they are similar—or at least a limited range of candidate respects in which they might be similar—has in some way been indicated.

Of course, in ordinary contexts we often *do* make claims of unspecified similarity of the form “ x is similar to y ” without these claims being empty of content. For example, suppose I mention to a friend a recipe I recently made using sudachi, and he responds by asking what a sudachi is. I respond,

(2) A sudachi is similar to a lemon.

My sentence has the form of an unspecified similarity claim, as in (1) above. But in this case, I could easily specify the similarity I mean if asked; as Burrell puts it, I could “furnish ‘in respect z ’ on demand.” In the context described above, I have in mind a specific, determinate proposition I mean to communicate when I say (2):

(2a) A sudachi is similar to a lemon in respect of taste and culinary properties.

¹ Burrell, *Analogy and Philosophical Language*, 14.

Given that the context of my utterance was a discussion of recipes, my hearer will also surely understand that what I mean is something in the neighborhood of (2a). He will not entertain the possibility that perhaps what I meant was that a sudachi is similar to a lemon in respect of shape or color, or in respect of being a concrete object smaller than a planet.² And thus, despite the fact that (2) has the form of an unspecified similarity claim, both the speaker of and the hearer of (2) understand it to be expressing something more determinate and specific.

I don't mean to be taking any position here on the question of whether the *meaning* of the sentence written as (2) above is actually something like what's expressed in (2a). The extent to which context factors in at the level of sentence meaning (rather than only at the level of speaker meaning) is a question I don't intend to address. Given that "analogy" as I define it is an epistemological or conceptual phenomenon, not a linguistic one, the important point here is not about the meanings of sentences, but about propositions considered as objects of knowledge or belief. Thus we need not worry about the question of whether (2a) is actually a good way of cashing out the *meaning* of (2). The important point is that (2) sounds like an unspecified similarity claim, but if when I say (2) I "have in mind" even vaguely some particular respect of similarity I take to be its specific content, then what I have in mind is a determinate proposition, not an unspecified similarity claim. That determinate proposition will be something like that expressed by (2a).

In cases involving more sophisticated and subtle similarities, the task of specifying the similarity I have in mind might be far more difficult than in (2). For example, I might feel

² Our interpretive practice in these cases can be explained by appeal to Grice's maxim of relevance: We say "x is similar to y" only when what we mean to communicate is that x is *relevantly* similar to y, where what it is to be "relevantly similar" depends on context. See Paul Grice, "Logic and Conversation," in *Studies in the Way of Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 27.

vaguely that the work of Artist A is similar to that of Artist B but lack a sufficiently sophisticated set of concepts for aesthetic analysis to pinpoint the reason. But even in these cases, if I have a determinate proposition in mind when I say “*x* is similar to *y*,” it will be because I have a particular similarity in mind, even if I do not have a fully conceptualized grasp of that similarity and would not know how to describe it in words.

However, it’s important to note that there are two ways one could specify a respect in which one thing is similar to another. One way is to specify merely the *kind* of S-property that the things share, as in (2a). The other way is to specify a *particular* S-property that the things share; for example,

(2b) A sudachi is similar to a lemon in respect of being a sour-tasting citrus fruit.

I will call similarity claims of the first sort “partly unspecified similarity claims,” since they lie somewhere in between purely unspecified similarity claims like (2) and fully specified similarity claims like (2b). Burrell’s point that we need to be able to supply “in respect *z*” requires only that that we be able to render our similarity claims *partly* specified.

However, it’s important to note how little (2a) says if it is not supplemented by background information. (2a) communicates a logically complete proposition: it tells us that sudachi share culinary properties with lemons. But it is only if we interpret (2a) to mean something like (2b) that (2a) actually tells us anything at all about sudachi. In ordinary contexts, my hearer will understand that the most salient of a lemon’s culinary properties are that it is sour-tasting and a citrus fruit, and hence will know to infer (2b) from (2a). However, if we lacked this background information about lemons, (2a) would tell us nothing about what a sudachi is actually like.

One might object that (2a) at least tells us that a sudachi *has* culinary properties—i.e. that it is some sort of food. (It’s not clear that it even does that, since “being completely inedible” is plausibly a sort of culinary property.) If we accept that something’s having culinary properties entails that it is a food, then (2a) does tell us something about sudachi: that it is a food. However, it achieves this only by virtue of ascribing, non-analogically, a particular S-property to sudachi: that of being the sort of thing that has culinary properties, i.e., that of being a food. So if it tells us anything at all about sudachi, it is by virtue of its directly ascribing some S-property to sudachi, and *not* by virtue of its appeal to similarity.

Thus, genuinely unspecified appeals to similarity—those in which context and background information cannot specify the similarity for us—seem to tell us nothing about their subjects. Where they do, it will be because they are not truly unspecified—not even *partly* unspecified—but instead actually entail the application of a specific S-property to the subject. And so if my intention is to say anything at all about what a sudachi is actually like intrinsically, I must have in mind not merely the bare abstract claim that a sudachi is similar to a lemon in respect of culinary properties, but instead I must have in mind (even if unclearly, or in a poorly conceptualized fashion) some actual S-property possessed by both. No similarity claim which does not at least implicitly involve the ascription of some *specific* S-property to the subject(s) could tell us anything about the nature of the subject. Similarly, if my goal is to say anything at all about what God is actually like intrinsically, I must be able to have in mind some specific S-property which I am ascribing to God.

But rendering determinate an unspecified similarity claim like “God is similar to a wise human being” by supplying or implicitly holding in mind some specific S-property God shares

with wise human beings is precisely what I cannot do if such claims about God are *irreducibly* analogical. An irreducibly analogical claim is by definition one whose appeal to similarity cannot be analyzed away. So to “have in mind” the particular S-property x and y share is precisely what one *cannot* do if one’s claim that x and y are similar is *irreducibly* analogical. For if one has in mind the particular S-property by virtue of which the two things are similar, the appeal to similarity could at least in principle be eliminated by replacing it with a specification of that S-property. For example, rather than asserting (2) while having in mind the particular respect in which they are similar, namely that they are both sour-tasting citrus fruits, I could instead say, “A sudachi is a sour-tasting citrus fruit,” thereby ceasing to rely on an appeal to similarity at all. The only way a claim can be *irreducibly* analogical for me is if I claim that two things are similar but *do not know* (or have a belief about) the S-properties they share—meaning that I cannot “have in mind” any particular similarity when I say that they are similar. Thus, if a claim like “God is wise” is irreducibly analogical, I cannot have in mind any particular property in respect of which God is similar to a wise person, or if I do, I must reject this as a mistake on my part.

On these grounds, one might argue that claims of irreducible analogy are obviously illegitimate, and that one who insists that a claim they have made is irreducibly analogical is thereby admitting that their purported “claim” is effectively empty of propositional content. This is the problem I will call the “problem of unspecified similarity.”

2. Harris, Palmer, and Alston on the failure of irreducible analogy

And indeed, the above objection has not infrequently been raised against the doctrine of analogy. For example, James F. Harris, Jr., argues that “any meaningful use of analogical

language to talk about x, presupposes that something literal [i.e., non-analogical] about x is already known.”³ The reason for this is that any analogical claim gets its meaning only insofar as it has some determinate interpretation, which must be specifiable non-analogically. For example, if the analogical claim “God is to man as a shepherd is to his sheep” is to be a meaningful claim, we must know in what *respect* God is to man as the shepherd is to the sheep. We must know that what is meant is that God provides for human beings, and not that God will one day shear us of our wool. And this information on how to interpret the analogical claim must be specified non-analogically, because if it were specified analogically, we would have only pushed the problem back a step without addressing it, and we would now need to explain how to interpret the interpretation.

Thus, Harris concludes, “If the similarities are not already known, then no fitting analogy can be understood, and if the similarities are known before the analogy is understood, then one does not come to know by analogy.”⁴ All of the actual work of expressing meaningful propositions is thus done by “literal” (i.e. non-analogical) language. Any propositional significance that an analogical statement has is parasitic on non-analogical claims about the ways in which that analogy does or does not hold, and without the aid of those non-analogical claims in spelling out the meaning of the analogy, the analogical claim would be meaningless. For this reason, Harris argues, attempts to resolve problems about talk of God by appealing to analogy are doomed to failure.

³ James F. Harris, Jr., “The Epistemic Status of Analogical Language,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 1, no. 4 (1970): 211.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 218.

Harris asserts that for analogical language to be meaningful, it must be explicable in non-analogical terms. However, to think that irreducibly analogical claims are actually *meaningless* seems like a slight exaggeration. Harris's claim is plausible if we stick to simple claims of unspecified similarity like "God is like a shepherd." That such a claim is meaningless (in the absence of one's "having in mind" something to fix its meaning) seems to follow from Burrell's point that similarity statements of the form "x is similar to y" are "elliptical" for full statements of the form "x is similar to y in respect z." If we take Burrell's point seriously, then a sentence which fills in only two of the three parts of the predicate is a logically incomplete sentence which therefore fails to express a proposition. Only if we fill in something for z will it constitute a determinate claim.

However, if we modify the above example to say, "God is like a shepherd *in at least some respect*," we now have a logically complete proposition: $(\exists x)(x \text{ is a respect in which God is like a shepherd})$. And this seems like a perfectly determinate meaning. It is of course a fairly minimal claim, in that it does not tell us in what *particular* respect God is like a shepherd, and hence there is very little we can infer *from* it. But it wouldn't seem quite right to describe this assertion, which is perfectly in order logically speaking, as *meaningless*.

Humphrey Palmer makes a more modest criticism of appeals to irreducible analogy, one which does not go so far as to suggest that irreducibly analogical claims are actually meaningless. Palmer seems to think it is at least *possible* for a believer to have a meaningful religious faith based solely on irreducibly analogical claims about God. However, he points out, to take theological claims to be irreducibly analogical undermines any possibility of theological

argument. If a claim about God includes some analogical term, then any argument *to* or *from* that claim will fail due to equivocity. For example, consider the following argument:

Premise 1: God is good.

Premise 2: A good being would not deceive us.

Conclusion: God would not deceive us.⁵

If the term “good” in Premise 1 is being said in a special, non-creaturely sense, then this argument is fallacious by virtue of equivocation, because in order for us to have any reason to assert Premise 2, it needs to be using “good” in some *familiar* sense that we understand. And so this argument, and any like it, is invalid. If we take the claim that God is good to be analogical, we cannot infer anything from it.

Palmer’s argument is based on the “different senses” definition of analogical speech, rather than on the definition of analogical speech as speech that appeals to similarity. However, his basic point transfers over easily. If “God is good” doesn’t mean that God has the very property we ordinarily call “goodness” but only that God has something relevantly *similar*, we clearly cannot infer anything from “God is good” without knowing in *which* respects the similarity holds and in which respects it doesn’t.

William Alston’s “Irreducible Metaphors in Theology” develops this point to devastating effect. Alston’s initial focus is to refute the perennially tempting claim that claims about God are irreducibly *metaphorical*. Alston argues that *any* concept is capable of being made the literal meaning of a word, and hence that there is no such thing as a concept that can only be expressed metaphorically. It follows that insofar as a sentence has propositional content at all, that

⁵ Palmer, *Analogy*, 99-100. This is not an exact quotation; I have slightly altered Palmer’s example for simplicity.

propositional content could at least in principle be expressed literally.⁶ However, Alston then recognizes that the above argument may not strike proponents of irreducible metaphor as posing any major problem to their view. The reason for this is that talk of irreducible *metaphor* in theology and philosophy of religion has often served as a confused way of talking about *appeals to similarity*, i.e. analogy (in my sense of the word).⁷

In the course of his argument against claims of irreducible metaphor, Alston argues that if nothing else, a metaphorical claim like “God is a king” must be paraphrasable as “God is significantly like a king in some way or other,” or something else of that sort.⁸ And while this paraphrase is vague, it is a literal statement, not a metaphorical one. However, Alston notes, the proponent of irreducible metaphor may well respond as follows:

What we anti-literalists are really concerned about is not those abstract, ‘structural’ predicates like (*significantly*) *similar in some way or other*, but specific predicates like *wise, loving, makes, forgives, commands*, and so on. Therefore, if we can make the denial of specific literal predicability stick, we will have gotten what we were after. For in that case it will be impossible to say, literally, what God is like, what He has planned, done, what He would have us do, and so on. We deniers of literal predication will be only minimally shaken by having to admit that God is, literally, *significantly like a king in some way or other* So when one says ‘God gave me the courage to face that situation’, he is to be interpreted as simply putting forward the model of one human being encouraging another, with only the unspecific claim that this is sufficiently similar to God’s relation to my being encouraged to be usefully employed as a model thereof. There is no further claim of some particular point of similarity, P.⁹

⁶ Alston, “Irreducible Metaphors,” 26-28. For similar criticisms of claims to irreducible metaphor, see C. J. Insole, “Metaphor and the Impossibility of Failing to Speak about God,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 52, no. 1 (2002): 35–43 and Paul Edwards, “Professor Tillich’s Confusions,” *Mind* 74, no. 294 (1965): 192–214.

⁷ Alston does not use the word “analogy” for this concept in this article; his only mention of the term “analogy” is to note that some authors use it when what they really mean is “metaphor” (“Irreducible Metaphors,” 19). However, Alston does use the term “analogy” in approximately the same sense I do in some other works, esp. “Religious Language,” (239-41). I will use “analogy” in my sense when explaining Alston’s argument here.

⁸ As we saw in Chapter 1, this is not the best way of expressing the meaning of a metaphorical claim. However, it is what Alston has to say about appeals to analogy, not what he has to say about metaphor, which is of interest here.

⁹ Alston, “Irreducible Metaphors,” 31.

Alston's imagined opponent backs off from the untenable position that statements about God are irreducibly metaphorical, to adopt instead the more tenable position that statements about God are irreducibly *analogical*. The position described above is a position on which the only things we can say about God are claims that appeal to *similarity*; we can say that God is "significantly similar in some way or other" to a wise being, but we cannot specify precisely in what respect these similarities hold. This position is of course precisely the one I mean to defend, so while Alston does not frame the rest of his argument as a criticism of "irreducible analogy," that is what it is.

However, Alston raises several persuasive criticisms of the position taken by his imagined opponent. First, God will be "significantly similar" to almost anything in at least some ways. Thus if all claims of the form "God is S" really just mean "God is significantly similar in some way or other to things that are S," then any possible claim about God is just as good as any other: "It would be just as true, true in the same way, that God is cruel as that God is merciful, just as true that God is a spider, a mud-pie, or a thief as that God is the creator of heaven and earth."¹⁰ The problem is not merely that God can be metaphorically described as a spider: a believer might find that perfectly acceptable. But most believers would find it unacceptable to think that "God is cruel" corresponds every bit as much to the truth about God as "God is merciful" does, and that there are no grounds, other than purely pragmatic ones, for valuing the latter claim over the former one.

Second, if we interpret claims about God in the way described above, they will no longer entail any of the things they are normally taken to entail. For example, if we take "God is

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 32.

perfectly loving” only to mean something like “God is significantly similar to a perfectly loving being in some way,” then it will no longer follow from the premises “God is perfectly loving” and “A perfectly loving being will forgive the sins of the truly repentant” that God will forgive the sins of the truly repentant.¹¹ This failure of entailment will also apply to the concrete predictions believers have taken to be entailed by their theological claims: for example, believing that God is good and faithful will no longer entail that God will in fact keep his promises. And it will apply to commands as well: if we take “God commands us to love one another” to mean merely that God is significantly similar to a person who commands us to love one another, it no longer follows from that claim that we are in any way obligated to love one another.

Whereas Alston takes the position that some or all claims about God are irreducibly metaphorical to be flatly incoherent, the revised version of that position on which such claims about God are irreducibly *analogical* is at least coherent. However, it is not likely to strike many believers as an attractive position. As Alston concludes,

A theology the propositions of which are logically compatible with anything else sayable of God, which can be true only in the same way virtually anything one might say of God is true, which have no determinate consequences either for theory or for practice, so eviscerated a theology is stripped of virtually all of its impact for human life.¹²

There may be some few negative theologians who would be willing to accept the above implications, but I think Alston is right that *if* the above position is the only way to cash out a theology on which claims about God are irreducibly analogical, it would be better to abandon the position that claims about God are irreducibly analogical.

¹¹ Ibid., 33.

¹² Ibid., 35.

3. Swinburne's more determinate conception of analogy

3.1 Not just similar but *more similar*

But is there any alternative way to spell out a claim of unspecified similarity which would not lead to total evisceration? One plausible proposal might be that of Richard Swinburne. Swinburne finds it necessary to appeal to analogy at a few points in his account of the central doctrines of theism, but his rule for analogical interpretation of a sentence is stricter than the one Alston proposes. A word like “wise” used analogically, in Swinburne’s sense of “analogically,” has its sense extended to apply not only to wise things but also to anything *more similar to standard cases of wise things than to standard cases of non-wise things*.¹³ Thus, whereas an Alstonian analogical interpretation of “God is wise” would be “God is significantly similar to a wise person in some way or other,” a Swinburnean analogical interpretation of that same sentence would be “God is more similar to a wise person than to a standard example of something or someone non-wise.”¹⁴

Swinburnean analogical statements are more specific than the sorts of analogical claims Alston considers, and thus they seem less utterly empty of determinate content. However, Swinburne’s version of analogical predication gives rise to a new complication: What exactly does it mean for something to be *more similar* to standard cases of *x* things than to standard cases of non-*x* things?

¹³ Swinburne, *Coherence of Theism*, 60. Swinburne does not argue directly for an analogical interpretation of the word “wise,” however; that choice of examples is my own. At this stage, I am discussing only Swinburne’s concept of an analogical claim, not his views about what theological claims actually fall into that category.

¹⁴ This is a simplified version of Swinburne’s full view; I will discuss Swinburne’s complete view later in the chapter.

Let's begin with a slightly more limited question: Is there such a thing as something's being, objectively, *more similar* to standard cases of x things than to standard cases of non- x things? I argued in Chapter 1 that, on pain of a radical non-realism, there must be such a thing as objective similarity. There must be an objective difference between those properties which constitute genuine similarities when shared by two things, and those properties like *is grue* which do not. However, there is an enormous gap between this minimal, common-sense realism about objective similarity and the position seemingly entailed by Swinburne's definition of analogical speech: that there's an objective fact about which of two things any x is *more similar* to, all things considered.

For two things to be similar is for them to share some S-property. Thus it might seem as if there is in principle an objective way to determine, for any a , whether it is more similar to b or to c : simply count up all the S-properties held in common by a and b , and then count up all the S-properties held in common by a and c , and see which group is larger. Of course, this procedure would be completely impossible in practice, but one might think it must be possible in principle. However, S-properties are not nearly as limited as Lewisian natural properties; they include, e.g., properties like *features a 12-year-old protagonist* (considered as a property of a story). It's not obvious that there is a finite number of S-properties at all, such that it would even in principle be possible to count up how many S-properties two things share. More importantly, even if there *were* a finite number of S-properties, in which case there would be some actual fact about which of two pairs of things shared more S-properties in total, *that* fact would be one we have no reason to care about. Our actual similarity judgments are always judgments of *relevant* similarity, where what similarities are relevant depends on one's particular interests and aims and

on one's cultural and personal background, among other things.¹⁵ It is not the *quantity* of S-properties that two things share which makes us see them as similar—if there even *is* such a definable quantity as the number of S-properties two things share—it is the sharing of *important* properties. And judgments of importance depend on one's perspective and purposes. Thus, even if there *was* such a thing as *a*'s being more similar to *b* than to *c* in an objective and context-independent way, that would not necessarily entail that *we* would find *a* more similar to *b* than to *c* in any sense that mattered to us, or even in any sense we could fathom.

Therefore, I will assume that either there is no such thing as something's being more similar to *b* than to *c* in a context-independent and objective way, or that if there is such a thing, it is not relevant to us. Thus, if we cash out the claim that “God is wise” is analogical to mean “God is more similar to standard examples of wise people than to standard examples of non-wise people or things,” we cannot usefully interpret this as meaning that God is more similar to the one than to other in some purely objective, context- and interest-independent sense. Even if there were some objective metric of degree of similarity, which seems dubious, God's being more similar to wise people than non-wise people according to some purely objective metric of similarity would not guarantee that he was *relevantly* or *importantly* similar to a wise person, or similar in any way that mattered to us at all.

Granting the above conclusion, we might try the opposite extreme and interpret analogical claims about God as ones made from our own actual perspective. On this strategy of interpretation, “God is more similar to standard examples of wise people than to standard examples of non-wise people or things” would mean something like “God *seems to us* more

¹⁵ See especially Amos Tversky, “Features of Similarity,” in *Preference, Belief, and Similarity: Selected Writings*, ed. Eldar Shafir (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 7–45.

similar to standard examples of wise people than to standard examples of non-wise people or things.” However, this interpretation of the meaning of analogical claims seems clearly unsatisfactory as well, because, by hypothesis, we are not in a position to compare God and creatures independently so as to perceive the similarities between them. To *perceive* some x as similar to some y requires that one in fact perceive the similarities that hold between x and y , at least dimly or inchoately. And if we could do that, it would in principle be possible to *specify* the shared properties in virtue of which God is similar to those other things. For while it may in practice be difficult to conceptually distinguish a vaguely and intuitively perceived similarity, any perceived similarity consists in specific shared S-properties, and if such a similarity has been perceived, then those particular S-properties are in some sense (perhaps very inchoately) known by the perceiver. So, if claims about God are irreducibly analogical, it must be that the similarity claim is not a claim about a similarity *as perceived by us*, but instead a claim about an objectively real similarity (which is unknown to us).

However, there is a middle ground between the two previous options. If a claim is to be irreducibly analogical, and yet still in some way clearly defined and determinate, it must be in some way which is at neither of the two extremes just considered. Instead, to speak analogically, I think, is to assert a similarity which is *unknown to me* (and thus not a similarity I am myself perceiving between the things in question), but which I *would* recognize as important and relevant, were I to perceive it. Thus analogical claims are best analyzed as involving a counterfactual claim about the perceptions of similarity I *would* have if I were in a better epistemic position.

I will interpret Swinburne's account of the nature of an analogical assertion in this third way. On this account, if "God is wise" is irreducibly analogical, it means something like

God is more similar to standard examples of things that are wise than to standard examples of things that are non-wise, in those respects that an outside observer with perfect knowledge would judge to be most important and relevant to us

or

If I were able to perceive the similarities between God and other things, I would judge God to be more similar to standard examples of things that are wise than to standard examples of things that are non-wise in those respects which are important and relevant to me.

This position seems to escape the weaknesses of the two alternative approaches. It does not presume that there is such a thing as an objective and context-independent fact of the matter about whether something is more similar to *b* than to *c*. It ensures that the claim that God is similar to something means that God is similar in ways that we would actually find relevant and important. And it does not presume that I am in fact able to perceive the similarities between God and creatures on which the analogical judgment is based.

I began by raising a problem with claims of irreducible similarity: they seem to be meaningless, or if not strictly meaningless, nonetheless eviscerated of any *useful* content or implications. If all it means to say that "God is wise" is that "God is similar to a wise person in some respect," the doctrine that all or most claims about God are irreducibly analogical would have unpalatable consequences, to say the least. In this section, however, I have tried to lay out a proposal on which claims of irreducible analogy could be rendered more specific, more determinate in their content. How successful is the Swinburnean definition of analogy, interpreted in the way I have just specified, in overcoming Alston's concerns that a doctrine of analogy will eviscerate theology of all theoretical and practical implications?

In one way, Swinburnean analogical claims seem to have a clear advantage over Alstonian analogical claims of the form “God is similar to a wise person in some respect,” because they are more specific. One of Alston’s objections to analogical claims was that if all “God is wise” means is that God is similar to a wise person in some respect, *any* claim about God will be just as true and appropriate as any other, and we will have no non-pragmatic, non-emotive reasons for preferring “God is merciful” to “God is cruel” or “God is a spider.” And, correspondingly, such claims will no longer rule out their opposites; that God is merciful, on an Alstonian analogical interpretation, will be no guarantee that God is not cruel. These objections do not apply to Swinburnean analogical interpretations, however. On a Swinburnean analogical account, if “God is merciful” is an analogical assertion then it means that God is more similar to standard examples of merciful things than to standard examples of non-merciful things. But the most standard example of a non-merciful thing is a *cruel* person. So “God is merciful” will in fact rule out a similarly analogically interpreted “God is cruel.” Whereas on an Alstonian analogical interpretation, “God is *x*” would be true for almost any value of *x*, Swinburne’s analogical interpretation rules out at least 50% of possible values of *x* since it requires that God be *more* similar to cases of *x* than to cases of non-*x*, and this requirement can at most be filled by one of every pair of contradictory descriptors. And thus Swinburnean analogical claims, unlike Alstonian analogical claims, will have at least *some* theoretical implications: “God is merciful” will imply “God is not cruel.”

However, some of Alston’s objections to appeals to irreducible analogy remain untouched by the Swinburnean proposal developed in the previous section. It may be true that “God is merciful” will imply that God is not cruel, on the Swinburnean analogical interpretation,

but that is about all it will imply. We will still not be able to infer from “God is merciful” and from “A merciful being will forgive the sins of the truly repentant” that *God* will forgive the sins of the truly repentant, nor will we be able to infer from “God has commanded us to love one another” that we are obligated to love one another. One might be tempted to think that, since the proposal has us understand the analogical claim “God is merciful” to mean that God is *relevantly* similar to a merciful being, then “God is merciful” *would* entail that God will forgive the sins of the truly repentant, since that seems like a maximally relevant feature of mercifulness. However, if we were able to draw that inference, that would mean that “God is merciful” was not an *irreducibly* analogical claim, because it would mean we were able to pinpoint the specific respects in which the similarity held. Thus, for the Swinburnean proposal I have offered to be a description of a kind of *irreducibly* analogical claim, we cannot simply assume that those S-properties which seem most relevant to us are the ones that the analogical claim is actually ascribing to God.

3.2 A loosening of syntactic rules

Thus, at least at this point in the discussion, it does not seem as if we have entirely escaped evisceration. However, Swinburne’s account of analogy includes resources I have not yet mentioned: what I have been calling “Swinburnean analogy” up until this point has been a simplified version of Swinburne’s conception of analogy. Swinburne’s precise account is this:

When the meaning of a word ‘*W*’ is modified by changing the role of examples in the semantic rule for its use (*viz.* saying that to be ‘*W*’ an object has only to resemble the standard objects more than objects which are standard cases of ‘not-*W*’ objects, but need no longer to resemble the former to the extent to which they resemble each other) and by loosening some syntactic rules (so that some inferences are no longer valid), I shall say that the word ‘*W*’ has come to be used

(by comparison with its old use) ‘analogically’. The loosening of rules means that ‘*W*’ comes to designate a different property *W**.¹⁶

Up until this point in the chapter, what I have been describing as “Swinburnean analogy” has included only the changes to the “semantic rules” that Swinburne describes, where by “semantic rule” Swinburne means “a rule which points out or describes coherently examples of particular objects or kinds of objects to which the term [in question] is correctly applied.”¹⁷ A word used analogically, Swinburne says, has its semantic rule loosened such that it no longer refers only to those things normally in its extension, but can now also be applied to things similar to the things normally in its extension. However, Swinburne also says that words used analogically have their “syntactic rules” loosened, where by “syntactic rule” he means a verbal definition or explanation of the meaning of a word.

To see how Swinburne’s full account works, it will be necessary to look at the way he actually applies it. Richard Swinburne’s account of the nature of God in *The Coherence of Theism* is almost entirely a univocal one: he repeatedly insists over the course of the work that he is not using words in analogical senses, and that moral goodness, knowledge, power, and free will should be understood as applying to God in well-understood univocal senses. Nonetheless, Swinburne finds it necessary to “play the analogical card” at one crucial point in his account.

The reason for this appeal is an otherwise irresolvable incompatibility between two claims that Swinburne takes the theist to wish to make about God. The first claim is that God is a “personal ground of being,” which is to say that God is a person and is “eternally perfectly free, omnipotent, and omniscient,” and furthermore that God is *essentially* these things: just as a

¹⁶ Swinburne, *Coherence of Theism*, 60.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 32.

human being could not become a cat without ceasing to exist as the individual she is, God could not cease to be a personal ground of being without simply ceasing to exist.¹⁸ (And of course for God to cease to exist is impossible, because one of his essential traits is that he is eternal). One of the implications of this claim is thus that God always has existed and always will exist as the particular kind of being just described.

The second claim is that God is “necessarily identical with any individual who is related to him by the relation of continuity of experience.”¹⁹ The reason Swinburne needs this second claim is that he takes there to be a distinction, at least conceptually, between the particular *individual* (i.e. person) God is and the particular *being* God is. These are conceptually distinct because the criterion of identity of an individual is continuity of experience, but the criterion of identity of a *being* is that it continues to possess all its essential properties. Now, the theist does not merely want to say that the being which is God will exist eternally; the theist wants to say that the particular individual who is God will exist eternally, and is necessarily and essentially (rather than accidentally or temporarily) a personal ground of being.

However, Swinburne argues, while it is crucially important for the individualist theist to insist on the truth of both of these claims about God, they are also incompatible. It is possible to coherently imagine an individual who was omnipotent or omniscient later ceasing to be so. The reason for this is that the criterion of identity of an individual is continuity of experience, not sameness of properties. Thus, an individual might be omnipotent, but cannot be essentially omnipotent, whereas the personal ground of being is by definition essentially omnipotent. And so we cannot consistently say that the personal ground of being is *necessarily identical* with the

¹⁸ Ibid., 272.

¹⁹ Ibid., 271.

individual, even though we *must* say it if we are to hold that the individual who is God is truly and essentially eternal.

The contradiction Swinburne finds here seems like one that it would be possible to resist in several ways. For example, we might prefer to deny that continuity of experience is always the determining criterion of identity for an individual. But I will set that issue aside. For the sake of argument, I will assume that the description of God as a person who has all his properties essentially gives rise to some such contradiction as Swinburne describes. I am interested, not in the specifics of Swinburne's position regarding God's personhood, but instead in the general *form* of Swinburne's position, and in his general strategy for dealing with the threat of a contradiction within his theology.

Swinburne's strategy works as follows. Swinburne takes himself (and other personalist theists) to be committed to two claims which, if interpreted straightforwardly and univocally, are incompatible. Thus in order to retain both claims, he needs to interpret at least one of them analogically. The most promising approach in this case, he thinks, is to interpret the word "person" as irreducibly analogical when applied to God. Interpreting "person" analogically will mean that other terms with close conceptual connections to the concept of personhood, such as thinking and acting, will also need to be interpreted analogically. This results in the following general account:

Now suppose . . . we retain the same standard examples of 'persons', 'thoughts', 'actions', etc. but insist that in order to be a 'person' or 'thought' or 'action' something only needs to resemble the standard examples more than it resembles things which are clear cases of 'non-persons', 'non-thoughts', etc., but does not need to resemble the standard examples as much as they resemble each other Suppose further that (with a certain exception) we retain all the syntactic rules linking these terms with each other and with other terms; as before, a 'person' is

(of logical necessity) an animate being who has ‘thoughts’ and performs ‘actions’ of a certain complexity. A ‘person’ who ‘knows’ *p*, ‘believes’ *p*. And so on.²⁰

On Swinburne’s account, we speak analogically in describing God as a person, and at a first approximation what that means is that God is *similar* to a person. However, Swinburne’s account is also far more specific than that. In contrast to Alston who takes for granted that inferences cannot be drawn from irreducibly analogical claims, Swinburne’s account of analogy is robust enough to allow for substantial inferences to be drawn even from irreducibly analogical claims.

Take “person*” to denote what “person” means when said analogically of God.

Swinburne asserts that, with one exception, the syntactic rules (i.e. verbal definitions and explanations of meaning) for the term “person*” are the same as the syntactic rules for the term “person.” Now, some terms (such as “thought,” “action,” and “knowledge”) are intrinsically personal terms; these must be interpreted as irreducibly analogical when applied to God if “person” is irreducibly analogical when applied to God, and so we attribute to God thought*, not thought; action*, not action, and so on. Thus, all of these personal terms stand in proportionally the same relationships to each other, in speech about God, that the terms stand in to each other when used univocally in speech about ordinary persons. For example, since ordinarily the claim that X knows *p* entails that X believes *p*, it follows that the claim that God knows* *p* entails that God believes* *p*.

But with this caveat that other personal terms must also be given analogically extended senses, and with the one exception I’ll explain momentarily, anything we would normally take to follow simply by definition from the claim that someone is a person will also follow by definition from the claim that someone is a person*. That is what it means to say that the

²⁰ Ibid., 273-74.

“syntactic rules” for “person” remain (almost entirely) the same when we use the word analogically. And so, in those cases in which the terms involved are not so intrinsically tied up with the concept of personhood, Swinburne thinks we can infer perfectly *univocal* claims from the claim that God is a person, or from other personal claims about God. Thus Swinburne asserts above that since the claim that X is a person entails that X is an animate being, the claim that God is a person* entails that God is an animate being—not analogically, but in the normal sense.

The one exception to this preservation of definitional inferences, Swinburne says, is that we would normally infer from the fact that X is a person that X is necessarily identical with the particular individual X is, and from this we would normally infer that X is *not* essentially the particular kind of being that it is. But we rule this particular inference out as illegitimate in the case of God.²¹ That is, Swinburne rules out the particular implication of the claim “God is a person” (and of related claims) which would render his theology inconsistent if it was allowed, but retains all the other implications that would normally follow by definition from the assertion “X is a person” (or from related claims).

Whether or not one finds Swinburne’s particular argument about the term “person” convincing, his strategy here is an ingenious one. Swinburne appeals, at this particular point in his theology, to an irreducible analogy. But whereas I have taken for granted in my account up until now that an irreducibly analogical claim will be one that we *cannot* infer anything from, Swinburne has carefully constructed his account of analogy in such a way as to allow us to infer

²¹ “We abandon any syntactic rules which . . . allow us to deduce from ‘God is *miniesentially* a personal ground of being’ that ‘God is not necessarily . . . identical with any animate being with whom he is related by the relation of continuity of experience’ (Ibid., 274). He clarifies the point by saying, “in claiming that God is necessarily the kind of person which he is, the theist claims that God is a necessarily eternal being. Being what he is, he cannot cease to be. Clearly, only with a stretched sense of ‘person’ can the theist coherently make that claim” (276).

most of the normal entailments even from an irreducibly analogical assertion. His appeal to analogy is so tightly constrained that he is still able draw the usual inferences from the claim that God is a “person” even though he is taking “person” to be irreducibly analogical when said of God. And so one might well find Swinburne’s general strategy as described here a tempting one, whether or not one is convinced by his particular application of it in the case of the term “person.”

Despite these careful constraints, Swinburne’s appeal to analogy is not without cost, as he acknowledges. Swinburne’s goal in *The Coherence of Theism* is, as the title suggests, to defend the conceptual coherence of traditional theism. The cost of his appeal to irreducible analogy is that he is unable to decisively achieve that goal.²² To demonstrate that traditional theism is coherent would require that we demonstrate that the different attributes theists ascribe to God are all logically possible attributes which are all logically compatible with one another. Swinburne’s attempt to prove that theism is coherent is stymied, however, by the fact that the attribute of personhood seems incompatible with some of the other attributes Swinburne takes God to have. His solution to this problem is to assert that God is not strictly a person but instead a person*, where a person* is almost exactly like a person with the exception that being a person* is *not* incompatible with those other attributes he takes God to have. However, since Swinburne can spell out what it means to be a person* only by appealing in this way to an unspecified and unspecifiable similarity to persons, this solution falls far short of an actual demonstration that the attributes Swinburne wishes to ascribe to God are actually consistent. On the contrary, the appeal to analogy amounts to a simple assertion that the attributes ascribed to God *are* consistent,

²² Ibid., 278.

despite the fact that they seem on the face of it not to be, and despite the fact that we cannot see how they *could* be. After all, if we could see a way for them to be consistent, Swinburne would not need to appeal to analogy in the first place.

Swinburne's appeal to analogy does save him from any accusation of actual incoherence; he is not entangled in any actual contradiction. But the appeal to analogy saves him from incoherence only by leaving a blank space in the middle of his theology which would need to be filled in order to render the theology a proper, fully comprehensible description—yet we are unable to specify anything which could fill that blank, because all the candidate concepts we are able to conceive of turn out not to fit into the blank spot without causing a contradiction. Swinburne's defense of his theology amounts to the bare assertion that *something* does fit precisely into that blank spot, even though he is completely unable to actually supply anything that does.

I do not mean the above description of Swinburne's position as a criticism: as an advocate of the doctrine of analogy, I think some such a position really probably is the best we mortals can do in speaking about God. If I disagree with Swinburne, it is in thinking that the blank spot is much larger than he has supposed. But it is important to recognize how great a concession even a single appeal to irreducible analogy is, even when that appeal to irreducible analogy is as carefully restricted in scope as Swinburne's is.

3.3 The trouble with Swinburne's account

The real problem with Swinburne's position, in my view, is that it constructs a theology that includes an irreducibly analogical term—a black box, a blank spot—and yet posits that it is

still possible to confidently infer things from that blank spot. This claim is not exactly incoherent; what Swinburne proposes is not a logical impossibility. But it makes no sense to think that we could, practically speaking, ever actually end up in such an epistemic situation. To see why I say this, however, will take a little time.

Swinburne's theory requires that we assume that a concept could be modified in such a way that *one* of its key implications no longer holds. In his particular example, he holds that in the analogical use of the term "person," the syntactic rules for the term are modified such that something's being a person no longer entails that it is *not* essentially eternal, or essentially omniscient, etc. Yet he holds that all the *other* implications of the term "person" remain the same. One might worry that I am oversimplifying matters in saying this, since Swinburne does say that other terms like "thought" and "knowledge" and "action" which are closely tied up with the concept of person will also have to be analogically extended, such that if something's being a person entails that it has thoughts, something's being a person* will only entail that it has thoughts*. However, these *other* terms *also* have their syntactic rules modified *only* to the extent that they no longer entail that one particular contradictory claim just noted. So in practice, all the implications of the term "person" remain the same except for the implication that something's being a person means it is not essentially eternal, essentially omniscient, etc.

But this doesn't make sense. A concept is not just a bundle of implications, such that we could remove one item from the bundle and leave the rest of them untouched. Swinburne's way of speaking about the meaning of a word as constituted by sets of "semantic rules" and "syntactic rules" makes it tempting to think of words that way; if we describe a word's meaning as consisting of some such set of rules it does indeed sound plausible that we might simply remove

one rule while leaving the rest untouched. But at least in *most* cases—and certainly in the case of the word “person” in particular—a word’s meaning is *not* helpfully described as consisting in sets of discrete, atomic, “semantic rules” and “syntactic rules.” The word “person” means a *particular kind of thing*, and the implications of something’s being a person follow from that meaning. And so one can’t eliminate one implication while leaving all the rest of them unaltered.

To illustrate, consider the following analogical extension of the term “square”: to be a square*, something needs to be more similar to standard examples of squares than to standard examples of non-squares, but we eliminate from the concept the requirement that it have corners which are points. It’s easy enough to imagine the sorts of things that might constitute square*s: a square shape with rounded corners, for example, or with a bit missing at each corner. However, what would *not* be intelligible is to assert that the analogical extension of the term “square” eliminates the implication that if something is a square, it has corners which are points, but that it retains all of its *other* syntactic rules—that is, that it retains all its other definitional implications. Other things that normally follow from something’s being a square are that it has precisely four sides, that it is an enclosed geometric shape, and that its area equals the product of its height and width. It’s absurd to think we could retain all of these implications while simultaneously abandoning the rule that says that something’s being a square entails that it has corners which are points. But this is the sort of thing Swinburne supposes we can do in the case of “person.”

One might object that the “square” example is rather different from Swinburne’s example, because in the “square” case it’s possible to *prove* that the purported analogical extension makes no sense. It’s possible to prove that something cannot have the *other* geometrical properties of a square without having corners which are points, and no such decisive

proof is possible in Swinburne's case. But suppose a student of mine has just this morning learned about the concept of non-Euclidean space, or about the theory that there are many more than three dimensions in physical space. This student proposes that perhaps, in some extra-dimensional or non-Euclidean space, there is such a thing as a square* which lacks corners which are points but from which we can safely infer all the other usual entailments of something's being a square. Given the vague form of this student's proposal, it would be impossible at least for most ordinary mortals, lacking a clear understanding of the implications of non-Euclidean or extra-dimensional geometry, to decisively disprove such a claim. And yet I would be well within my rights to remark that such a proposal is absurd, because that's just not how concepts work. The different entailments of something's being a square cannot be neatly teased apart from one another like that; it would be, at the very least, utterly astonishing if it turned out that something could retain all the properties of being a square *except* the property of having corners which are points. Nothing short of truly decisive demonstration could give us any reason to think such a thing is possible.

In Swinburne's defense, however, we might note that not all concepts have their various implications so thoroughly tied up with one another as is the case with "square." For example, suppose I were to propose a Swinburnean analogical definition of the term "unicorn." First, the term has its meaning loosened such that in order to be called a "unicorn," a thing need only resemble standard examples of unicorns more than it resembles standard examples of non-unicorns. Second, suppose we retain all the "syntactic rules" associated with the word "unicorn" *except* that whereby we are able to infer from something's being a unicorn that it has a horn. This second example seems much more reasonable than my first one. It really does seem possible to

posit a loosened use of the word “unicorn” which eliminates the implication that it has a horn, while keeping all of its other implications. The analogical use of the term “unicorn” simply adds horses to the extension of the word.²³ In this case, it really *does* seem possible to eliminate one “syntactic rule” from the meaning of the word, while retaining all of the others unchanged, and to have as a result a perfectly good concept.

However, the reason it’s possible to do this in the case of “unicorn” is precisely that the concept “unicorn” is a conjunctive concept: at least as I have used it in the above example, the term “unicorn” just means “a horse with a horn sticking out of its head.” To be a unicorn is to fulfill two completely distinct and separable criteria. One is to be a horse—or more precisely, to have the precise collection of equine properties (whatever exactly those are) that both a horse and a unicorn have essentially. The other is to have a horn sticking out of one’s head. Because that is the structure of the concept of a unicorn, it’s possible to then formulate an “analogical” concept which works perfectly well in the way Swinburne proposes.

So is “person” like “square,” or is it like “unicorn”? That is, is the concept “person” one with a sort of internal unity, or is it a mere conjunction of more basic, logically distinct and separable concepts? It seems to me that it is the former: indeed, if anything, “person” seems even *more* internally unified than “square.” Certainly it is not at all a mere conjunctive concept like “unicorn.” But Swinburne’s theory of analogy would only make sense if “person” were a concept like “unicorn.”

²³ This assumes that a unicorn is simply a horse with a horn. That definition which could be challenged on mythological grounds, since unicorns have other special properties, such as only being able to be captured by virgins, and on philosophical grounds, since Kripke argues that something that merely fit the description of a unicorn would not thereby be a unicorn (Saul A. Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980], 23-24, 156-58). But for the purposes of this example, I mean to count as a unicorn any animal which has a horn coming out of its head and is in every other respect just like a horse.

Consider one more example that is similar in some respects to the situation Swinburne posits.²⁴ As Kuhn has demonstrated, different scientific paradigms are incommensurable: the new theory cannot be clearly explained as a response to or even a contradiction of the old theory, because the new theory requires that we give new meanings to many of the old terms, at which point the competing theorists will talk past each other. As a result, the task of communicating the new paradigm to those still thinking in terms of the old one is tricky. Consider one specific such paradigm shift: Maxwell's theory of electromagnetics posits that electromagnetic phenomena, including electricity, magnetism, and light, are constituted by waves. Since a wave is by definition a disturbance traveling through a medium, there must be some medium which electromagnetic waves travel *through*, and so Maxwell and his followers posit an "ether" which is this medium. By contrast, on the theory of special relativity, while electromagnetic phenomena do act like waves, there *is* no ether. The wave-like properties of these phenomena have to do, in part, with the behavior of the electromagnetic field, which exerts a force independently of any medium.

One attempting to communicate the new theory to someone still mired in the old paradigm has a difficult task. Aristides Baltas highlights an especially striking attempt at cross-paradigm communication by Stephen Weinberg: "A field is a taut membrane without the membrane."²⁵ This statement is obviously contradictory if taken as a literal and non-analogical

²⁴ I have borrowed the example in this paragraph from Aristides Baltas, "Nonsense and Paradigm Change," in *Rethinking Scientific Change and Theory Comparison: Stabilities, Ruptures, Incommensurabilities*, ed. Léna Soler, Howard Sankey, and Paul Hoyningen-Huene (Dordrecht: Springer, 2008), 49–70. My understanding of this example is heavily indebted to Baltas' interpretation. However, whereas Baltas argues that the sort of statements produced by one attempting to communicate across incommensurable paradigms are *nonsense*, which serve as a Wittgensteinian ladder to be thrown away once one has reached the top, I prefer to see them as *analogical* statements which look contradictory only if one fails to recognize that they are analogical.

²⁵ Stephen Weinberg, "The Search for Unity: Notes for a History of Quantum Field Theory," *Daedalus* 106, no. 4 (1977): 17–35, cited in Baltas, "Nonsense and Paradigm Change," 56.

utterance, but despite this feature, it can serve effectively as a “bridge” to help one grasp the new theory. Similarly, a proponent of special relativity might describe light as “a wave, but without a medium.” Such a description may no longer sound contradictory to us, but in the era of classical mechanics, it was as nonsensical as positing ocean waves without any ocean. And yet it may be a useful thing to say all the same.

Let’s take the statement, “Light is a wave, but without a medium” as a sort of analogue of Swinburne’s assertion, “God is a person, but one who has certain properties (eternity, omniscience, etc.) essentially.” According to Swinburne, the latter statement is, if taken non-analogically, a contradiction, just as the former statement would be a contradiction for a scientist in the era of classical mechanics. Swinburne’s analogical approach involves loosening the meaning of the term “person” in such a way that something’s being a person no longer entails that it does not have certain properties (eternity, omniscience, etc.) essentially. Similarly, someone who is looking at things from the perspective of classical mechanics, but attempting to get their mind around the new paradigm of special relativity, might attempt an analogical loosening of the meaning of the word “wave,” in such a way that something’s being a wave no longer entails that there is a medium it is a disturbance of. The whole point of Weinberg’s paradoxical description is that it tells us to eliminate *one* implication of the original concept of a wave, while retaining many of the other implications of that concept—just as Swinburne tells us to do with the claim that God is a person.

However, what would *not* have been reasonable is for those who asserted, “Light is a wave, but without a medium,” to hold that all the ordinary implications of “light is a wave” *other* than the implication that it has a medium continue to apply when the term is used analogically.

That would only make sense if the concept of a wave worked like the concept of a unicorn; specifically, it would only work if the concept of a wave was a *conjunction* of two completely separable concepts: having a medium, and everything else. And that is obviously not the case. And so, although initially it might make sense for a learner to say, “Light is just like a wave, except that there is no medium,” in time it must become clear that light differs from (classical mechanical) waves in many other ways too. For instance, it would normally follow from something’s being a wave that it is *not* a particle, yet this does not follow in the case of light. It doesn’t make sense to think that we could remove *one* implication from something’s being a wave—that there is a medium it is a disturbance of—without any of the *other* implications of something’s being a wave being affected as well. Yet it is that precise operation which Swinburne argues we ought to make with the claim that God is a person.

Swinburne defends his analogical account of God’s personhood in part by arguing that it is “a claim which is not altogether remote from mundane thinking.”²⁶ Without going into the details of Swinburne’s argument for saying this, the general thrust of the argument is that it is not really all that strange to think that God could be (essentially) a person who is *also* necessarily eternal, omnipotent, etc.: “There is no reason in principle why a claim to the effect that there exists now a person of a certain kind should not carry entailments about past and future”—i.e., should not entail that he always has been and always will be that particular kind of entity with those particular properties—“but a person of the kind with which we are concerned would have to be a person of a very different kind from ordinary persons.”²⁷ Now this line of argument, it seems to me, represents some significant backpedaling on Swinburne’s part. The reason analogy

²⁶ Swinburne, *Coherence of Theism*, 276.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 277.

was required in the first place was that, according to Swinburne, it is *contradictory* to say that God is a person who is essentially eternal. That is an entirely different matter from saying merely that a person who is essentially eternal would be a different *kind* of person than ordinary.

I myself am not particularly committed to Swinburne's view that there is a logical contradiction in describing someone as a person who is essentially eternal and omnipotent. But if it *is* a contradiction, then it's no good saying, as Swinburne does here, that we can see how it might nonetheless be true. And if it really is the case that "there's no reason in principle" why a being couldn't combine these properties, and that God really is just a very strange *kind* of person, then there was no need for an appeal to irreducible analogy in the first place. *If* there is a case in which irreducible analogy is the only way to avoid contradiction, we cannot defend a Swinburnean appeal to analogy by arguing that the particular analogical claim being made really seems pretty reasonable and plausible after all. To be in a position to make such a judgment, we would need to know what we were talking about: we would need to be dealing with non-analogical (or at least reducibly analogical) claims.

Thus the Swinburnean strategy for appealing to irreducible analogy does not seem plausible. His theory about the meaning of the term "person" as applied to God is not incoherent; it can't be proven wrong. But it is literally incredible. I cannot imagine any situation in which I would think I had grounds of any sort at all to actually *believe* that such a being existed, or even that such a being was possible. Any actual arguments or evidence or intuitions or pragmatic justification—any appealing grounds for belief of *any* kind—would be grounds for belief in a univocal person, or in something vaguely similar to a person, or in a non-person. They would *not* be grounds for belief in the very specific kind of person-like thing described by Swinburne's

account. By the same token, any grounds for believing that God is *not* univocally a person will be grounds for believing either that God is only analogically a person, or that God is simply not a person; they would not be grounds for belief in the God of Swinburne's account. The only grounds I can imagine for thinking God is a "person" in precisely Swinburne's analogical sense would be if that precise claim were divinely revealed. But I think I can safely assume no such revelation has occurred.

This point about the grounds one might have to believe such a being exists raises a second, perhaps even more worrying problem. Recall that Swinburne's only reason for positing this strange concept is that he is caught between two undesirable options. On the one hand, if he does not appeal to irreducible analogy, his theology will be logically contradictory. On the other hand, Swinburne distrusts appeals to analogy, fearing that "if theology uses too many words in analogical senses it will convey virtually nothing by what it says."²⁸ As a result of this worry, he restricts his appeal to irreducible analogy to the absolute minimum; he not only makes sure to appeal to irreducible analogy only once in his theology, but he also insists that almost all of the normal implications of the word are still implied by the analogical use of it. Because of this restriction, he is able to reassure his reader that, "although I have loosened up the meanings of those words, I have not emptied them of meaning . . . information is still conveyed by the use of the words."²⁹ The claim that God is a "person" still has almost all of its usual implications, even though it is analogical.

This strategy is ingenious, but it has a crucial failing: while the above considerations constitute reasons of a sort for Swinburne to adopt the theological theory he adopts, they

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 70.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 277.

constitute absolutely no reason for thinking that such a theological theory would be *true*. Whatever sort of being God is, his being the kind of being he is will not be responsive to concerns about whether appealing too much to analogical senses will result in a theology that conveys virtually nothing by what it says. Our claims about what kind of being God actually is cannot be guided by considerations about what sort of theology *we* have to have in order for our theology not to be empty—at least not if we want a theology which is both true and realist in purport. But those are precisely the considerations Swinburne is relying on to develop his theology.

Swinburne's argument in *The Coherence of Theism* is not intended to show that the God he describes actually *exists*; in this text he intends only to argue that it is (probably) coherent to suppose that such a being *could* exist. Since I must admit that Swinburne's proposal is not positively incoherent, my objections here do not really undermine Swinburne's stated aim. However, as my goal is to propose a way of speaking and thinking about God which can be satisfactory for the purposes of actual religious life, I must reject Swinburnean analogy as inadequate to the task.

Alston's conception of an irreducibly analogical theology, on which the contents of the believer's assertions are things like "God is in some significant way like a merciful being," is too empty to be of any use. As Alston demonstrates, such an account would have neither theoretical nor practical implications. We can slightly improve the situation by modifying Alston's conception with Swinburne's slightly more specific appeal to similarity, such that we understand the believer to be saying that God is *more* similar to a merciful being than to a non-merciful being, but this modification is not enough to escape the problem Alston highlights. On the other

hand, Swinburne's conception of a theology that appeals to irreducible analogy goes too far in the opposite direction in its attempt to avoid theological evisceration. Swinburne's irreducibly analogical theological claims have lots of theoretical and practical implications, but they are bizarre and incredible, and we could never have grounds of any sort to think that they even *might* be true. To satisfactorily respond to Alston's critique will require a different approach.

There are two more proposals which might seem like tempting solutions to our problem, which warrant discussion. The first of these proposals is that we interpret claims about God as assertions of *proportional* similarities, rather than direct similarities. The second is Alston's favored solution: that we interpret claims about God as *partially* but not wholly univocal.

4. Proportionality as a solution to the problem

Many people have been inclined to think that appealing to *proportional* analogies offers a way out of otherwise inescapable difficulties with speaking about God. Two such proportional strategies are sometimes proposed. On one strategy, rather than asserting direct similarity claims like "God is similar to a wise person," we can instead assert the existence of proportional relationships such as "God is to the world as an artist to her creations" or "God is to human beings as a loving father to his children." Such proportional assertions seem to offer a way to suggest *something* of the truth about God, but without asserting the existence of a *direct* similarity between God and any creature. The other strategy is to assert proportions of the form God's love:God::human love:humans.³⁰ In this second case, what the proportionality asserts is

³⁰ This conception of proportional analogy used to speak of God is especially associated with the Thomistic tradition descended from Cajetan's work. See for example Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *God: His Existence and His Nature: A Thomistic Solution of Certain Agnostic Antinomies*, vol. 2 (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1936), 208 and Dorothy M. Emmet, *The Nature of Metaphysical Thinking* (London: Macmillan, 1949), 176.

not something about God's relation to us, but instead something about God's relation to his own properties. Either "God is to human beings as a loving father is to his children," or "God's love is to God as human love is to humans" could be used to express what is meant by "God is loving," but in different ways.

In one of Aquinas's earlier works, he argues that we speak analogically of God, but that the form of the analogy must be proportional rather than direct. He describes two forms of analogy: analogy of "proportion" (by which he means not proportional analogy, but rather something like "relation") and analogy of "proportionality" (by which he means proportional analogy):

Two kinds of community can be noted in analogy. There is a certain agreement between things having a proportion to each other from the fact that they have a determinate distance between each other or some other relation to each other, like the proportion which the number two has to unity in as far as it is the double of unity. Again, the agreement is occasionally noted not between two things which have a proportion between them, but rather between two related proportions—for example, six has something in common with four because six is two times three, just as four is two times two. The first type of agreement is one of proportion; the second, of proportionality

In those terms predicated according to the first type of analogy, there must be some definite relation between the things having something in common analogously. Consequently, nothing can be predicated analogously of God and creature according to this type of analogy; for no creature has such a relation to God that it could determine the divine perfection. But in the other type of analogy, no definite relation is involved between the things which have something in common analogously, so there is no reason why some name cannot be predicated analogously of God and creature in this manner.³¹

Aquinas's argument in this early work is fairly unconvincing, because it is based on a false dilemma. This passage posits that there are only two analogical options: one is analogy of proportionality, and the other is the sort of similarity that holds between things which are

³¹ *De veritate* q. 2 a. 11. All quotations from *De veritate* taken from Thomas Aquinas, *Truth*, trans. Robert W. Mulligan, 3 vols. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994).

members of a common genus, related in something like the way 2 is to 1. However, if we grant that limited set of options, the preference for proportionality is understandable. A certain form of analogical speech would posit direct similarities between God and creatures, such that God and creatures are taken to be members of a common genus who can therefore be directly compared without difficulty. This position would undermine God's transcendence. By contrast, proportional analogies seem not to entail any such direct similarities. A proportionality posits, not a direct similarity between God and creature, but instead a similarity between the relation God has to some x and the relation some y has to some z . Thus, proportionality seems like a way we can say something about God without directly comparing God to creatures.

Aquinas seems to have soon abandoned the above argument as a mistake, and in his mature works (including the *ST*) he does not rely on proportional analogy.³² However, Aquinas is not the only figure who has thought that proportionality might offer special resources for speaking about a transcendent God.

Kant, like the early Aquinas, rejects direct ascriptions of similarity to God and takes proportional analogy to be the only appropriate way to speak about God. Defining analogy as "a perfect similarity between two relations in wholly dissimilar things," he asserts,

By means of such an analogy I can therefore provide a concept of a relation to things that are absolutely unknown to me. E.g., the promotion of the happiness of the children = a is to the love of the parents = b as the welfare of humankind = c is

³² See George P. Klubertanz, *St. Thomas Aquinas on Analogy: A Textual Analysis and Systematic Synthesis* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1960) and White, *Talking about God*, 82-87 for an analysis of the shift in Aquinas's thought about analogy over the course of his career. The fact that Aquinas abandoned his early views did not prevent many generations of commentators from attributing to Aquinas a doctrine of proportional analogy and reading it back into his mature works such as the *ST*. As Klubertanz notes, Thomas Cajetan's interpretation of Aquinas's writings about analogy as presenting a concept of "analogy of proper proportionality" came to be understood as *the* Thomistic doctrine of analogy until well into the twentieth century, though it is now widely rejected as a misinterpretation. For criticisms of Cajetan's interpretation, see also Ralph McInerny, *Aquinas and Analogy* (Washington, D. C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1996). The works of McInerny and Klubertanz, among others, have convinced most contemporary scholars to reject Cajetan's interpretations of Aquinas.

to the unknown in God = x, which we call love: not as if this unknown had the least similarity with any human inclination, but because we can posit the relation between God's love and the world to be similar to that which things in the world have to one another

By means of this analogy there still remains a concept of the supreme being sufficiently determinate for us, though we have omitted everything that could have *determined* this concept unconditionally and *in itself*; for we determine the concept only with respect to the world and hence with respect to us, and we have no need of more. The attacks that *Hume* makes against those who want to determine this concept absolutely—since they borrow the materials for this determination from themselves and from the world—do not touch us; he also cannot reproach us that nothing whatsoever would remain to us, if objective anthropomorphism should be subtracted from the concept of the supreme being.³³

Kant is responding here to a dilemma put forth by Hume: to simply ascribe human traits directly to God is unacceptable anthropomorphism, but if we strip from the concept of God any such human traits, we are left with an empty deism, “which can be of no use to us, and which can in no way serve as a foundation for religion and morals.”³⁴ Kant takes proportionality to be the way out of this problem. We can use proportional assertions to give some content beyond bare deism to claims about God. If, for example, God bears a similar relationship to us as a parent does to a child, this claim tells me something more than bare deism about how God relates to me, and it has practical implications, for if God is to us as a parent is to a child, then we ought to obey him. However, because we are speaking only proportionally, nothing in this claim applies any anthropomorphic concept directly to God. The claim is one about God's relation to us, not about God himself. Thus, proportional analogy seems to enable us to use human concepts to speak about God while avoiding inappropriate anthropomorphism.

Proportional analogies have a valuable role to play in speaking about God, I have no quarrel with the use of proportionally analogical claims like “God is to human beings as a loving

³³ Kant, *Prolegomena*, 4:357-58.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 4:356.

father is to his children.” However, proportional analogy does not have the special status Kant and the early Aquinas take it to have, and it will not enable us to escape the problems associated with direct, simple similarity claims.

The reason is that, as I argued in Chapter 1, proportional analogies of the form $a:b::c:d$ entail direct similarities between a and c , and between b and d .³⁵ A proportional analogy is a similarity between two *relationships*, where by “relationship” I mean the collection of all relations that hold between two specified relata. More specifically, a proportional analogy takes the form of those two relationships sharing some particular *relation* in common. Thus if we assert that God is to human beings as a loving father is to his children, what we are asserting is that there is some particular relation R which holds both between God and human beings and between a loving father and his children. But if there is such a relation that holds between both, it follows that God and a loving father both share the property *being intrinsically able to stand in relation R to some x* . Furthermore, while this property is, so to speak, extrinsically *denominated* (in that we have described the property via the extrinsic matter of a relation to some other thing) it is an *intrinsic* property, because whether a thing is the sort of thing that can stand in a certain relation R depends entirely on that thing itself, not on anything outside it.

Thus, those who have appealed to proportional analogy in an attempt to avoid positing any *direct* similarity between God and creatures are wrong to think such a strategy could succeed. A proportional analogy entails the existence of at least some minimal direct similarity between the analogates, and thus if there is a proportional analogy between God and creatures, there are also direct similarities between God and creatures. One cannot consistently posit

³⁵ See pp. 30-32.

proportional analogies between God and creatures while denying that there are direct similarities between them.

One might object, however, that my argument above illegitimately assumes that a proportional analogy must involve the two relationships in question sharing the very same relation R. This might seem rather too strict. Couldn't the two relationships in question be similar, not by virtue of sharing the very same relation, but instead by virtue of including *similar* relations R and R*?

Suppose then that there is a proportional analogy of the form $a:b::c:d$. And suppose that the specific proportional similarity which constitutes this proportional analogy is that aRb and cR^*d , where R is similar to R*. How is R similar to R*? One option is that R is similar to R* by virtue of some relation S which is a more generic relation which encompasses both R and R*. For example, *being taller than* and *being wider than* are not the same relation, but they are similar relations by virtue of the fact that both are sub-relations, so to speak, of the more generic relation *being longer in one of the three dimensions than*. Now, if R and R* are similar in *that* way, then the fact that a bears R to b and c bears R* to d will entail that there is some broader relation S which holds between *both* pairs of analogates. And in that case, it is S that is the real similarity between the two relationships, not the more specific relations R and R*. And so, if *this* is the way that R and R* are similar, we have just returned to my initial position that the relationships in a proportional analogy are similar by virtue of having a relation in common—in this case, S.

So if we want to find a way for a proportional analogy not to entail any direct similarity between the analogates, we need R and R* to be similar in some *other* way. The alternative is

that R and R* are similar by virtue of sharing some second-order property; for instance, perhaps both R and R* are transitive relations. That would be a way that R and R* could be similar without the relationship R is a part of and the relationship R* is a part of sharing any particular relation in common. However, as I argued in Chapter 1,³⁶ if two relationships are similar only in *this* way, that doesn't constitute a proportional analogy at all. To repeat my earlier example, no one would accept, "hamsters are to cats as mice are to 5-carat diamonds" as a proportional analogy on the grounds that hamsters are smaller than cats, mice are more plentiful than 5-carat diamonds, and *being smaller than* and *being more plentiful than* are both transitive relations.

Proportional analogy is often loosely described as consisting in similarity between two different relationships. However, as I argued in Chapter 1, that casual definition is not specific enough to pick out the concept of proportionality. A proportional analogy is not just *any* similarity between two relationships; it specifically takes the form of two relationships both including some particular relation in common. And if the relationship between *a* and *b* and the relationship between *c* and *d* include some common relation S, then it follows that *a* is similar to *c* by virtue of being the sort of thing that is able to stand in relation S to something.

I do not intend any of this as an objection to the use of proportional analogies in speaking about God. Proportional analogies cannot simply be reduced to direct, non-proportional statements of similarity about the analogates, and thus they have an important and ineliminable role to play in analogical speech about God. However, because any claim of proportional analogy involving God entails claims about direct similarities between God and creatures, appealing to proportional analogy will not help us to escape the problems associated with direct

³⁶ See pp. 28-29.

similarity claims. Proportional analogy is not the silver bullet for the problem of speaking about God that it has sometimes been taken to be.

5. Partial univocity as a solution to the problem

Like Swinburne, Alston has argued that appeals to irreducible analogy are acceptable, but only if they are strictly limited and take place in the context of an otherwise univocal theology. Alston has criticized the tendency of most philosophers of religion to take a position at one or the other extreme, taking religious language to be either entirely univocal or entirely irreducibly analogical. Instead, Alston argues for a position of “partial univocity,” on which claims about God are analogical but partially reducible to univocity.³⁷

Alston argues that most terms applied to God cannot be applied univocally, because of the vast difference between God and the creatures to whom those terms properly apply. For example, when we talk of God “speaking,” the word does not have the same sense it has when we talk of a human being “speaking,” because God is incorporeal, and so does not “speak” in the sense of employing vocal cords to produce sound.³⁸ Furthermore, Alston adheres to the traditional position that God is atemporal, and thus any ascription of temporally loaded concepts (including concepts of action or purpose) will not apply univocally to God. If God is not temporally bound, God cannot plan or decide something in the same sense a human being does,

³⁷ See especially William P. Alston, “Functionalism and Theological Language,” in *Divine Nature and Human Language: Essays in Philosophical Theology* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 64–80 and “Divine and Human Action,” in *Divine and Human Action: Essays in the Metaphysics of Theism*, ed. Thomas V. Morris (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 257–80.

³⁸ Alston, “Religious Language,” 233.

because it is an essential element of our concepts of planning, deciding, and acting that these things take place at some particular moment in time and are oriented towards the future.³⁹

But Alston rejects the view that such predicates are *entirely* non-univocal, for fear of the eviscerated theology he thinks such an approach will produce. Instead, he argues that in each of the above cases, some elements of our ordinary concept are applicable to God and some are not. To take a different example, the ascription of *making* to God, Alston argues, “What it is for God to *make something* is radically different from what it is for a human being to make something; but that does not rule out an abstract feature in common, e.g., that *by the exercise of agency something comes into existence.*”⁴⁰ This latter, more abstract concept *can* be univocally applied to both God and creatures, and constitutes the “univocal core” of the analogical claim that God makes the world. A similar strategy can be employed for a wide range of personal or psychological predicates commonly applied to God. This general approach to understanding religious language is what Alston calls “partial univocity.”

In arguing for partial univocity, Alston distances himself from the kind of flat-footed anthropomorphism which takes God to believe, speak, act, etc., in precisely the same sense as a human being does. But he is also distancing himself from the kind of theology which avoids anthropomorphism simply by *abandoning* the anthropomorphic language of biblical theology, restricting itself instead to highly abstract descriptions of God. In asserting a position of *partial* univocity, Alston is rejecting any such theological strategy as inadequate. Alston’s partial univocity is simultaneously partial *analogy*.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 234.

⁴⁰ Alston, “Functionalism and Theological Language,” 67.

The reason analogy is still irreducibly required, on Alston's account, is that the functionalist account he offers of psychological concepts as applied to God is quite thin and abstract—too thin and abstract to be sufficient for religious purposes:

The conception I have offered of a timeless 'personal system' of functionally interrelated psychological states simply does not present anything with which we can coherently conceive ourselves to be in dynamic personal relations of dialogue, support, love, or instruction. Thus it seems to be a practical necessity of the religious life to represent God as much more like a created, imperfect temporal agent than a sound theology will allow. We must, for devotional and edificatory purposes, think of God as finding out what happens as it occurs and forming intentions to deal with developing situations as they develop, even though an omniscient being, whether timeless or not, would know everything about the future at any given point in time.⁴¹

Thus Alston thinks there is an ineliminable need to appeal to analogy in speaking about God; he just takes those analogical elements to constitute only part, rather than all, of what can be said (positively and intrinsically and truly) about God.

Alston's approach, taking a middle path between the two extremes of a purely univocal theology and a purely analogical theology, has an obvious appeal. Recall, however, that the reason Alston rejects the radical version of the doctrine of analogy is that he thinks the radical approach leads to an eviscerated theology, one emptied out of any useful content. Given that, it might strike us as a little odd that Alston thinks irreducible analogy has *any* valuable role to play in a meaningful theology. If irreducibly analogical claims lack content, wouldn't we be better off *completely* doing away with them, rather than only *partially* reducing them to univocity? Alston seems to want to say both that irreducibly analogical claims are empty of usable theoretical or practical content (when considering a wholly analogical theology), but also that they are useful and even essential (when considering a partially univocal theology). Is this a consistent position?

⁴¹ Alston, "Divine and Human Action," 101.

One possible solution to this puzzle is that I may have been mistaken, just now, in ascribing to Alston the view that partially univocal claims are also partially irreducibly analogical. Alston never exactly says that; what he says is that the remainder of a partially univocal claim would be something in the realm of “analogy, metaphor, symbolism, etc.”⁴² Perhaps the non-univocal elements of a partially univocal claim about God are not really analogical, in my sense of the term, but fall into some other category of non-univocity.

And indeed, one such alternative way of understanding Alston’s position is easily available. The long passage quoted above asserts that we need to think of God as “like a created, imperfect temporal agent” even though God isn’t created, imperfect, or temporal. But it’s not clear that Alston takes this to consist in genuine *analogical* thinking, in my sense of the word. That is, it’s not clear that Alston thinks these ways of thinking about God are rooted in any actual *similarity* between God and a created, imperfect, temporal agent. Rather, it sounds more as if Alston is suggesting that employ a *fiction* or *make-believe* whereby God is similar to a created, imperfect, temporal agent, and employ that fiction for practical purposes, without taking this fiction to illuminate God’s actual nature. If so, that would be something rather different from true analogical thinking. There is an important difference between (a) an analogical assertion that *s* is similar to *x*, or that *s* is *P* where the meaning of *P* is determined by a presupposed similarity claim, and (b) a practical recommendation to *think* of *s* as an *x*, even though it isn’t, or to think of *s* as *P*, even though it isn’t.

For comparison, I once read a blog post by an author who stated that he thought of his audience as consisting in roughly 50 people, even though it was in fact much larger than that.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 102.

There are practical benefits for him in thinking of his audience this way: it helps him to write in a more conversational style and to feel less nervous about writing. This blogger's stance doesn't entail any truly *analogical* thinking, it seems to me: it's not that he thinks his audience is *similar* to an audience of 50 people. He just thinks of his audience *as if it were* a certain way, while simultaneously believing it not to be that way. Now, this sort of thought does have some important similarities to analogical thinking,⁴³ but it isn't truly analogical thinking. Certainly this blogger's stance doesn't involve any analogical *claims*; the actual propositions he is committed to regarding his audience are entirely separate from the make-believe stance he adopts in thinking about them.

Now, just as one might think of one's audience as consisting in roughly 50 people even though one knows that's not true, one might think of God as "finding out what happens as it occurs," as Alston says, even though one believes that God is timeless. Just as in the case of the shy blogger, there are practical grounds for engaging in this kind of thinking. As Alston notes, at least in many traditions, it is a requirement of the religious life that we pray, expect God to hear and respond to our prayers, and in other ways think of ourselves as standing in an ongoing interpersonal (and hence interactive) relationship to God. But it would be, at best, extremely difficult to do this while also consistently thinking of God as timeless. So the believer should think of God as existing in time, in order to be able to relate rightly to God in prayer and so forth, even though God doesn't actually exist in time.

⁴³ In particular, the blogger is employing a sort of *fiction*. In Chapter 5, I take the position that analogical models, of the sort employed in some analogical speech, are fictional entities. But employing a fiction in one's thinking is only an *analogical* way of thinking if one takes the fiction to be an analogical representation of reality—otherwise it is just ordinary make-believe.

At least in the long passage quoted above, Alston sounds like he is taking a position like the blogger's, rather than the position that some of our claims about God are genuinely irreducibly analogical. The difference is that in Alston's case, his practical advice that we think of God as *p* overlaps with the genuinely (but reducibly) analogical claim that God's desires/intentions/knowledge/etc. really *are* similar to human desires/intentions/knowledge/etc. (in the specific ways Alston specifies in his functionalist account). The blogger's commitment to a certain fiction about his audience, by contrast, is not accompanied by any genuinely analogical claims about his audience's similarity to an audience of 50 people.

If this reading of Alston is right, Alston takes claims about God's desires, intentions, etc. to be analogical, but only *reducibly* so, because all the propositional content of those claims can be expressed in the univocal core concepts. What's left over after that reduction isn't a remainder of irreducibly analogical propositional content; what's left over is a practical recommendation that one think of God in certain ways despite the fact that God is not actually like that. That practical recommendation wouldn't constitute irreducibly analogical propositional content because it isn't propositional content at all—or at least, it's not propositional content about *God*. (I suppose we could take it to be propositional content about how it's best to think about God.)

I am not entirely confident the reading I have just proposed accurately captures Alston's true position, though as far as I can see it is consistent with everything he has said in his writings on partial univocity. But if the above reading of Alston is correct, then Alston's theory of "partial univocity" is not actually an example of the sort of theory I meant to address in this section: it is not an example of a position on which *some* but not *all* of what can be said about God is irreducibly analogical, but rather an example of a position on which all that can be asserted of

God can be asserted non-analogically, but on which believers require some additional fictions to help them to think about and relate to God appropriately.

However, it seems clear that one *could* hold a position which is at least very similar to Alston's which *does* involve irreducible analogy. And such a version of "partial univocity," on which claims about God include both a univocal core and some irreducibly analogical propositional content, might seem intuitively appealing as a middle ground in the debate about analogy. So to avoid getting bogged down any further in the question of how best to interpret Alston's position, I will simply consider an invented example of a position similar to Alston's, on which some claims about God are "partially univocal" in the sense that they can be partly reduced to positive, intrinsic, univocal claims about God, but have a remainder which is irreducibly analogical. I'll suppose also that this irreducibly analogical remainder cannot be eliminated without losing part of the propositional content of the original utterance.

I argued in Chapter 2 that the individualist theist ought to appeal to analogy in addressing the question of whether God has emotions.⁴⁴ On the one hand, to think that God has emotions in the same sense a human being does has unacceptable implications: as Creel points out, it seems to entail that God is an object of pity, dependent on creatures for his happiness, and vulnerable to deliberate punishment from creaturely opponents. On the other hand, given that the individualist thinks of God as personal, to then think of God as lacking emotions seems to amount to thinking of God as aloof and uncaring. Neither of these options is appealing. Instead, I argued, the best approach for the individualist theist is to assert that God does not actually have emotions, on any conception of emotions available to us, but also to assert that God is (in some way we cannot

⁴⁴ See pp. 125-130.

properly understand) *similar* to a loving and hence emotionally affected being, and to *think of* God as having emotions on the basis of this belief. That is, the best solution is to take the ascription of emotions to God as analogical.

Suppose, then, that Emma is a believer who has been convinced by my argument about the applicability of emotion concepts to God, but who has also been convinced by Alston that it is a good idea to aim at “partial univocity” rather than at sheer irreducible analogy. Accordingly, Emma takes the claim “God loves us” to be partially univocal, in the following way: Emma thinks that God does not have emotions, in any sense of the word we understand, and that God is not vulnerable to suffering. Thus, Emma concludes, God does not “love” us in the same sense that one human being may love another; for Emma thinks that it is an essential element of love properly so-called that it involves some tender emotions towards the beloved and some tendency to feel grief at the other’s misfortune, but that God neither has tender emotions nor suffers grief. Nonetheless, Emma believes that God desires our good, in some sense specifiable in well-understood, univocal terms. And to desire the good of the beloved is an essential element of love. Thus, for Emma, the claim “God loves us” is partially univocal: some aspects of our concept of love (the desiring-our-good parts) apply univocally to God, and others (the emotion-involving parts) do not.⁴⁵

To complete the account, suppose that Emma also takes those emotion-involving aspects of our concept of love which do *not* apply univocally to God to nonetheless be analogically appropriate in speaking about God. On this account, the partial univocity of the claim “God loves

⁴⁵ More radical proponents of analogy would be as reluctant to take “God desires our good” univocally as to take “God loves us” univocally. For the purposes of this argument, however, I want to address a position somewhat comparable to Alston’s—a personalist theology on which some important things *can* be said univocally and unproblematically about God. So I will set aside for now any worries about the applicability of “desire” to God.

us” does not mean that we should keep the univocal element of the claim—the claim that God desires our good—while discarding every other element of the concept of love as inappropriate. Instead, Emma thinks we ought to retain the claim that God *loves* us (while recognizing it to be an analogical description), rather than simply replacing it with the thinner, less robust claim that God desires our good. Nor does she think the believer ought to think this way merely for pragmatic reasons, for instance because it will help the believer to pray and so on. Rather, what she thinks is that God is in some very important way *similar to* a being who loves us, in a way that goes beyond merely desiring our good—but that she does not know *how* God is importantly like a being who loves us in a way that goes beyond merely desiring our good. She trusts that thinking of God as loving us, in an emotion-laden way, in some way gets at an important truth about God, despite the fact that she doesn’t believe God actually has emotions in any sense of the word she understands. Thus, Emma takes the claim that “God loves us” to be partially univocal, but partially irreducibly analogical, and she retains both parts.

Emma, as I have described her, takes a roughly Alstonian position, with two key differences. First, she applies the strategy of partial univocity to talk of love and emotion in particular, as Alston does not. Second, she clearly and explicitly takes partial univocity to involve full-blooded analogical predication, whereas it is not clear that Alston does so.

The first point to note is that Emma, by virtue of accepting the legitimacy of these partially irreducibly analogical claims, is now also committed to accepting the legitimacy of *wholly* irreducibly analogical claims. The reason is that one aspect of what Emma wants to say is this:

It's not *just* that God desires our good. God *loves* us—and although I know it can't be that God loves us in the same sense that human beings love one another, I believe God loves us in a sense that goes beyond merely desiring our good.

Emma is committed to the (analogical) claim that “God loves us in some sense that goes beyond merely desiring our good.” But *this* claim is not partially but *entirely* analogical, because it is just the partially univocal claim with the univocal part neatly excised. Thus, by positing the partially irreducibly analogical claim “God loves us,” Emma is now also committed to a corresponding wholly irreducibly analogical claim “God loves us in some way that goes beyond merely desiring our good.”

If we wanted to make this point clearer, we could supply a name for those aspects of loving some *s* which are not captured in the property of desiring *s*'s good; for example, let's call all those aspects of love *other* than desiring the object's good “emotional love.” Emma's commitment to accepting the claim “God loves us” as a true partially univocal claim, in the particular way described above, means she is also committed to accepting “God emotionally loves us” as a true, *wholly* irreducibly analogical claim.

Expressed more generally, the point is that the theory of partial univocity posits analogical claims about God which consist of two elements: There is the “univocal core” which is reducible to univocity, and there is the flesh surrounding that core, which is meaningful but not reducible to univocity. But once one has specified the existence of both a univocal core and some analogical but still meaningful flesh surrounding that core, it is then possible to specify the flesh alone: one does so by saying something like “God is (analogically) *x*, not only because he is (univocally) *y*, but also in some sense we are unable to specify that goes beyond *y*.” And so, to

accept as legitimate “partially univocal” (i.e. partially irreducibly analogical) claims automatically commits one to accepting as legitimate *wholly* irreducibly analogical claims too.

I have emphasized this point because it is very tempting to think that there is some really important logical difference between a partially univocal statement and a wholly analogical one. It is tempting to think that a “univocal core” could serve as a sort of anchor to ground our understanding of the broader analogical claim whose core it is, or as a skeleton which the irreducibly analogical elements of the claim can attach to, enabling them to do meaningful work they would not otherwise be able to do. But this is a confusion.

An analogical claim which has a univocal core, but which is also partly irreducibly analogical, is simply a claim which takes something like this form:

s is similar to *t* in respects *x* and *y*, but also in some other important respects which we are unable to specify.

The specification that it is in respects *x* and *y* that *s* is similar to *t* will help to give content to that last “but also in some other respects” part of the claim *only* if we are able to infer, from the fact that *s* is similar to *t* in respects *x* and *y*, that the “other respects” in which they are similar probably include some other particular respect *z*. But if we could legitimately make such an inference, that would prove that the supposedly “irreducibly analogical” part of the claim was reducible all along. If the claim really does have some element which is *irreducibly* analogical, then the reducible parts of the claim cannot possibly help to explicate the irreducible part.

Therefore, anyone who takes “partially univocal” (i.e. partially irreducibly analogical) claims to be legitimate is committed to the equal legitimacy of wholly irreducibly analogical claims, and anyone who rejects wholly irreducibly analogical claims as empty of content is also committed to the emptiness of content of all the irreducibly analogical parts of a partially univocal claim.

However, one might reasonably protest at this point that my entire analysis of the concept of “partial univocity” has overlooked the real problem. If the problem with appeals to analogy is that appealing to irreducible analogy is intrinsically illegitimate, then indeed, taking a theological claim to be partially univocal would be no better than taking it to be wholly irreducibly analogical, since any partially univocal claim entails at least one wholly irreducibly analogical claim. But Alston seems to think that the evisceration of theology results from a sin of omission rather than of commission. Theological evisceration occurs not because one has posited too many irreducibly analogical claims about God, or because one has posited analogical claims about God which are too thoroughly irreducible; rather, theological evisceration occurs because one has *failed* to posit a sufficient number of contentful, positive, and intrinsic *non*-analogical claims about God. And if *this* is Alston’s worry, then partial univocity really will solve the problem, since on the partial univocity account, every irreducibly analogical claim about God is accompanied by some contentful, positive, and intrinsic non-analogical claims about God. So long as there are enough non-analogical claims about God to form a contentful theology, we will have avoided evisceration, even if we add a number of irreducibly analogical claims as well.

Thus, one might argue that what really matters is not that each *individual* analogical claim about God has a univocal core, but rather that one’s theology *as a whole* has a univocal core. Perhaps a theology which includes some irreducibly analogical claims may be perfectly in order, so long as it also includes a solid foundation of positive and intrinsic non-analogical claims about God. And thus what’s really important about Alston’s proposal is that it results in a theology which *taken as a whole* has a univocal core.

To this point, I can raise no objection. If it is true that irreducibly analogical claims lack practical or theoretical implications, one can indeed fix a theology which includes such claims by simply adding a bunch of nice univocal claims to provide the needed practical and theoretical content. However, this is hardly a defense of analogy. If our sole strategy for successfully employing appeals to irreducible analogy without theological evisceration is to make sure all the really important claims are expressed univocally as well, the irreducibly analogical claims will bear no theoretical weight. And if they bear no theoretical weight, we cannot use them to solve any of the theological problems I raised in Chapter 2 as reasons for adopting a doctrine of analogy in the first place. There would be little point in including irreducibly analogical claims within one's theology at all rather than embracing an entirely univocal theology.

All this is not meant as an objection to Alston's partial univocity position as such, nor to the partial univocity of my quasi-Alstonian Emma. On the contrary, I think some version of partial univocity is precisely the position a personalist theist like Alston or Emma ought to take. But so far, we have not achieved any proper defense of partially irreducibly analogical theology. Alston's defense of partial univocity rests entirely on the *univocal* element of partial univocity. His account does not include any satisfactory defense of the *analogical* element of partial univocity—if (as is unclear) he even intended partial univocity to include a genuinely analogical element. And indeed, Alston acknowledges that he has not dealt satisfactorily with the issue of analogy, asserting the need to travel “the still not sufficiently charted seas of the figurative and the symbolic.”⁴⁶ I will be making some progress in charting those seas in the next few chapters.

⁴⁶ Alston, “Divine and Human Action,” 102.

Chapter 4: Aquinas's Doctrine of Analogy

In the previous chapter, I introduced the problem of unspecified similarity, and discussed a few unsuccessful approaches to addressing it. However, no survey of possible defenses of analogy could possibly be complete without an account of Aquinas's doctrine of analogy. In what follows, I will be considering Aquinas's theory of analogy in its mature form, as found in the *Summa Theologiae*.¹ After first offering a general description of Aquinas's theory, I will demonstrate two things: first, that Aquinas's view rests on claims of unspecified similarity between God and creatures, and hence is vulnerable to the "problem of unspecified similarity" described in Chapter 3, and second, that Aquinas's view does not offer any solution to that problem.

1. Overview of Aquinas's doctrine of analogy

Aquinas's main argument for the analogical nature of religious language arises in response to the question, "Do we use words univocally or equivocally of God and creatures?"² This question poses something of a dilemma given his theological framework. It cannot be that we speak univocally of God—that words like "good" or "wise" have the same sense when applied to God that they have when applied to some familiar, created thing. For one thing, God shares no ontological category with any creature, and Aquinas thinks it is impossible to speak univocally of two things that do not share a genus. Furthermore, a word like "wise" signifies a

¹ As noted in Chapter 3 (see pp. 169-70), Aquinas's views on the precise analogical nature of religious language evolved over time, and some of his early works take positions which conflict with that of the *ST*. In this chapter, I will restrict my discussion to Aquinas's mature theory.

² *ST* I q. 13 a. 5.

quality when ascribed to a creature. But a quality is distinguishable from the thing that has the quality, and for Aquinas, God is absolutely simple, which means there is no distinction between God's wisdom and God's essence, or God's existence, or God's goodness, or anything else pertaining to God. So whatever "wisdom" means when ascribed to God, it isn't a quality. And so whatever "wise" means when said of God, it isn't the same as what it means when said of a creature.

But although we can't speak univocally of God and creatures, it also can't be that when we describe both God and creatures as "wise" we are *merely* equivocating, as we do when we use the word "bank" to refer both to a financial institution and to the ground bordering a lake. And so, Aquinas asserts,

whatever we say of both God and creatures we say in virtue of the order that creatures have to God as to their source and cause, in which all the perfections of things pre-exist most excellently. This way of using words lies somewhere between pure equivocation and simple univocity, for the word is neither used in the same sense, as with univocal usage, nor in totally different senses, as with equivocation.³

The difficulty is to explain what exactly this position mid-way between sheer equivocity and univocity amounts to.

For Aquinas, analogy fundamentally involves an "order" between the two analogates, one of which is primary and the other of which is secondary.⁴ In the case of words used for God, the order by virtue of which a word like "good" is applied both to God and to creatures is that God is

³ *ST I* q. 13 a. 5 resp.

⁴ Aquinas also discusses cases of analogy in which neither of the two analogates under consideration are primary with respect to the other, because they are related to one another only indirectly, by virtue of the same primary analogate. For example, we speak analogously in calling both urine and medicine "healthy," not because of an order or relation that holds directly between urine and medicine, but because both are related to the same primary analogate: animal health (*Ibid.*). Since I am considering cases in which the same word is said of God and of creatures, only the relationship between the primary and the secondary analogates is of interest here, not that between different secondary analogates. So I will ignore the latter kind of analogical speech in what follows.

the source and cause of the creature and its goodness. Aquinas illustrates the concept with the example of “healthy” as said of animals, of medicine, and of urine. If I say of a dog that it is healthy, and of a sample of urine that it is healthy, I am using the word “healthy” in different (non-univocal) senses. What licenses this use of the word is the “order or relation” that holds between the two analogates. To say that urine is healthy means it is a symptom or sign of the health of the animal, and medicine is called healthy because it is the cause of health in the animal.⁵ It is animals which are healthy in the primary sense of that word. We call urine or medicine “healthy” only in secondary, derivative senses based on their respective relationships to animal health. I cannot properly understand what it means to call urine or medicine healthy unless I first understand what it means to say that an animal is healthy, because the meanings of these secondary senses make essential reference to the primary meaning.

The issue of priority is more complex in the case of words said of God, however:

From the point of view of what words mean they are used primarily of God and derivatively of creatures, for what the words mean (the perfections they signify) flows from God to creatures. But from the point of view of our use of the words we apply them first to creatures because we know them first.⁶

It might seem as though the primary sense of words like “good” or “wise” is that sense they have when we use them to describe creatures. After all, we first learn these terms as they apply to creatures; understanding that they might also apply to God comes much later. Aquinas acknowledges this: from the point of view of our use of words, the creaturely sense is the

⁵ The word Aquinas uses for “medicine,” like the English word, could mean either the medical practice or a special substance one consumes or applies. The relationship of the former kind of “medicine” to animal health is rather more complicated, however, because animal health is not merely the efficient cause but also the final cause—the aim—of the medical profession. I take Aquinas to mean “medicine” in the simpler sense of a curative substance, both because he speaks as if the relation is one of simple efficient causation and never says anything to suggest the more complicated story, and because in *De principiis naturae* 46 he uses the example of a healthy food rather than healthy medicine to make the same point.

⁶ *STI* q. 13 a. 6 resp.

primary sense. This is sometimes expressed by saying that the ordinary sense is first in the “order of knowing,” because we must know that these words apply to creatures before we can infer that they also apply to God.

However, from the point of view of the perfection signified, the primary sense of a word like “good” or “wise” is that by which it is said of God. Goodness and wisdom are possessed in their pre-eminent form by God, and flow from God to creatures; creatures reflect, inadequately, the goodness and wisdom of God. Thus creatures are good or wise in the secondary senses of those words. While the creaturely senses of these words are first in the “order of knowing,” the divine senses of these words are first in the “order of being.”

For Aquinas, it is this priority in the order of being which distinguishes analogy from mere metaphor. When we apply metaphorical terms like “lion” or “rock” to God, these words apply primarily to creatures and only secondarily to God in both the order of being *and* the order of knowing. The reason is that terms like “lion” and “rock” have imperfections such as materiality as an essential part of what they signify, so they cannot properly apply to God. But they do of course apply properly to actual lions and rocks. Thus when these terms are said of God, they are applied only secondarily and improperly, i.e. metaphorically. By contrast, words like “wise” are *literally* true when said of God, and in an important way they apply *more* truly and properly to God than to any creature. That is why Aquinas can take the position that “wise” when said of God has a different sense than it has when said of anything else, while also insisting that “God is wise” is the literal truth.

Aquinas's insistence that words like "good" apply primarily to God and only secondarily to creatures rules out an account on which the relation which grounds the analogical application of such words is a merely extrinsic one:

If, for example, 'God is good' meant the same as 'God is the cause of goodness in creatures' the word 'good' as applied to God must be defined in terms of what it means when applied to creatures; and hence 'good' would apply primarily to creatures and secondarily to God. But . . . words of this sort do not only say how God is a cause. They also say what he is essentially. When we say that he is good or wise we do not simply mean that he causes wisdom or goodness, but that he possesses these perfections eminently.⁷

In the "health" example, the secondary analogates are called "healthy" for extrinsic reasons. Medicine is called healthy because it is the sort of thing that tends to cause health in an animal, not because of anything intrinsic to the medicine considered in itself as a substance. But the analogical use of words like "good" for both God and creatures is not like that. God is of course the cause of the goodness of creatures, and it is because of this fact that we are able to learn that God is good. Nonetheless, God is not called good *merely* because he is the cause of the goodness of creatures, in the way that medicine is called healthy merely because it causes health. God is essentially and intrinsically good.

2. Similarity in the doctrine of analogy

Aquinas's account of analogy at least superficially takes the form I criticized as inadequate in Chapter 1: he defines analogical speech as speech which falls mid-way between univocity and equivocity. I say "superficially" because it's not clear that "univocity" and "equivocity" name purely linguistic categories for Aquinas. Instead, those terms seem to do

⁷ Ibid.

double duty as ontological descriptions for him; for example, Aquinas describes *causes* as univocal or equivocal.⁸ However, setting that aside, Aquinas certainly doesn't define analogy the way *I* do, as speech that appeals to similarity. Thus, before considering whether Aquinas can solve the problem of unspecified similarity described in Chapter 3, I first need to demonstrate that Aquinas belongs in this conversation at all—that he does in fact think that we speak analogically of God in *my* sense of “analogical.” And so we'll need to consider what Aquinas thinks about the similarity between God and creatures, and how this similarity relates to his doctrine of analogy.

One of the implications of Aquinas's assertion that God is essentially and intrinsically good is that creatures are similar to God by virtue of their goodness. Aquinas explicitly asserts that creatures resemble (*similis*) God.⁹ This resemblance between God and creatures will of course be “remote,” because God does not share a genus with any creature, but Aquinas does nonetheless assert that there is a sort of likeness between God and creatures, in that they “share a form, but in different ways.”¹⁰ This doctrine that creatures resemble their creator is at the very heart of Aquinas's theology, informing his thought both about God and about creatures. Aquinas understands all of creation as good because it is created by God and thus reflects God's goodness. And it is only the resemblance of creatures to God that makes it possible for us to know anything at all about God, for Aquinas, because all the knowledge we have of God is derived via analogy, from our knowledge of creatures. Thus, if creatures were not similar to God

⁸ See *ST* 1 q. 13 a. 5: “Now some causes are univocal because their effects have the same name and description as themselves—what is generated by human beings, for example, is also a human being. But some causes are equivocal, as is the sun when it causes heat”

⁹ *ST* 1 q. 4 a. 3.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

(even if only distantly) we would not be able to know anything about God or to have any conception of him. There is in a sense no more fundamental principle of Aquinas's theology than that creatures resemble their creator.

Aquinas argues, however, that the resemblance between God and creatures is one-way:

Although we may admit in a way that creatures resemble God, we can in no way admit that God resembles creatures. For, as Dionysius points out, 'mutual likeness obtains between things of the same order, but not between cause and effect'. That is why we call a portrait of someone a likeness of a human being, but not vice versa. Similarly, we can say that creatures resemble God in a way, but not that God resembles creatures.¹¹

The assertion that creatures are similar to God but that God is not similar to creatures might seem puzzling. Similarity has often been thought of as a symmetrical relationship: it seems mere common sense that if x is similar to y , y must also be similar to x . However, Amos Tversky's study of similarity shows that our concept of similarity, once properly analyzed, applies asymmetrically in many cases.¹² Similarity judgments do not merely involve judging how many traits x and y share and how many they do not share. If that were how we made judgments of similarity, they would necessarily be symmetrical. Instead, Tversky points out, when considering whether x is similar to y , we make our judgment by considering the most salient of the properties of y , and considering whether x shares *those*. That means that if x and y share a number of traits, and those traits have a high salience for y but a low salience for x , then x will be judged similar to y but not *vice versa*.

For example, in English-speaking cultures, the most salient feature of chives is their taste. The fact that they are green, grow from bulbs, or have flowers that look a certain way are not

¹¹ *ST* 1 q. 4 a. 3. ad. 4.

¹² Tversky, "Features of Similarity."

salient features in most contexts. By contrast, the salient traits of grass are usually its color (since grass is a proverbial example of a green thing), its shape and appearance, and that it grows in lawns and needs to be mowed. So if I am asked, “Are chives similar to grass?”, I will answer, “yes,” because chives share a few of the most salient features of grass: chives have long, thin leaves like grass does, and they are green like grass is. But if I am asked, “Is grass similar to chives?”, I am less likely to say yes, because grass does not taste at all like chives. Chives share some of the salient features of grass, but grass does not share any of the most salient features of chives, and this makes us judge chives to be more similar to grass than we judge grass to be to chives.

Once we consider the issue of salience, Aquinas’s assertion that creatures are similar to God but not *vice versa* no longer seems so strange. The “salient features” of God for Aquinas (and presumably for any rational human being) include, crucially, God’s existence and God’s perfections. Creatures possess inadequate reflections of these by participating in God’s existence and perfections, and so to that extent they are similar to God: they manage to exist at all only by virtue of that resemblance. By contrast, the salient features of human beings include both perfections and imperfections. Some of the most salient features of human beings include corporeality, mortality, and all kinds of imperfections and evils, all of which are entirely absent from God. And even the goodness that a human being possesses is an imperfect, limited kind of goodness, a particular creaturely way of possessing goodness which is inapplicable to God. And so God does not share any of the salient traits of human beings, and so God is not similar to human beings, nor to any other created thing.

This Tverskian interpretation of Aquinas's assertion has an important implication, however. Judgments of similarity, on a Tverskian account, can be asymmetrical, but they can never be *absolutely* asymmetrical, such that x is similar to y but y is entirely dissimilar to x . In order for a creature to resemble God, there must be some property they share. These features are of high salience with respect to God and low salience with respect to the creature, and so we judge the creature to resemble God, but not vice versa. Nonetheless, while these features are of low salience with respect to the creature, they must have *some* non-zero salience with respect to it. And so, on this account, it must be true that there is some respect in which God is similar to creatures, and thus that God resembles creatures to a very small extent.

This may seem unsatisfactory as an interpretation of Aquinas, given the absoluteness of Aquinas's assertion that "we can in no way admit" that God resembles creatures. However, I think the absoluteness of Aquinas's assertion stems from a second consideration: judgments of similarity are sensitive to judgments about causal priority, and perhaps about which thing is the standard for which. For example, we say that the child resembles the parent, and not the reverse, because the parent is the source of the child. Whatever features they have in common, the parent had them first, and is the cause of the child having them. And so it makes sense to give the parent priority when asserting the similarity.¹³ Similarly, as Aquinas notes, we judge that a portrait resembles its subject and not the reverse. One reason for this judgment seems to be that the person existed first, and is part of the causal basis for the portrait. In addition, the person is the standard for the portrait, and not the reverse: the portrait is *supposed* to resemble the person and

¹³ One might interpret such causal priority as just one of many factors that determines judgments of salience, in line with the account Tversky has already given us. Tversky himself takes the asymmetry of our judgments of similarity between subject and portrait and between parent and child to result from differences in relative salience ("Features of Similarity," 8). However, I am inclined to think it is a distinct consideration.

is judged by whether it does so, but the reverse is not true. In like manner, God has priority in all those properties by which creatures resemble him, and is the cause of creatures having those properties, and God is also the standard by which all creaturely virtues are judged. So we express God's priority by saying that creatures resemble God and not that God resembles creatures.

These two features of the relationship between God and creatures—the asymmetry in salient traits, and the fact that God is the source and pattern for all creaturely perfections—account satisfactorily for Aquinas's assertion that creatures resemble God but that God doesn't resemble creatures. The account I have offered entails that there are, strictly speaking, some particular respects in which God is similar to creatures, so long as we interpret that claim strictly as a statement of shared features, and not as implying any sort of ontological priority on the part of creatures. But I don't think this is an unwelcome implication. For one thing, I don't think we can make any sense of a relationship of similarity which is *absolutely* asymmetrical, in which x resembles y but y in no way at all resembles x . Furthermore, Aquinas does assert that God and creatures “share a form, but in different ways,” which suggests that his claim that God “in no way” resembles creatures is not actually intended to imply that God and creatures share no similarities.

One might wonder, however, whether Aquinas *really* means “similarity” in the proper sense when he speaks of resemblance. Given the substantial difficulties we face in appealing to a concept of similarity, as discussed in the previous chapter, might there be some way to sidestep the problem of similarity altogether by finding a way of understanding Aquinas which does not entail a claim of genuine similarity between God and creatures, or between divine goodness and creaturely goodness?

One possibility that might suggest itself is this: Perhaps God is Goodness itself, or something akin to Plato's form of the Good. On this view, creatures are good by participation in God. When Aquinas speaks of creatures as "resembling" God, therefore, perhaps he really means to refer to this relation of participation. We can speak of the form of the Good as "good" and also of creatures as "good," and for that reason we can speak of the creature as "resembling" the form of the Good, by virtue of the fact that both are "good." But in that case, the real relation would be that of participation, not similarity: to claim that creatures *resemble* the form adds nothing to the claim that they *participate* in it, and the latter is the better and more proper description of the relation between them. Given the Platonic and neo-Platonic influences evident in Aquinas's thought, this reading might seem like a tempting option.

However, Aquinas explicitly rejects such a view of the relation between God and creatures, at least in part because he is convinced by Aristotelian criticisms of the Platonic theory of forms. Aquinas raises the question, "Does God's goodness make everything good?" and responds in the negative: "Things exist not by divine existence but by their own. So things are good, not by God's goodness, but by their own."¹⁴ Thus rules out the view that creatures are good by virtue of participating in God. Instead, creatures are good by virtue of their own goodness, and this is why we need the further claim that the creatures' goodness *resembles* God's in order to explain what relation creaturely goodness and divine goodness have to one another. While Aquinas does in various places describe creatures as existing or as good "by participation," in order to contrast them with God who exists "by essence," he speaks of them as good by participation in *goodness*, not in God or God's goodness.¹⁵

¹⁴ *ST* 1 q. 6 a. 4 s.c.

¹⁵ See for example *ST* 1 q. 6 a. 3 s.c.

Aquinas does license a way of speaking of creatures as “participating in” God in q. 6 a. 4, but it is with heavy qualifications:

We may call things good and existent by reference to [God], existent and good by essence, inasmuch as they somehow participate in and resemble [him], even if distantly and deficiently In this sense we say that all things are good by God’s goodness, which is the pattern, source, and goal of all goodness. Nevertheless, the resemblance to God’s goodness that leads us to call something good is inherent in the thing itself, belonging to it as a form.

Here, Aquinas accepts a Platonic-sounding description of creatures as “somehow participat[ing] in and resembling” God. But this is not an assertion that creatures are good by virtue of participating in God: on the contrary, it is flanked by denials of precisely that claim. Insofar as Aquinas is (reluctantly) willing to speak of creatures as “participating” in God’s goodness, that claim seems to be grounded, for him, in the more fundamental relationship of *resemblance* that creatures have to God. Because God is the “pattern, source, and goal of all goodness,” good things, by virtue of resembling God, can be described as “participating” in that goodness. The relation of “participation” presupposes the more fundamental relationship of resemblance. Resemblance can thus not be reduced to or explained in terms of participation; instead, “participation” is explained in terms of resemblance.

While his conception of God is not without some echoes of neo-Platonic thought, Aquinas does not conceive of God as anything like the form of the Good. God’s fundamental relationship to his creation, for Aquinas, is not that of a form to those things that participate in it. Rather, it is the relationship of efficient causation, and of the consequent resemblance of the effects to their cause. For this reason, it isn’t possible to read the appeals to similarity out of Aquinas’s view, nor to reduce those claims of similarity to something else.

Thus Aquinas is committed to thinking that creatures are similar to God, and that creaturely perfections are similar to God's perfections, which are their "pattern, source, and goal." Furthermore, it is this resemblance of creaturely perfections to divine perfections which grounds the analogical use of words for those perfections to apply both to creatures and to God. The reason we can speak of both God and creatures as "good," and be speaking analogically rather than engaging in sheer equivocation, is that what we call "goodness" in creatures resembles what we call "goodness" in God. Aquinas's analogical predications thus fall within what I called "Type 2 analogical speech" in Chapter 1, though of course his account involves additional complications.

Aquinas also takes the analogical language we use for God to be *irreducibly* analogical, because for Aquinas, there is absolutely nothing we can say (or think) about God except by analogy. Even to say that God exists is to speak analogically, for God does not "exist" in the same sense of the word that creatures do. This entails that it is impossible for us to specify any particular respect in which the "goodness" of creatures is similar to the "goodness" of God, unless it is by some other term which is itself analogous.

And so Aquinas's account of analogy seems to face the problem of unspecified similarity described in Chapter 3. Aquinas is committed to there being a relation of similarity between creaturely perfections and divine perfections, and if there is a relation of similarity between two things, there must be some respect in which those things are similar. But Aquinas thinks we cannot specify that respect except analogically, because we cannot speak non-analogically about God at all. It is precisely this combination of an appeal to similarity and a claim of irreducibility that gives rise to the problem of unspecified similarity discussed in Chapter 3. And thus it seems

as if Aquinas's doctrine of analogy, if taken seriously and consistently, is vulnerable to Alston's accusations of theological evisceration, and to the worries I raise in Chapter 3.

But of course Aquinas's doctrine of analogy includes far more than the mere claim that we employ irreducible analogy in speaking about God. So there is reason to hope that Aquinas's full account might have the resources to actually *solve* this problem. In particular, there are two directions one might look to find a solution to the problem of unspecified similarity within Aquinas's theology. One is based on his distinction between the *res significata* and the *modus significandi*, and the other on what I'll call the "like-causes-like" principle.

3. Possible solutions

3.1 The *res/modus* distinction

One might think Aquinas has a ready answer to the question, "In what respect is Socrates's wisdom similar to God's wisdom?" On Aquinas's account, it's not that there are two different perfections called "wisdom" which are similar to one another, one of which is appropriate to God and the other of which is appropriate to creatures. For Aquinas, there is only one perfection which we ascribe both to God and to creatures with the word "wise," and it applies literally to both.

This might seem to contradict Aquinas's claim that we cannot speak univocally about God. The reason Aquinas can assert both of these things has to do with his distinction between the perfection signified (the *res significata*) and the way in which it is signified (the *modus significandi*). While Aquinas holds that we speak analogically about God when we describe God

as “good” or “wise,” he insists that this analogical speech is not metaphorical but literal, because there is a sense in which such words are entirely appropriate to God:

We have to consider two things in the words we use to attribute perfections to God: first the perfections themselves that are signified (goodness, life, and the like); second, the way in which they are signified. As far as the perfections signified are concerned, we use the words literally of God, and in fact more appropriately than we use them of creatures, for these perfections belong primarily to God and only secondarily to other things. But so far as the way of signifying these perfections is concerned, we use the words inappropriately, for they have a way of signifying that is inappropriate to creatures.¹⁶

Aquinas argues here that the perfection itself that we ascribe to God when we describe God as good—namely, goodness—is appropriately ascribed to God, even more appropriately than to created things. And this seems, intuitively, like what the theist must want to say. It would be unappealing to assert that created things are the *really* good things, and that God is only good in a derivative or secondary sense.

However, Aquinas asserts, we are unable to signify God’s goodness or other perfections in an appropriate *way*. The reason we cannot speak of God with an appropriate *modus significandi* has to do with God’s radical simplicity:

God is both simple, like a form, and subsistent, like something concrete. So, we sometimes refer to him by abstract nouns (to indicate his simplicity) while at other times we refer to him by concrete nouns (to indicate his subsistence and completeness)—though neither way of speaking measures up to his way of being.¹⁷

It is equally appropriate (and equally inappropriate) to say “God is good” as to say “God is goodness.” To describe God as “good” is inappropriate because it suggests that God is a

¹⁶ *ST* 1 q. 13 a. 3 resp.

¹⁷ *ST* 1 q. 13 a. 1 ad. 2.

“concrete union of form and matter,” that God is an entity which *possesses* goodness. But it is appropriate insofar as it suggests God’s “subsistence and completeness.” To describe God as “goodness” is inappropriate insofar as it suggests that God is an abstraction rather than something self-subsistent, but it is appropriate insofar as it suggests that God is simple rather than composite.

Thus the perfection signified, the perfection of goodness, is signified by both the term “good” and the term “goodness,” and it is appropriately applied to God, but we cannot signify it in any genuinely appropriate way when applying it to God. For “we can understand what is both simple and subsistent only as though it were composite, [and] we can understand and speak of the simplicity of eternity only after the manner of temporal things.”¹⁸ The “ways of signifying” of which we are capable belie our attempts to speak about or think about a being that is both absolutely simple and timeless.

It is tempting to think that the *res/modus* distinction might offer us a way to respond to the problem of unspecified similarity. “Goodness” as said of God and “goodness” as said of a human being amount to very different things, and the way of signifying goodness which is appropriate to human beings is not appropriate to God. Nonetheless, according to Aquinas, the *res significata* is the same in both cases. And so, if we are asked in what respect the wisdom ascribed to God and the wisdom ascribed to Socrates are similar, can we not simply respond that they are similar in respect of being the same perfection, or by virtue of the fact that the perfection signified is the same?

¹⁸ *ST* 1 q. 13 a. 1 ad. 3.

David Burrell notes that certain other medieval philosophers are tempted by something like this line of thought. Albert the Great, for example, raises the *res/modus* distinction in order to then argue that while we cannot signify anything about God in an appropriate way, we can nonetheless have some kind of confused knowledge of the *res significata* independent of any particular mode of signifying. But Aquinas eschews any such position, and for good reason. As Burrell points out, “just as we have never come across a quality-less substance, so no name signifies outside of a grammatical position without ‘consignifying’ as well. Things are simply not distinguishable from their manners.”¹⁹ Albert’s position would require us to think something without thinking of it in any particular *way*, and that is not a coherent possibility.

For example, suppose I assert, “x is good—but not in the sense in which goodness is a *quality*.” What could I mean by such a baffling utterance? Perhaps we could, with a bit of imagination, think of some meaningful things someone might intend to communicate by such a statement, but if we succeed, our successful interpretation will necessarily involve assigning some particular way of signifying to the term “good.” To reject *all* particular modes of signifying is to reject all *meaningful* interpretations of the word, because you cannot mean anything by a word without meaning it in some particular way.

Aquinas, to his credit, is fully aware of the incoherence of such a misuse of the *res/modus* distinction and is careful to repudiate it. For Aquinas, we understand the perfections we ascribe to God “as we find them in creatures, and as we understand them so we use words to speak of them.”²⁰ We understand the perfections in the modes appropriate to creatures, and in those modes only, because they are the only ways we have of thinking anything at all. It is not merely

¹⁹ Burrell, *Analogy and Philosophical Language*, 137-38.

²⁰ *ST* 1 q. 13 a. 3 resp.

our *words* that cannot apply appropriately to God because, for instance, we must choose between saying that God is “just” and that God is “justice.” The reason we cannot *speak* of God except in ways appropriate to creatures is that we cannot *think* about God except in ways appropriate to creatures. And so we do not have a grasp of the things signified independently of the creaturely modes of signification by which we grasp them.

To return, then, to my initial suggestion: One might think that that if the *res significata* of a word like “good” is said appropriately of God, this licenses us to say that God and creatures “have the same perfection,” and that we have thereby specified the respect in which God and creatures are similar. The problem is that what we needed was not merely to specify a respect in which God and creatures are similar, but a respect in which God and creatures are similar which is not itself irreducibly analogical. If we specify a respect in which God and creatures are similar, but that respect must itself be interpreted analogically, then we have not actually solved the problem, but merely pushed it back a step.

If it were possible to signify the *res significata* independently of any *modus significandi*, then we would be able to specify non-analogically a respect in which God and creatures are similar: both possess the whatever-it-is which is the *res significata* of the word “good.” But we are *not* able to signify (either in speech or in thought) the *res significata* independently of any *modus significandi*. For instance, I referred just now to the *res significata* as “possessed” by both God and creatures, but for Aquinas, God does not *possess* goodness, because it is not distinct from his essence. Thus despite my attempt to speak of the *res significata* as something independent from any *modus significandi*, I still actually end up signifying it in a particular way,

and hence in a way inappropriate to God. It is tempting to imagine that we can somehow get around these modes of signifying to something that lies beyond, but this is an illusion.

The *res/modus* distinction enables Aquinas to affirm that in one sense it is more true of God than of anything else to say that he is good, and yet also to affirm that everything we say about God is said to some extent improperly. The distinction thus enables us to make sense of a pair of seemingly contradictory impulses in theistic thought. But if one were tempted by the thought that this distinction could also help us solve the problem of unspecified similarity, that is weight it cannot bear, and Aquinas purposely steers clear of any such misuse of the distinction.

3.2 The like-causes-like (LCL) principle

A second and more promising approach to responding to the problem of unspecified similarity on Aquinas's behalf is one based on what I'll call the "like-causes-like" principle. For Aquinas, the "proportion" or "order" that underlies the analogous use of the term "good" consists both in a causal relation (that God is the source of creatures' goodness) and a relation of resemblance (that creatures resemble God by virtue of being good, and that creatures' goodness resembles God's). Aquinas makes a point of distinguishing between these two aspects of the relationship between God and creatures when he denies that what "God is good" means is merely that God causes good things. God is the cause of creatures, and of their perfections, but our words "do not only say how God is a cause. They also say what he is essentially."²¹

But while they are distinct, it would also be a mistake to interpret the causal relation and the relation of resemblance as *unrelated* features of the relationship between God and creatures.

²¹ *ST* 1 q. 13 a. 6 resp.

Aquinas points to the fact that God is the source of creatures' goodness in order to *explain* the resemblance that holds between God and creatures insofar as they are good. The perfections we ascribe to God "[flow] from God to creatures,"²² and thus God causes them to be in creatures only by virtue of having first possessed them himself. The causal relationship thus could not exist without the relationship of resemblance, because God, by virtue of his goodness, cannot create anything that is not good. Nor could the relationship of resemblance exist without the causal relationship, because nothing good could ever arise were it not for God's creative power.

This necessary connection between the causal relation and the relation of resemblance is, for Aquinas, an instance of a general metaphysical principle: all causal relationships involve a resemblance between the cause and its effect:

Any perfection found in an effect must also be found in the effective cause of that effect—either as it exists in the cause, when cause and effect are of the same sort (as when people beget people), or in a more perfect manner, when cause and effect are not of the same sort (as when the sun's power produces things having a certain likeness to the sun).²³

Aquinas's comment on the sun here will sound odd to the modern reader, as it is based on an understanding of celestial bodies which we no longer hold. The sun, for Aquinas, is incorruptible, unlike earthly things which are all corruptible: celestial bodies are of a fundamentally different, higher nature than the things on earth. Thus the sun, for Aquinas, cannot be said to be hot or bright in the same sense that an earthly object could be said to be hot or bright, in much the same way that God cannot be said to be good in the same sense that a created thing can be said to be good. Leaving aside the peculiarity of Aquinas's astronomy from a modern perspective, the point is this: because of the exalted nature of the sun, it cannot possess

²² Ibid.

²³ *ST* 1 q. 4 a. 2 resp.

the perfections of earthly things in the same way that they possess them. But we know that it must possess those perfections in *some* way, because it is their cause, so if it cannot possess those perfections in the same way earthly things possess them, it must possess them in a higher, analogous way.

Elsewhere Aquinas states the principle even more straightforwardly:

Effects that fall short of their causes do not agree with them in name and nature. Yet, some likeness must be found between them, since it belongs to the nature of action that an agent produces its like, since each thing acts according as it is in act.²⁴

Thus, the like-causes-like (henceforth LCL) principle includes both the general claim that an effect resembles its agent cause, and the more specific claim that the agent cause has those particular perfections it causes in the effect. The resemblance between cause and effect will take one of two forms. In some cases, the cause has the same perfection in the same way that its effect has them. But in other cases, the cause is of an essentially higher kind than its effect and possesses the perfection in a different, “more perfect” way than the effect does. In these cases we speak analogically when we ascribe the same perfection to the cause and its effect.

The importance of this claim is this: for Aquinas, it simply follows that since God is the agent cause of creatures, they must resemble him, however imperfectly and inadequately. And since God is the source of the perfections of creatures, he must possess their perfections. God cannot possess those perfections univocally, in the same way creatures do, so it follows that he must possess them in a higher way, analogically. The crucial hinge on which this argument turns is the premise that effects *necessarily* resemble their causes. If that premise is correct, everything else follows.

²⁴ *Summa contra gentiles* 1 29.2.

Brian Davies notes,

Critics of belief in God have sometimes asked theists to prove in the abstract that statements about God are “coherent” or “meaningful” before ever considering why we might want to say that God is whatever we say that he is. And some theists have seemed to accept that proof like this ought to be supplied. But a proof that p is true is proof that p is possibly true since it is proof that p is actually true. And much of Aquinas’s thinking on the sense it makes to say “God is F”, “God is G”, etc. is inseparable from the reasons he thinks we have to speak in this way.²⁵

Aquinas does not arrive at his claim that God is good by first considering what it might mean to say that God is good, assuring himself that it is a meaningful claim, then considering whether or not it is true, and finally concluding that it is. His procedure is rather to prove that God is—*must* be—good. And if he has succeeded in that, it follows that “God is good” is true, and from that it follows *a fortiori* that “God is good” is meaningful. If Davies is right, and if Aquinas’s argument, based on the LCL principle, is convincing, we would be justified in adopting the doctrine of analogy even if we lacked a satisfactory account of *how* such claims manage to be meaningful.

But the claim that all effects resemble their efficient causes seems, on the face of it, quite implausible. It is admittedly true of *many* instances of causation. A hot fire heats a room, a billiard ball moving in a certain direction communicates its momentum to the one it hits, and human beings who reproduce produce new human beings. It is examples like these that Aquinas uses to illustrate the principle that the effects resemble their causes. But it just doesn’t seem true that *every* efficient cause possesses the perfections of its effects. In fact, Aquinas himself has given us what certainly seems like a counterexample in the “health” example he borrows from Aristotle. Medicine (or a diet, or a drink) is called “healthy” because it causes health in the

²⁵ Brian Davies, “Aquinas on What God Is Not,” *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 52, no. 2 (1998): 233-34.

animal. But it does not do so by possessing the perfection of health itself, and the person rendered healthier by taking medicine is not rendered healthier by coming to more closely resemble the substance she consumed. How is this compatible with the LCL principle?

Some scholars defend Aquinas by arguing that the principle holds true so long as we understand the “resemblance” between cause and effect in the appropriate way. For example, Brian Davies argues, “Aquinas’s idea is that a cause expresses itself in its effects and is therefore knowable from its effects.”²⁶ Consider alcohol as a cause, and drunkenness as its effect:

[Aquinas’s] line is that alcohol is something the effects of which show it forth. So he will say that my drunken state resembles alcohol since it shows forth the power of alcohol as it takes place in me. I cannot, when drunk, be described as looking like alcohol. But, so Aquinas thinks, I, when drunk, certainly exemplify what alcohol is when it works on me. In this sense, so he holds, I resemble it. When I am drunk, so Aquinas would say, I am alcohol in action.²⁷

This is an appealing way of reading Aquinas’s LCL principle, because it seems true. Any time we meet with the effects of some causal agent, we have thereby learned something about that causal agent: that it produces those effects.

But this interpretation of the LCL principle also renders it completely empty. Drunkenness does not actually resemble alcohol in any useful sense of the term “resemble.” Drunkenness does not exemplify anything about alcohol considered in itself, in its intrinsic properties. The only thing that drunkenness reveals about alcohol is *what the causal effects of a human’s drinking alcohol are*. That is, the only thing one’s drunkenness reveals about alcohol is that alcohol causes drunkenness. Thus the “resemblance” of drunkenness to alcohol, on Davies’ interpretation, ends up amounting to nothing more than the causal relationship that holds

²⁶ Ibid., 230.

²⁷ Ibid.

between the two. And so, on this reading of Aquinas's principle, when Aquinas says "all effects resemble their agent causes," all that really amounts to is, "all effects reveal the effects of their agent causes." But the effects only "reveal" the effects of their agent causes by *being* the effects of their agent causes, so it really just amounts to "all the effects of agent causes are the effects of their agent causes." Aquinas's LCL principle, which he seems to intend as a substantial metaphysical claim, turns out on Davies' reading to be tautologous.

Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange offers a different line of defense that seems to suffer from the same problem:

If every agent produces, not an indifferent effect whatsoever, but a determined effect which belongs to it by right, *though it does not tend towards this effect*, and is not *ordained* for it; if *e.g.*, the acorn produces the oak rather than the poplar, though it is not ordained for the one rather than for the other; if the eye sees rather than hears, though it is not naturally predisposed for the former act instead of the latter—it follows that there is no way of explaining by the *principle of sufficient reason* how it is that the effect is definitely established and essentially refers to a definite cause. Unless these qualities were somehow present in the efficient cause, they could not be produced in the effect. Now, they are there merely in a *virtual* manner, inasmuch as the efficient cause *tended* to produce this particular effect rather than any other, and inasmuch as it was ordained for this effect.²⁸

The idea here is that, if the cause is such as to produce a certain effect, then there must be something intrinsic to the cause itself which accounts for its tendency to produce that effect in the appropriate circumstances. And this could only be true, Garrigou-Lagrange asserts, if the effect were in some way present in the cause.

The first thing to note here is that, as with Davies' interpretation, there doesn't seem to be any legitimate reason to describe this as a case of *resemblance*. That something is "ordained" to have a certain kind of effect does not in any way imply that it itself possesses the quality it

²⁸ Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *God: His Existence and His Nature: A Thomistic Solution of Certain Agnostic Antinomies*, vol. 1 (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1936), 201.

causes, or anything resembling that quality. Garrigou-Lagrange does assert that, were these qualities not in some way present in the cause, they could not be produced in the effect, but that is just a restatement of Aquinas's principle, not an argument for it.

We might be tempted to interpret his assertion that these qualities are present "merely in a *virtual* manner" to mean that they are present *potentially*. But that cannot possibly be the position Garrigou-Lagrange means to attribute to Aquinas. If the correct way to interpret the principle that effects resemble their causes is that effects have actually those perfections which are *potentially* in their causes, then when applied to God that would mean that creatures have actually those perfections which are merely potential in God. But it would not be at all acceptable to Aquinas to say such a thing: actuality is superior to potentiality, and hence God is pure actuality.²⁹ If God possesses the perfections he causes, he possesses them actually.

Thus there seem to be only two ways of interpreting the justification that Garrigou-Lagrange gamely offers for the LCL principle. On one interpretation, he simply begs the question: he pretends to offer an explanation for why effects must resemble their causes, but that explanation simply presupposes that nothing could cause a certain effect without possessing in some occult way the perfections it causes. On the other interpretation, Garrigou-Lagrange's claim that the quality caused must be present in the cause itself is simply an unclear way of saying that the cause must be the sort of cause that can produce that quality. If this were the correct interpretation of the LCL principle, then when Aquinas says that God both causes goodness and possesses what our goodness inadequately resembles, that would be equivalent to saying that God both causes goodness and is such as to cause goodness, which is equivalent to

²⁹ *ST* 1 q. 3 a. 1 resp.

just saying that God causes goodness. As in Davies's account, resemblance on this interpretation drops out as redundant.

Aquinas insists that "when we say that [God] is good or wise we do not simply mean that he causes wisdom or goodness, but that he possesses these perfections eminently."³⁰ He thus explicitly rejects any possible interpretation on which all that "good" means when said of God is "the cause of goodness in creatures." But Aquinas arrives at the claim that God "possesses these perfections eminently" via the LCL principle. If we interpret that principle as Garrigou-Lagrange and Davies do, God's possession of the perfections of the creatures he causes turns out to amount to nothing more than that he does in fact cause them, implying precisely the reduction Aquinas took such pains to avoid.

But perhaps there is another approach to saving the LCL principle which does not require us to water the principle down so far that it no longer signifies anything. Let us assume instead that Aquinas really does mean that effects genuinely *resemble* their causes. If this is what he means, then the most obvious problem with this principle is that there seem to be many counterexamples, many cases of effects which do not resemble their causal agents. The health of a dog does not resemble the pill that caused it, ash does not resemble fire, and drunkenness does not resemble alcohol. But perhaps closer analysis of Aquinas's principle will enable us to discover a way to deal with these apparent counterexamples.

I will take Aquinas's own "health" example as a test case. What is primarily and most "eminently" described as "healthy" is the animal. The "health" of the medicine or diet is causally prior to the health of the animal, because it causes the health of the animal, but it is described as

³⁰ *ST* 1 q. 13 a. 6 resp.

healthy only secondarily, by virtue of its causal relation to animal health. But Aquinas has also said that whatever perfection exists in an effect must be found in its agent cause, either in the same way, or “in a more perfect manner.” Thus if medicine causes health in the animal, health ought either to exist in the *same* sense in medicine as in the animal, or in *more perfect* sense in the medicine than in the animal. But we know medicine and animals cannot be described as “healthy” in the same sense of the word; the fact that they can’t is precisely why Aquinas uses “healthy” to illustrate the concept of analogy. And medicine, like diet, or urine, is denoted “healthy” only secondarily, by virtue of its relation to animal health; to say that health exists in medicine in a *more* perfect way than in an animal would be absurd.

Ralph McInerny deals with this puzzle by arguing that even in this case, the effect does in fact resemble its cause:

Medicine is denominated healthy *causaliter*, something which involves, of course, a similarity between medicine and the quality in the animal. This similarity, however, is only partial: medicine possesses only part, or a part of a part, of what constitutes the quality health; for example, the medicine may be warm and warmth be considered as part of health.³¹

McInerny is surely right that there is *some* similarity between the medicine and the health of the animal, for the simple reason that any two physical things will share some points of similarity. But that point doesn’t satisfactorily resolve the problem. Aquinas does not assert merely that there exists a similarity of some kind between a cause and its effect. He asserts specifically that the perfection brought about in the effect can be found in the cause. If medicine is the cause of health in the animal, then it is the perfection of health in particular that needs to be present in medicine. And as McInerny here admits, that is not the case.

³¹ Ralph McInerny, *The Logic of Analogy: An Interpretation of St. Thomas* (Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1961), 163.

But one might object that since the LCL principle involves *perfections* in particular, the “health” example is poorly chosen. Perhaps health, as a quality inherently tied up with materiality by virtue of being a feature of animal bodies, does not count as a perfection. If so, then the fact that medicine can cause health without possessing health would be no exception to the principle that something cannot cause a perfection without possessing that perfection.

However, Aquinas does not seem to intend any such limitation on what counts as a “perfection.” Recall the wording of q. 4 a. 2: “Any perfection found in an effect must also be found in the effective cause of that effect—either as it exists in the cause, when cause and effect are of the same sort (as when people beget people)” Here, in one of the central passages in which Aquinas states the LCL principle, he treats humanity as a perfection, for he cites people reproducing people as an example of a case in which the perfection of an effect must be found in the effective cause. Elsewhere he describes heat as a perfection: “if something hot falls short of the full perfection of heat, this is clearly only because it does not fully partake of the nature of heat. But if heat were to subsist through itself, nothing of the power of heat could be lacking in it.”³² If heat is a perfection, then surely health is too.

Even more tellingly, Aquinas argues that all these incompatible perfections “pre-exist as one in God without detriment to his simplicity” and explains that principle with reference to the sun, citing Pseudo-Dionysius:

if the sun ‘possesses in itself, primordially and without diversity, the different qualities and substances of the things that we can sense, while yet maintaining the unity of its own being and the homogeneity of its light, how much more must everything pre-exist in unity of nature in the cause of all?’³³

³² *ST* 1 q. 4 a. 2 resp.

³³ *ST* 1 q. 4, a. 2 ad. 1, quoting Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 5.8.

The sun, on this view, possesses in a pre-eminent form all the “qualities and substances” of the mundane things we can sense. It thus possesses in this exalted pre-eminent fashion a number of qualities which are incompatible in their earthly form. The same is true of God, only to an even greater degree. Now, are these “qualities and substances” which the sun possesses primordially *perfections*? It seems like they must be. This statement about the sun is occurring in an answer to the question, “Is God’s perfection all embracing, containing, so to speak, the perfection of everything else?” and the parallel between God and the sun is intended to show that the answer is “yes.” If the sun were not intended as an example of something that embraces the perfections of the things it causes, it would do a poor job of helping to argue that God embraces the perfections of all the things *he* causes. But if the sun embraces the perfections of everything it causes, that means that “the different qualities and substances of the things that we can sense” are all perfections.

Thus it seems inescapable that all qualities which are not privative must count as perfections for Aquinas. (Evil, injustice, illness, darkness, and the like are clearly not perfections, but Aquinas understands such privative “qualities” not as positive qualities of a thing but as the lack, in the thing, of some good quality.) Aquinas argues that “each species is perfected by that which differentiates it from other species in the same genus” and hence that there are many perfections which are opposites of one another.³⁴ As he specifies no particular category of genera for which this truth holds, it seems as if all positive qualities by which one thing can be differentiated from another count as perfections. Given his consistency in describing all non-privative qualities as “perfections,” there is no denying that health must count as a perfection for

³⁴ *ST* 1 q. 4 a. 2 arg. 2. This is part of an objection, but Aquinas’s response in no way suggests that the quoted claim is mistaken.

Aquinas. But if it is a perfection, then the fact that it exists in some animal ought to mean that it exists either in the same way or in a more perfect way in the medicine which is the cause of the animal's health. But it clearly doesn't.

But perhaps there is some *other* reason why the "health" case ought legitimately to fall outside the purview of the LCL principle. Medicine, we'll note, is a cause of health in a very different sense than God is the cause of perfections, or the sun is the cause of heat. The sun seems, alone, to directly cause heat wherever it interacts with a material thing. At least from a pre-scientific perspective, there is something very simple and straightforward about this causal relation: the sun simply causes heat wherever it shines. By contrast, medicine is only ever one of many contributing factors to an animal's health, and the medicine only contributes to the animal's health because of specific features of the particular animal and the particular circumstances. What is good medicine for one creature might be fatal to a different kind of creature, so medicine is "healthy" only with reference to those *particular* things in which it causes health. And for this reason it would clearly be inappropriate to take medicine as "healthy" in more than a derivative sense. And so, we might argue, the LCL principle should not be taken to hold between just any two things we can call cause and effect, but only to be valid for a particular kind of causal relationship, of which the medicine-health case is not an example.

The above response sounds like the most reasonable way to explain the failure of the LCL principle in the "healthy" example. Since Aquinas clearly does not think that medicine possesses health either in the same sense that an animal does or in a higher sense, there doesn't seem to be any way around the fact that the LCL principle doesn't apply in the case of medicine causing animal health. However, this response leaves us with a new problem. There doesn't

seem to be any principled way of making the distinction between those kinds of causal relationships the LCL principle will legitimately apply to and those kinds it will not apply to. Aquinas wants to offer, as examples of the principle that effects resemble their causes, such incredibly different causal relationships as the sun heating a rock, the idea of a house in the mind of an architect resulting in the creation of the house,³⁵ and animals reproducing animals of the same kind. If we want to be able to accept all these as instances of the LCL principle, then we will inevitably be stuck with many other instances of causation which have equally strong grounds to count as instances of it, but in which the effects don't seem to resemble their causes. We will then be forced either to write off all cases in which the causes don't resemble their effects as the wrong kind of causation, on an *ad hoc* basis, or else to insist that the effects actually *do* resemble their causes, just in some occult way we can't perceive. This might be a way of rescuing the implausible-sounding LCL principle, but what's clear is that we have no good reasons to *accept* it, given its dismal lack of empirical justification.

As Roger White points out, even in those cases in which the cause and its effect *are* similar, on a modern scientific understanding we see that these similarities are grounded in very different kinds of reasons.

Perhaps the most plausible explanation for the widespread belief in the mediaeval period that the effect of an efficient cause must resemble the cause seems to be that there are several striking cases of causation where features of the cause are replicated in the effect: the fire heats the room, the father resembles his son, the billiard cue moves in a certain direction in order to move the ball in the same direction, and the architect has a plan that resembles the building . . . At a time when the underlying physics and biology were scarcely understood, it may well have appeared to be the best explanation of all these cases that they were manifestations of a general metaphysical principle of causation. However, with the growth of modern physics and biology there has developed a much better understanding of why in these particular cases features of the cause should be

³⁵ *De potentia dei* q. 7 a. 7 resp.

replicated in the effect, without the need to appeal to a general metaphysical principle guaranteeing such replication. Also, . . . since the reason that a son resembles his father has nothing in common with the reason that a fire heats a room, it no longer looks as if these examples were all manifestations of a single principle of causation.³⁶

Thus while the LCL principle may have seemed like a plausible way of describing the world to Aquinas's contemporaries, it does not seem like a claim the modern reader has the slightest reason to accept.

4. Conclusion

I have just argued that, while Aquinas's LCL principle may have seemed like a plausible metaphysical principle to his contemporaries, it is no longer defensible. The trouble is that Aquinas's argument depends heavily on the LCL principle, so its failure severely undercuts the credibility of his doctrine of analogy as a whole.

Aquinas wants to say that it is intrinsic to causation that the effect resembles its cause either univocally or analogically. Saying this was what enabled his account to go beyond a bare, unexplained and unspecifiable assertion of similarity between God and creatures: since God is the source of creatures' perfections, it follows automatically that they resemble him, and since they cannot resemble him by possessing those perfections univocally with him, they must possess them analogically. If this argument worked, we would still lack a description of the particular respect in which our perfections are similar to God's, but we would at least have some assurance that the similarity is a really substantial one (since it involves the very same perfection), and a good reason to override our usual suspicion of claims of unspecified similarity.

³⁶ White, *Talking about God*, 93-94.

But as we have seen, the LCL principle turns out to be either empty or indefensible. Without this principle, it is of course still true that there are some cases in which effects resemble their causes, and God's causation *could* be one such example. But to say merely that *some* effects resemble their causes does not do anything to prove that *God's* effects resemble *him*, or to explain how and why they do, in the way that a universal principle that *all* effects resemble their causes would. And without the LCL principle, we cannot prove that the claim that creaturely goodness resembles God's goodness *must* be true.

But there is an even more serious problem with the account than the falsity of the LCL principle. It's not just that Aquinas is unable to justify his claim that a causal relationship will always entail a relation of resemblance. He cannot even tell us what that claim *means* in the particular cases of interest to us. What Aquinas asserts is that there are some causes which are univocal and some which are equivocal. Univocal causes seem clear enough: fire heats the room, humans beget humans, and so on. In these cases, the cause and effect share the same property, and it is by virtue of having that property that the cause was able to give rise to an effect with that same property. But in other cases, such as those in which God or the sun is the causal agent, it cannot be that the effects possess the same perfections univocally with their causes. The important move in the argument is that because of the LCL principle, these "equivocal" causes cannot be *sheerly* equivocal, but instead must be analogical. Every effect must resemble its cause, and in particular the perfections present in the effect must be possessed by the cause. And so when we come across two things which have a causal relationship, but where the cause is of such a radically different kind than the effect that they cannot univocally share any qualities,

Aquinas will infer that the cause must nonetheless possess the perfection present in the effect, but possess it in a higher, more perfect, non-univocal way.

But the examples Aquinas gives of analogical causation do nothing to explain what it *means* to assert that the cause possesses the perfection in a higher, more perfect way, because those other examples are just as speculative as the claim as it pertains to God. Aquinas's other main example of analogous causation is that of the sun, which, citing Pseudo-Dionysius, he takes to possess "in itself, primordially and without diversity, the different qualities and substances of the things that we can sense." The sun cannot be univocally said to be hot, on Aquinas's view, because it is incorruptible, but it is the cause of heat in things on earth, and so it possesses, primordially and pre-eminently, the perfection of heat:

The sun causes heat among those sublunary bodies by acting according as it is in the act. Hence, the heat generated by the sun must bear some likeness to the active power of the sun, through which heat is caused in this sublunary world, and because of this effect the sun is said to be hot, even though not in one and the same way. And so the sun is said to be somewhat like those things in which it produces its effects as an efficient cause.³⁷

The trouble with this example of the sun is not merely the factual difficulty that the sun is not the kind of thing Aquinas thinks it is, and that the whole idea that the sun possesses the perfections of light and heat in some more perfect way which is fundamentally unknowable to us is a bit of philosophical fantasy. The more significant problem is that the example of the sun does nothing to explain what the relationship of resemblance between an analogical cause and effect is supposed to amount to.

What we wanted to avoid was a bare, inexplicable and unspecifiable assertion that creatures are similar to God. But an attempt to explain the similarity by saying it works like the

³⁷ *Summa contra gentiles* 1 29.2.

sun doesn't help, because all we have in the case of the sun is the bare assertion as well. Certainly we have no way of actually determining what sort of resemblance there is between the heat of ordinary things and the (fictional) pre-eminent heat of the (fictionally) incorruptible sun. Even if Aquinas were *right* about the nature of the sun, we wouldn't have any way of determining what sort of resemblance there was between its heat and the heat of sublunary objects. By hypothesis, any kind of understanding of the primordial perfections of the sun beyond what we get by analogically ascribing the perfections of sublunary objects to the sun is out of reach for us. Thus any kind of understanding of how something could be similar to the sun by virtue of being hot, despite the fact that the sun is incorruptible and so can't be properly said to be hot, would have to be beyond us as well.

To summarize: Aquinas's account of religious language asserts that the reason we can meaningfully describe God as good despite God's radical un-likeness to anything we know is that God created all good things, and that because of that causal relationship, we know that the perfection of goodness must exist in a higher sense in God. So if Aquinas's theory is right, it must be the case that God is rightly described as good, merely because God is the cause of good things. But this claim rests on Aquinas's principle that effects always resemble their causes, and we have no reason at all to believe that principle is true. Without that principle, all we have left at the end of Aquinas's account is a bare assertion that despite that enormous unlikeness between God and creatures—despite the fact that according to Aquinas God has no qualities at all, is absolutely simple, and belongs to no genus, not even that of “substance” or “existing thing”—our goodness has such a significant resemblance to what we call God's goodness that both God and creatures can be called “good” literally. This is a remarkable claim, but when we attempt to find

a way to specify what this resemblance could possibly consist in, we are unable to do so. And so Aquinas's LCL principle does not offer us any way to address the problem of unspecified similarity.

The difficulty with Aquinas's doctrine of analogy is that for all its ingenuity, once we have rejected the one principle on which it turns out to depend completely, the account amounts to no more than a bare assertion that there *is* a form of resemblance which would satisfy all those criteria. But that is of course no account at all.

Chapter 5: Analogical Models of God

In the previous chapters I have argued that a theist has good reasons to want to say that some or even all positive, intrinsic claims about God are irreducibly analogical. Yet we have also seen reasons to worry that a theology which appeals to claims of irreducible similarity may be illegitimate, and the familiar versions of a doctrine of analogy I have considered turned out to give us no resources to address these worries. In this chapter and the next I will offer my solution to this problem.

On my view, the key to a viable doctrine of analogy is to understand the believer's claims about God, not as *simple* analogical claims, but specifically as claims that either serve to construct, or are based on, analogical *models* of God. This chapter consists of three main parts. First, to contextualize my own account, I will briefly summarize two existing accounts on which religious speech involves analogical models of God: as we will see, while I agree with substantial elements of these accounts, my own will depart from them in certain respects. Second, I will explain in detail what I mean by an "analogical model," drawing in part on accounts of analogical modeling in the sciences. And third, I will explain my account of religious language, on which claims about God either serve to construct, or are based on, analogical models. An account of religious language that appeals to analogical *models* can solve problems that a simpler account of analogical speech cannot solve.

1. Ramsey and Barbour on analogical models of God

I am hardly the first person to claim that talk of God involves appealing to analogical models. Indeed, quite a few philosophers and theologians have claimed that we use models of God in speaking metaphorically or analogically about God.¹ Often, the notion that believers employ “models” of God is cashed out rather imprecisely, so that it amounts to little more than the claim that believers speak metaphorically of God. However, a few theorists have developed the claim more thoroughly. In this section I will discuss two particularly prominent proponents of the idea that we use models in speaking about God, both of whom employ fairly well-developed concepts of what a “model” is. While both of these accounts have valuable insights, neither offers resources to solve the problem of unspecified similarity.

Perhaps the most famous proponent of the view that religious speech involves models is Ian Ramsey.² Ramsey’s account of religious language centers on a distinction between those things that are publicly observable, and those things which are “more,” which go beyond but stand behind the publicly observable. His paradigm example of the “more” is the “I” as an agent with a subjective perspective and free will, in that each of us as a subject goes beyond anything which could be observed of us from an objective perspective.³ Other examples of the “more”

¹ See especially Ian G. Barbour, (*Myths, Models and Paradigms: The Nature of Scientific and Religious Language* [London: SCM Press, 1974]), Frederick Ferré (*Basic Modern Philosophy of Religion* [New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1967], 373-88), Sallie McFague, (*Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987]), Ian T. Ramsey (“Talking about God: Models, Ancient and Modern,” in *Myth and Symbol*, ed. F. W. Dillistone [London: S. P. C. K., 1966], 76–97; *Models for Divine Activity* [London: SCM Press, 1973]; and *Religious Language: An Empirical Placing of Theological Phrases* [New York: Macmillan, 1963]), Janet Martin Soskice, (*Metaphor and Religious Language* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1985]), and David Tracy (“Metaphor and Religion: The Test Case of Christian Texts,” *Critical Inquiry* 5, no. 1 [1978]: 91–106).

² I owe much of my interpretation of Ramsey’s thought in what follows to Donald Evans’s illuminating synthesis of Ramsey’s varied and often unsystematic writings about religious language in Donald Evans, “Ian Ramsey on Talk about God,” *Religious Studies* 7, no. 2 (1971) and “Ian Ramsey on Talk about God (Continued),” *Religious Studies* 7, no. 3 (1971).

³ See, e.g., Ramsey, *Religious Language*, 31-32.

include moral duty⁴ and infinite mathematical series.⁵ Each of these things is not directly observable, but nonetheless has some relation to experience, because it is *disclosed* in certain experienced situations. For example, the “I” is disclosed in certain personal situations when “the ice breaks” and we come to genuinely see the other person as a subject—to say “I-Thou” rather than “I-it,” in Martin Buber’s terms. A “disclosure” is an experience in which “light dawns” or “the penny drops” and one spontaneously discerns one of those things which are “more,” which go beyond the publicly observable.⁶

A disclosure is a disclosure *of* something objectively real, but Ramsey argues that when the goal of one’s language is to talk about something “more” rather than about something publicly observable, one’s language cannot function by simply *describing* that objectively real thing. Instead, the best we can do is to speak in ways designed to evoke, in the mind of the hearer, a “disclosure-situation.” For this reason, discourse about the “more” is “logically odd,”⁷ and one will misunderstand it if one interprets it as straightforward description. This is where models come in: the “more” cannot be straightforwardly described, but instead must be spoken about by means of a model.

To illustrate, consider the sequence of regular polygons with increasing numbers of sides: a 3-sided one, then a 4-sided one, then 5-, etc.⁸ Considering this sequence and where it is heading discloses a *circle*. One attempting to evoke this disclosure in another person might say, “Now imagine a polygon with *infinitely* many sides.” But there *is* no such thing as an infinite-sided

⁴ Ibid., 47-50.

⁵ Ibid., 67-68.

⁶ Ibid., 20.

⁷ Ibid., 103.

⁸ Ibid., 78.

polygon, because a polygon by definition has some definite number of sides. To describe a circle as an “infinite-sided polygon” sounds superficially similar to describing a triangle as a “3-sided polygon”—it looks like a description of a certain kind of shape. But in fact, Ramsey argues, the underlying logic of the expression is quite different. In the phrase “infinite-sided polygon,” the term “polygon” is not serving as a straightforward description of the object, because an “infinite-sided polygon” isn’t a possible kind of polygon at all. Instead, the term “polygon” in that phrase names a *model* for the object we are trying to speak about, where a “model,” for Ramsey, is “a situation with which we are all familiar, and which can be used for reaching another situation with which we are not so familiar.”⁹ To that model we add the *qualifier* “infinite-sided” which, by its conceptual incompatibility with the term “polygon,” makes it clear that the phrase as a whole is not serving as a straightforward description. This invites the sort of reflection which may evoke the relevant disclosure.

Ramsey takes this to be the characteristic way religious language works. Consider for example talk of God as “infinitely good.” On Ramsey’s view, this phrase works very much like speaking of a circle as an “infinite-sided polygon” does. Our ordinary sense of what it is for something to be good, Ramsey thinks, involves the idea that it is always possible to be better, and thus we have no way to understand how to apply the concept of *infinity* to goodness. And so the phrase “infinite goodness” doesn’t make sense if interpreted as a straightforward *description* of something. One who appends the qualifier “infinitely” in speaking of God as “good” is implicitly indicating that the term “good” is not being used as a literal, straightforward

⁹ Ibid., 69.

description in that context. Instead, Ramsey argues, “good” serves as a model which, appropriately qualified, may evoke a disclosure of something “more.”

The example of a circle as disclosed by a series of polygons might be slightly misleading as a way of explicating Ramsey’s views, because if the polygon belongs in the category of the publically observable, then so does the circle. On the other hand, if we take the circle (qua unencounterable geometric abstraction) to be an unobservable “more,” then the polygon must fall into that same category for the same reasons. And so the case of polygons and circles is not really an example of something publically observable which evokes a disclosure of something “more”—either both polygons and circles are publically observable, or both are “more.” However, if we imagine a group of beings who properly understood polygons, but to whom the concept of a circle was for some reason mysterious, then the phrase “infinite-sided polygon” would strike them in something like the way Ramsey thinks the phrase “infinitely good being” should strike us.

For Ramsey, to describe some term x predicated of God as a “model” of God implies that “God is x ” is *not* accurate as a literal, straightforward description of God, because a model is both similar to *and* different from that which it models. Believers speak about God by employing models because we cannot describe God straightforwardly with concepts familiar to us without misrepresenting him. Thus, to the extent that model-language succeeds in communicating something true about God, it is not by straightforward descriptive propositions but only via the indirect route of evoking a disclosure.

Because of his emphasis on disclosure situations, Ramsey ties each description of God back to some specific element of experience. Ramsey takes God to be something like the “more”

of the universe, in the same way the “I” as transcendental subject is the “more” of a human being. Thus, just as the “I” is disclosed through one’s experience of a person, God is disclosed through one’s experience of the universe. Consider, for example, the traditional theological talk of God as “immutable.” Ramsey takes immutability to be something disclosed in our experience: we see change all around us, but “do you not apprehend something which remains invariable in the situation despite what is so visibly changing?”¹⁰ A certain sort of reflection leads one to a disclosure of that which does *not* change: this is the disclosure of immutability. As a “cosmic” disclosure, one which is universal in scope, this is a disclosure not of the “more” of some specific, limited thing but instead a disclosure of God. Ramsey treats all the traditional descriptions of God (as loving, powerful, knowing, creator, etc.) the same way, tying each one back to a specific kind of cosmic disclosure rooted in specific kinds of experience.

One difficulty in discussing Ramsey’s account of models today is that it is based on a perspective on language which now seems quite dated. While Ramsey was a noted critic of verificationism, his disagreements with the verificationists now seem much less significant than his agreements with them. For example, Ramsey takes the paradigm case of a meaningful claim to be an observation-statement, and while he insists that there are meaningful things we say that *can’t* be reduced to complexes of observation-statements—e.g., the things we say about the “more”—he sees this as a surprising fact requiring special explanation. He also insists that, because the “more” is not publicly observable, things we say about the “more” can’t constitute genuine “descriptions,” by which he seems to mean that they can’t constitute genuine *propositions*. For Ramsey, statements about the “more” lead others to realize certain things, but

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 57.

not by *asserting* those things. Ramsey intends to challenge verificationism by insisting that some meaningful and true claims may be based on “disclosures” rather than on direct observation, but this way of putting it just shows how much he is granting to the verificationist: a “disclosure” is still a way of rooting the meaningfulness of each term directly in a certain sort of experience. Ramsey thus accepts most of the verificationists’ requirements for what it takes for (purported) propositions to be genuinely meaningful, tweaking those requirements only slightly, but philosophers today are likely to reject most of those purported requirements—purported requirements that were the driving forces behind much of his thought. As a result, it is somewhat difficult to see how one might even begin to translate Ramsey’s account into contemporary terms, or to see what could be left of it if such a translation were accomplished.

But setting that difficulty aside, even if we simply grant Ramsey’s assumptions about language and meaningfulness, Ramsey’s account of models has little to offer us in our search for an account of religious language that can solve the problem of unspecified similarity laid out in Chapter 3. To illustrate why, it will help to consider a distinction Augustine makes between two ways we can be hindered in speaking about God:

God can be thought about more truly than he can be talked about, and he is more truly than he can be thought about.¹¹

According to Augustine, there is one gap between what we understand about God and what we are able to clearly express in words, but also a second, deeper gap between the reality of God and what we are able to understand. The reason Ramsey’s account of religious language cannot help

¹¹ Augustine, *De Trinitate* 7.3. All quotations from *De Trinitate* taken from Augustine, *The Trinity*, ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. Edmund Hill (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1991).

us is that Ramsey's account addresses only the first gap, whereas the problem of unspecified similarity arises by virtue of the second gap.

Ramsey takes the main problem in religious language to be the gap between what one understands (in *some* sense—perhaps not in a well-conceptualized fashion), and what one can express straightforwardly and directly in propositional form. For Ramsey, the truths we try to express in religious language are things we actually do have a grasp of; it's just that it's a slippery grasp, because these things are not publically observable, and so cannot be directly described in public observation language, and this makes attempts to talk about them “logically odd.” Thus, for Ramsey, the problem with religious language really is, at bottom, a problem about *language*—it isn't a problem about what we can *know* about God, but about how to express or communicate what we (in some inchoate sense) know. That is why Ramsey places such a strong emphasis on the concept of “disclosure”: disclosures are cases in which we realize something which resists straightforward description or communication. The model is something a bit like a koan, or like the questions Socrates asks Meno's slave: it is intended to help the hearer either to spontaneously discern something which has been implicit but unnoticed in their experience, or to help them call to mind something they already knew but that cannot be communicated in a more direct fashion. Thus the gap which the model serves to bridge is that between our knowledge or awareness of things and our ability to describe what we know, not that between the reality and our knowledge of it.

It seems to me that in placing his emphasis on the first of the two gaps Augustine names, Ramsey places it wrongly, and that to the extent that there is in some cases a gap between what we know and what we can express in plain descriptive language, that gap is not as interesting or

significant as Ramsey thinks it is. However, I will not endeavor to argue for that here. What is important for our purposes is to note that, because of his focus on the first gap, Ramsey's account of models has no resources to offer towards solving the problem of unspecified similarity.

In Chapter 2, I discussed several reasons why theists need a doctrine of analogy. The most forceful of these reasons stems from a classical or quasi-classical conception of God on which God “escapes our conceptual nets” and does not fall under any of our fundamental ontological concepts. God is neither substance nor accident, neither concrete nor abstract, in any positive sense we can attach to those terms, and if this is so, then none of the positive and intrinsic things believers say about God could possibly be true in any sense we can understand. My goal has been to demonstrate that this radical position can be rendered coherent, and that it is compatible with having beliefs about God which are sufficiently contentful to support a robust religious life. The goal of my account of analogy in religious language is to show that even if the classical conception of God is correct, believers can still affirm central theistic claims about God by taking them to express, in analogical form, some truth which is beyond our grasp.

Thus, whereas Ramsey takes us to have a certain inchoate understanding of God which cannot be *expressed* except indirectly with the help of models, on the view I wish to defend, it is impossible for us to *conceive* of God as he is—even in a hazy and inchoate way which defies clear expression in words--except negatively or via analogy. I take the deepest and most significant problem we have in speaking about God to be that God escapes our conceptual nets, and that as a result we are unable to accurately conceive of God as he is. And so, when I say that we are able to speak about God only by analogy, what I mean is that there are analogical claims

which in some way indicate important truths about God, but that we do not know what those truths are independently of the appeal to similarity: we have only the analogical claims and cannot “see behind” them. By contrast, Ramsey’s account of models assumes that we *can* see behind the models: one who experiences the disclosure the model is meant to evoke understands not only the model but also that which it is a model *of*—that which is disclosed. And so Ramsey’s account of models cannot help to address the problem I am worried about.

Ian Barbour’s account of models in *Myths, Models and Paradigms* looks decidedly more promising for our purposes, since he is concerned with the second of Augustine’s gaps and not the first. Furthermore, Barbour’s main goal is to demonstrate that models can enable us to speak meaningfully and *truly* about a realm which is in some important sense outside our cognitive grasp; in contrast to Ramsey, he insists that model-talk is representational.

Barbour defines models as especially systematic and well-developed metaphors. To employ models or metaphors in one’s speech is not to speak literally, but such speech nonetheless does have cognitive content, because when one uses a metaphor or model one implicitly “asserts that there are significant analogies between the things compared.”¹² However, Barbour argues, a metaphor is not *merely* the assertion that two things are similar. Metaphors are also “open-ended and extensible” rather than positing any pre-defined set of similarities, they often have “emotional and valuational overtones” which a mere assertion of similarity would not have, and they direct us to perceive the subject in a particular way that is guided or ordered by the metaphor.¹³ For Barbour, all these are central properties of models as well.

¹² Barbour, *Myths, Models and Paradigms*, 13. As I noted in Chapter 1 (see pp. 37-38), this is not the best way of describing how metaphor works. However, I don’t think this weakness in Barbour’s understanding of metaphor undermines his account of models.

¹³ Barbour, *Myths, Models and Paradigms*, 14.

Barbour argues that we are especially dependent on models in those realms of inquiry where direct observation of the phenomena in question is not available to us—e.g. in fundamental physics and in religion. Models are “partial and provisional ways of imagining what is not observable; they are symbolic representations of aspects of the world which are not directly accessible to us.”¹⁴ We cannot see or touch or otherwise directly learn about an atom the way we can directly learn about the dishes in the sink, and so if we are to have any positive conception of atoms, we must employ a model, borrowing concepts from some realm we *do* have direct experience and an immediate grasp of. Similarly, Barbour thinks, we cannot see, touch, or directly learn about God the way we can learn about our fellow creatures, and so we must employ models of God as well.

Barbour takes scientific models like the billiard ball model of gases as his paradigm examples of models, and uses his account of scientific models as the basis for his account of religious ones. His main purpose is to defend what he calls the “critical realist” position about models, both in the context of science and in the context of religion.¹⁵ The critical realist takes models “seriously but not literally.”¹⁶ On the one hand, one must not mistake a model for a literal and straightforward description of reality: atoms are not *literally* tiny billiard balls or tiny solar systems. On the other hand, Barbour also criticizes those non-realists who take scientific models not to constitute any sort of representation of objective reality at all, but instead to be mere heuristic devices or instrumental fictions which happen to be useful for practical purposes.

¹⁴ Ibid., 7.

¹⁵ Ibid., 37.

¹⁶ Ibid., 7.

Models are not *literal* representations of reality, but they are nonetheless *genuine representations* of reality.

Extending this position to the case of religion, Barbour takes nearly everything believers say about God to be based on models. This means believers' claims about God are not "literal pictures of reality,"¹⁷ but nonetheless are genuinely representational in some fashion. Under the influence of verificationism, some philosophers of religion have denied that religious models are representational at all. Most famously, R. B. Braithwaite takes things said of God to be rather like things said of Anna Karenina: fictional stories about a fictional being, valuable not because they assert true propositions but because such stories can offer us moral insight and strengthen our moral motivation.¹⁸ However, Barbour argues, this position on religious models is as unappealing as the corresponding position on scientific models:

Religious language does indeed express and evoke distinctive attitudes. It does encourage self-commitment to a way of life; it acknowledges allegiance to ethical principles and affirms the intention to act in particular ways. But I would maintain that these *non-cognitive uses* presuppose *cognitive beliefs*. To be sure, religious faith is not simply assent to the truth of propositions; but it does require the assumption that certain propositions are true.¹⁹

Models *both* serve as (non-literal) representations *and* fulfill other extra-representational purposes such as expressing or evoking certain attitudes and imposing particular interpretations or orderings of information on the subject. It is a mistake to think one of those things must come at the expense of the other.

¹⁷ Ibid., 50.

¹⁸ R. B. Braithwaite, *An Empiricist's View of the Nature of Religious Belief* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955).

¹⁹ Barbour, *Myths, Models and Paradigms*, 58.

Barbour's account of models seems much more promising, at least for our purposes, than Ramsey's. However, Barbour himself has little to say about the role played by similarity in models, and nothing at all to say about the philosophical quandaries that arise when one appeals to unspecified similarities. Barbour does assert that models are based on similarities—that, for example, the billiard-ball model of atoms is based on real similarities between the behavior of billiard balls and the behavior of atoms. In the scientific case, following Mary Hesse, he then distinguishes between the “positive analogy” (those elements of the model we know to be similar to the target—for example, that both billiard balls and atoms have velocity), the “negative analogy” (those elements we know *not* to be similar to the target—for example that billiard balls, unlike atoms, are always some particular color), and the “neutral analogy” (those features of the model about which we don't yet know whether they are shared with the target). The “neutral analogy” in the case of scientific models serves primarily as a source for further hypotheses which can be tested; scientists strive to turn those areas of neutral analogy into either positive or negative analogy by further experimentation. Thus the role similarity plays in Barbour's understanding of *scientific* models is a clearly-defined one: models are based on certain observable, well-understood similarities, and based on those observed similarities, serve to posit other further similarities which *might* hold, as directions for further research. Given this tidy understanding of the role similarity plays in scientific models, no problem of unspecified similarity threatens this account.

However, when Barbour turns to the topic of *religious* models, he largely sets aside the topic of similarity. He asserts that, like scientific models, religious models are based on

analogy,²⁰ but he does not explain what role similarity actually plays in religious models. And this leaves us with several crucial questions: In what *way* is the religious model of God as, say, a person, similar to God himself? Do religious models work the same way scientific models do, such that we can distinguish between the positive analogy, negative analogy, and neutral analogy? If so, what constitutes the “positive analogy”—what sort of properties does the model of God as a person share with God? In the scientific case, Barbour cashed out the cognitive aspect of his “critical realist” position specifically in terms of similarity: the reason scientific models are genuinely representational is that one employing the model asserts that there are genuine similarities between the model and that which it models. But when he turns to religion, Barbour cashes out the cognitive aspect of “critical realism” instead in a discussion of the role models play in “the interpretation of experience.” For example, a religious believer will interpret experiences of moral obligation or reorientation, of the beauty of the world, of certain historical events, and so on, as “manifestations of God,” whereas a non-religious person will interpret them in a different way. But this leaves unanswered the question of what is actually being *said* or *believed* about God, when various elements of experience are interpreted as manifestations of God. While he insists that religious models *are* representational, Barbour does not explain how exactly they represent, or what exactly the content of these representations is.

Barbour’s account is a suggestive and insightful one in numerous ways, but it is not clear enough on the role of similarity in particular to be of any help in addressing those worries that have concerned us since Chapter 3. In what follows, I will develop an account of analogical models which is often (though not always) in harmony with Barbour’s ideas, though I will

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 49.

develop my account independently, because the explosion of literature on scientific models in recent decades has made available a far more sophisticated understanding of models than Barbour could draw on at the time of his own work. However, Barbour's account of models will serve as a useful contrast case with my own account in Chapter 6.

2. Basic features of analogical models

What I propose is that the analogical claims used by believers to describe God serve to construct *analogical models* for understanding God. But first, I must explain what precisely I mean by "analogical models." My account of analogical models will draw primarily on existing accounts of *scientific* models, since it is in discussions of scientific modeling that we find the best-developed accounts of analogical modeling.

In brief, for some object or system *m* to be able to serve as an analogical model of some target object or system *t*, *m* must bear some relevant similarities, including at least some relevant *structural* similarities, to *t*, while also being *dissimilar* to *t* in some significant respects. However, *m* is only an analogical model of *t* insofar as it is *taken* as a model, or used as a model, of *t*. To take some *m* as a model of some *t* is to use *m* to represent *t* by virtue of *m*'s similarities to *t*, while using *m* in *surrogative thought* about *t*. I will unpack the different aspects of this definition in turn.

2.1 An analogical model is not a description or theory

In writings on scientific models in particular, it is common to distinguish two main kinds of representational models: concrete physical models, and theoretical models. Physical models

are real physical structures. This is the most fundamental kind of model, the paradigm from which other senses of the word are derived.²¹ Examples of this sort of model include a model of a glucose molecule constructed out of tinker-toys, a globe or map, and a scale model of a building. Not all concrete physical models are deliberately constructed to be models, however: the solar system can serve as a model of the atom, but not because it was constructed to do so.

Taking existing physical things as models for other things is something we do often, in non-scientific contexts as well as scientific ones. For example, I once had two pet domestic rats named Myrtle and Maud. Myrtle was high-strung and timid and prone to respond to new stimuli with terror; by contrast, Maud was calm and unflappable. As rats generally establish a hierarchy, I had expected Maud to take charge: she seemed strong and confident and independent, whereas Myrtle was afraid to explore or try anything new, and was touchingly dependent on Maud for soothing and reassurance. But in fact, within a few weeks it became clear that it was Myrtle who dominated; her high energy and the intensity of her responses to stimuli meant that she would insist forcefully on what she wanted and persist almost limitlessly in trying to get it, whereas Maud would soon placidly give in. My experience with these two little creatures has served ever since as a helpful model for understanding certain human relationships. Some human pairs form (metaphorically speaking) a Myrtle and a Maud, and by thinking of those people in light of the model given me by the original Myrtle and Maud, I find I am able to understand certain

²¹ Ludwig Boltzmann's entry on the term "model" in the 1902 edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* asserts that models "always involve a concrete spatial analogy in three dimensions," and hence that other forms of representation such as maps and diagrams are not properly models at all. Ludwig Boltzmann, "Model," in *Theoretical Physics and Philosophical Problems: Selected Writings*, ed. Brian McGuinness (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1974), 214. Nowadays, mathematical and computational models are so much more central to scientific practice than physical ones are that Boltzmann's assertion may sound rather odd to our ears. Nonetheless, I think there is value—perhaps not in all scientific contexts, but at least for our purposes in this chapter—in holding onto the thought that paradigm example of a model is a concrete physical one.

relational dynamics both more clearly and with more compassion. While this is a fairly idiosyncratic example, the *kind* of thinking involved in this example is, I think, quite common.

While physical models have important roles to play in both scientific and non-scientific contexts, *theoretical* models are far more central to contemporary scientific practice. Like a physical model, a theoretical model represents its target, and does so in part by virtue of some similarity it bears to the target. However, theoretical models are not real physical objects or structures, but instead exist only as imaginary constructs. Examples of theoretical models include Bohr's model of the atom and Maxwell's model of an electrical field as a sort of fluid. A theoretical model may employ concepts of familiar physical phenomena, but unlike a concrete physical model, a theoretical model does not consist in some actually existing physical object or system. Often, a theoretical model combines properties in such a way that no real physical object or system of that sort could possibly be constructed. For example, colliding billiard balls may serve as a concrete physical model of atoms, but once we specify that in the case of atoms, the "billiard balls" are perfectly elastic, the model has become a theoretical one, for no such billiard balls can be physically constructed.

One may be tempted to take theoretical models as something like (metaphorical or analogical or idealized or approximate) *descriptions* of their target.²² One reason this position may seem tempting is that the term "model" is sometimes used almost interchangeably with the

²² For example, Peter Achinstein defines what he calls "theoretical models" as consisting in "a set of assumptions" about the system represented by the model (*Concepts of Science: A Philosophical Analysis* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1968], 212). Martin Thomson-Jones argues in a similar vein for a conception of "propositional models" as consisting in sets of propositions about the target system ("Models and the Semantic View," *Philosophy of Science* 73, no. 5 [2006]: 524–35). It is worth noting that while both of these theorists take this descriptive category of models to be an important one which includes the Bohr model and other paradigm examples of scientific models, neither of them takes the position that *all* non-physical scientific models (let alone all representational models more generally) fall into this category.

term “theory.”²³ If one takes a theory to be a sort of description of a phenomenon or of the mechanism underlying a phenomenon, this would entail that a model is likewise a sort of description as well. Furthermore, in economics and the other social sciences it is fairly common to equate a model with a particular equation or set of equations, and the equations that constitute an economic “model” at least plausibly serve as a sort of mathematical description (though an idealized or merely approximate one) of some real-world phenomenon.

However, to take a model to be a kind of description does not match the way scientists actually use the term “model,” nor does it match the way we use the term in comparable non-scientific contexts. Commonly, a model is spoken of *not* as a description of the target system, but instead as an independently self-standing entity. For example, Martin Thomson-Jones notes that textbooks in classical mechanics generally include a description of something called “the simple pendulum”:

The simple pendulum, we are told, is made up of a mass, and a rod or piece of string by which the mass is suspended from a fixed point; the mass swings back and forth in a plane perpendicular to the ground . . . the mass encounters no air resistance in its travels, and . . . there are no frictional forces at the point of suspension It is a straightforward observation, however . . . that there are no real systems fitting this description.²⁴

The “simple pendulum” is a model of the real-world pendulum. It is not a *description* of a real-world pendulum, however, because it is not a description at all, but a (fictional, idealized) three-dimensional entity.

²³ For example, one can refer almost interchangeably to the “Bohr model” or the “Bohr theory” of the atom—or at least one could have done so during the era when the Bohr theory was widely accepted. Today the distinction is more relevant, because Bohr’s *theory* has been superseded in favor of a more sophisticated account of how atoms work, while Bohr’s *model* of the atom is still useful for some purposes.

²⁴ Martin Thomson-Jones, “Missing Systems and the Face Value Practice,” *Synthese* 172, no. 2 (2010): 284.

There are, of course, descriptions *involved* in our use of theoretical models. For example, the model pendulum is defined by descriptive statements such as “the pendulum is made up of a mass suspended by a rod or piece of string from a fixed point.” I will here borrow a term from Ronald Giere and distinguish between the “model description” and the model itself.²⁵ The model itself is the structure, either concretely real (in the case of physical models) or abstract or fictional (in the case of theoretical models) which represents the target by virtue of its similarities to the target. The model description is the description or representation of the *model*: it may consist in verbal descriptions, equations, diagrams, or a mixture of such things.

If theoretical models are not descriptions, what *are* they? Ronald Giere argues that theoretical models are “abstract entities” which are defined by their model descriptions.²⁶ However, Thomson-Jones objects that defining models as abstract objects is unappealing, because abstract objects are ordinarily taken not to have physical properties.²⁷ Thus if the model pendulum is an abstract entity, it is not three-dimensional, and no part of it possesses mass. But that would accord with our usual ways of speaking about models no better than the models-as-descriptions account did.²⁸

In response to concerns such as these, many contemporary theorists have adopted the view that theoretical models are *fictional entities*, and thus have roughly the same ontological

²⁵ Ronald N. Giere, *Explaining Science: A Cognitive Approach* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 83.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 78.

²⁷ Thomson-Jones, “Missing Systems,” 290-91.

²⁸ Giere denies that these implications follow from his characterization of models as “abstract”; by saying models are abstract entities, Giere notes, he means only that they are not concrete in the way that real physical objects are concrete. They do still have whatever properties they are defined as having—and thus the model pendulum does have mass. Ronald N. Giere, “Why Scientific Models Should Not Be Regarded as Works of Fiction,” in *Fictions in Science: Philosophical Essays on Modeling and Idealization*, ed. Mauricio Suárez (New York: Routledge, 2009), 250. However, this renders Giere’s account unsatisfyingly negative: he has told us what models *aren’t*—concrete entities—but this doesn’t explain what they *are* or how they possess physical properties.

status as Pegasus or Sherlock Holmes.²⁹ This seems to accord better with our ordinary ways of talking about such models. On this account, models like the model pendulum do not exist in the real world, but instead are merely imagined constructions. Nonetheless, we can say of them many of the same sorts of things we could say about real things: just as we can truly say that Sherlock Holmes lives in London, or that Pegasus has hooves and a mane, we can also truly say that the model pendulum is made up of a mass suspended from a fixed point by a rod or string. As Peter Godfrey-Smith puts it, we take models to be “‘imagined concrete things’—things that are imaginary or hypothetical, but which would be concrete if they were real.”³⁰

This characterization of models as fictional entities is the one I will follow, because it has several benefits. First, this account aligns well with the way scientists actually talk about such models. Second, it allows us to see physical models and theoretical models as functioning in the same fundamental way: both are entities which represent their target via their structural similarities to it. This seems appropriate because in practice, theoretical models and physical models *do* seem to work in very similar ways. In some cases, a theoretical model may even be

²⁹ Those who take this position include Alisa Bokulich (“Explanatory Fictions,” in *Fictions in Science: Philosophical Essays on Modeling and Idealization*, ed. Mauricio Suárez [New York: Routledge, 2009], 91–109 and “Fiction as a Vehicle for Truth,” *The Monist* 99, no. 3 [2016]: 260–79), Gabrielle Contessa (“Scientific Models and Fictional Objects,” *Synthese* 172, no. 2 [2010]: 215–29), Catherine Elgin (“Exemplification, Idealization, and Scientific Understanding,” in *Fictions in Science: Philosophical Essays on Modeling and Idealization*, ed. Mauricio Suárez [New York: Routledge, 2009], 77–90), Roman Frigg (“Fiction in Science,” in *Fictions and Models: New Essays*, ed. John Woods [Munich: Philosophia Verlag, 2010], 247–87 and “Models and Fiction,” *Synthese* 172, no. 2 [2010]: 251–68), Peter Godfrey-Smith (“Models and Fictions in Science,” *Philosophical Studies* 143, no. 1 [2009]: 101–16 and “The Strategy of Model-Based Science,” *Biology and Philosophy* 21 [2006]: 725–40), Mauricio Suárez (“Scientific Fictions as Rules of Inference,” in *Fictions in Science: Philosophical Essays on Modeling and Idealization*, ed. Mauricio Suárez [New York: Routledge, 2009], 158–78), and Adam Toon (*Models as Make-Believe: Imagination, Fiction and Scientific Representation* [Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012]). I am here distinguishing the view that models are fictional entities from the semi-related view that goes by the name of “fictionalism,” on which scientific theories are false (i.e. “fictional”), at least if interpreted as straightforward descriptions of the phenomena they purport to describe. See, e.g., Nancy Cartwright, *How the Laws of Physics Lie* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983) and Arthur Fine, “Fictionalism,” in *Fictions in Science: Philosophical Essays on Modeling and Idealization*, ed. Mauricio Suárez (New York: Routledge, 2009), 19–36.

³⁰ Peter Godfrey-Smith, “Model-Based Science,” 734–35.

one that *could* actually be constructed as a physical model, but has not been because simply imagining it was sufficient. For example, one might construct an actual tinker-toy model of a molecule, but one could also simply describe such a structure and ask the student to imagine it.³¹ Given that whether a particular model is physical or theoretical seems to be entirely accidental in some cases, an account of theoretical models on which they function in a radically different way from physical models would be undesirably counterintuitive. The models-as-fictional-entities approach escapes this difficulty and offers a consistent and intuitive way of understanding the role of analogical models.

Taking models as fictional entities seems even more intuitively appropriate if we consider non-scientific examples of theoretical models, since some of the most obvious examples of theoretical models in non-scientific contexts are entities uncontroversially recognized as fictional. Suppose, for example, that Myrtle and Maud were *invented* rats in a children's story. Then they would of course be fictional entities. But a fictional Myrtle and Maud, if described sufficiently well, could work just as well for modeling purposes as a real Myrtle and Maud. And indeed, one of the valuable things a really good novel or other work of fiction can do for us is to give us models for understanding human relationships, or the human condition more broadly. If we agree that a fictional Myrtle and Maud constitute a theoretical model, it follows that at least *some* theoretical models are fictional entities. But models like the model pendulum function

³¹ Michael Weisberg classes those cases in which one imagines a possible physical structure as instances of *physical* models rather than of theoretical models, because he wishes to characterize all non-physical models as mathematical in character (*Simulation and Similarity: Using Models to Understand the World* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013], 18). His view is that in cases like the one described here, we are employing a physical model that we happen not to have physically constructed. This strikes me as an unsatisfactorily *ad hoc* solution, however. More importantly, it seems to me that once Weisberg has admitted that there are models which consist in imaginary physical objects, he has essentially granted the existence of fictional models, at which point there is no reason not to expand that category to include model pendulums, the Bohr model atom, and so on.

similarly in thought. It thus seems reasonable to take the model pendulum to be a fictional entity as well.

However, to describe models as fictional entities does not really resolve questions about the ontological status of models, because the ontological status of fictional entities is itself a matter of great debate. On the one hand, non-realists about fictional entities assert that there really are no such things, in any sense, and therefore that a sentence like “Pegasus has wings” that seems to presuppose the reality (in some fashion) of a certain fictional entity should not be taken at face value. Instead, it should be interpreted as a disguised or elliptical way of saying something like “There exists a horse with such-and-such properties and that has wings,”³² or “Within the world of ancient Greek mythology, Pegasus has wings.”³³ On the other hand, realists about fictional entities do not agree about what they are: perhaps fictional entities are merely *possible* entities,³⁴ or perhaps something like Meinongian abstract objects,³⁵ or perhaps something else. In any case, I certainly cannot hope to resolve *that* debate here. However, whatever the correct account of fictions is, it must be an account on which “Pegasus is a winged horse” is an appropriate thing to say, and (at least when properly interpreted) expresses a true proposition. Thus, if we take models to be fictions, this will be enough to justify our practice of saying that the model pendulum has mass, swings back and forth in a plane perpendicular to the ground, and so on, for the same reason that we are justified in making similar descriptive or definitory statements about Pegasus. And so any acceptable account of fictions would suffice to

³² This is Russell’s approach to the puzzle; see “On Denoting,” *Mind* 14, no. 56 (1905): 479–93.

³³ This is Lewis’s view, though since Lewis also identifies fictional entities with entities in other possible worlds, and is furthermore a modal realist, it’s a bit ambiguous whether Lewis really counts as a non-realist about fictional entities. See David Lewis, “Truth in Fiction,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 15, no. 1 (1978): 37–46.

³⁴ See David Lewis, “Truth in Fiction” and Graham Priest, *Towards Non-Being: The Logic and Metaphysics of Intentionality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), chapter 6.

³⁵ See Edward N. Zalta, *Abstract Objects: An Introduction to Axiomatic Metaphysics* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1983).

justify our ordinary ways of talking about models, on the assumption that models are a sort of fiction.

Not all non-physical or theoretical models are fictional, however. For example, Michael Weisberg argues that scientific models consist in *mathematical structures*, which are neither concrete entities nor fictional ones. I find Weisberg's assertion that *all* theoretical models in science consist in mathematical structures rather implausible, but he is certainly right that mathematical structures *can* serve as models for physical phenomena. Alternatively, for a non-mathematical and non-scientific example, consider Kierkegaard's use of the difference between a polygon and a circle to illuminate a key distinction in his work. Kierkegaard points out that the more sides a polygon has, the closer it approximates to a circle, yet no matter how many sides it has, it will never actually *be* a circle, and there is a "qualitative difference" between a circle and a polygon.³⁶ Whereas Ramsey uses this example to illustrate the very concept of a model (by taking "infinite-sided polygon" as a model of a circle), Kierkegaard uses the relationship between a polygon and a circle as a model for the relationship between *other* sets of concepts, for example, that between the *useful* and the *good*. This metaphor employs something quite abstract—the relationship between two geometrical shapes—as a model for something else.

My point in enumerating the different sorts of entities that can constitute models—real, fictional, concrete, abstract—is not to offer a taxonomy of models. Indeed, it would be quite difficult and also entirely unhelpful to try to categorize all models neatly into the appropriate ontological categories from that list of four. My point is rather the opposite: to illustrate that the

³⁶ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 21.

ontological category into which the model entity falls is usually completely irrelevant.³⁷

Theoretical models work more-or-less like physical models do: they are not anything like *descriptions* of their targets, but instead are self-standing entities (of some sort or another) which represent their targets by virtue of their similarity to them. What remains is to explain how this representation works.

2.2 An analogical model bears relevant similarities, including at least some relevant structural similarities, to its target

In order to be an analogical model of a particular target, the model entity must be similar in some relevant respects to the target; it is these similarities that enable the entity to function *as* a model. The solar system works as an analogical model of the atom only because it is structurally similar to the atom in certain respects, Myrtle and Maud can serve as an analogical model of a human couple only because they are similar to human couples in certain respects, the model pendulum can serve as an analogical model of a real pendulum only because it is similar to the real pendulum, and so on.

There are some kinds of scientific models which don't seem to work by similarity. One possible example are what Michael Weisberg calls "hypothetical models," which are not

³⁷ There is one way in which the differences between types of models *can* be an important one. Some concrete physical models can be experimentally manipulated to enable us to learn things about their target systems which we could not have otherwise learned. For example, Dave Fultz's "dishpan experiments" use a rotating dishpan of water to model the atmosphere of one hemisphere; such a model can be manipulated and observed (by heating the pan and adding dye to make fluid movement visible) in a way the actual atmosphere cannot be. See Charles Care, *Technology for Modelling: Electrical Analogies, Engineering Practice, and the Development of Analogue Computing* (Springer Science and Business Media, 2010), 169-75. This is a feature of modeling which merely theoretical models cannot replicate. However, there is no analogue to the experimental physical models in the case of God; we cannot experiment on physical models of God and expect that endeavor to be illuminating. So we can safely ignore this aspect of scientific modeling for the purposes of this project; our interest is in the theoretical and imaginative use of models, not in the experimental use of them.

intended to be models *of* any independent thing.³⁸ He offers as an example R. A. Fisher’s model of a three-sex species. Fisher wanted to know why it is that species that reproduce sexually always seem to have *two* sexes, rather than three or more. One way to try to answer this question is to imagine a species with three sexes—in essence, to construct a theoretical model of such a species—and then consider what problems might arise for it. However, Fisher’s model is not a model *of* any other thing.³⁹ The “species with three sexes” is only an imagined, fictional entity, and the “model of a species with three sexes” seems to be the very same fictional entity. We would of course say that the model employed by Fisher is “a model of a species with three sexes”—but there is no “species with three sexes” independent of the model itself. And so it seems like Fisher’s model and the target of that model are the very same thing, which is another way of saying the model really *has* no target. And so, *a fortiori*, it is not similar to its target. If this is the right way to understand what is going on in a hypothetical model, then we should not classify hypothetical models as analogical models, because to be an analogical model is to be a model *of* something else and to represent that something else by virtue of some similarity to it.

Thus, not all scientific models are *analogical* models in the sense I am describing here—not everything we want to call a “model” is an analogical model, especially in scientific contexts, and while I have drawn heavily on scientific examples, my account here should not be taken as an attempted account of scientific models *in general*. However, many and probably most scientific models are analogical ones.

³⁸ Weisberg, *Simulation and Similarity*, 121-34.

³⁹ As Weisberg points out (Ibid., 131-34) there *are* species which can be at least plausibly described as having more than two sexes. So it is perhaps not strictly true that Fisher’s three-sex model species has no real target. I will ignore that accidental detail for the sake of the example; Fisher’s model was certainly not intended as a model of any such actually existing species.

But some theorists have resisted the idea that scientific models of the sort I have discussed up to this point operate by virtue of similarity. Weisberg suggests, with some plausibility, that this resistance may be driven by the thought that there is something unscientific or otherwise intellectually disreputable about appealing to a concept as hazy and unanalyzable as similarity.⁴⁰ But a consideration of actual examples reveals that qualitative similarities are often essential to scientific models. As a result, any attempt to analyze away the key role similarity plays in scientific modeling will be unsuccessful.

The most prominent competing account of models roots the representational force of a model not in its similarity to its target, but in its *isomorphism* (or at least *partial* isomorphism) to its target.⁴¹ For two systems to be isomorphic is for their structures to correspond proportionally, such that the structure of the one system can be mapped consistently onto the other. This mapping is quantifiable: for each point in one system, there is a consistent function which determines exactly one point corresponding to it in its isomorphic counterpart. This way of thinking about modeling is most naturally applied to mathematical models. A mathematical model consists of a (perhaps infinite) set of points in some mathematically defined space, as defined by the formulas which constitute the model description. For such a model to be isomorphic to its target is for there to be a function which enables us to pick out, for every point

⁴⁰ Ibid., 142. See, for example, Goodman's influential criticisms of the misuse of appeals to similarity ("Seven Strictures on Similarity," in *Problems and Projects* [Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merill, 1972], 437–47) and Quine's description of the concept of similarity as "logically repugnant" in "Natural Kinds," 117.

⁴¹ Proponents of the isomorphism view include Patrick Suppes, "A Comparison of the Meaning and Uses of Models in Mathematics and the Empirical Sciences," *Synthese* 12, no. 2/3 (1960): 287–301, Bas C. van Fraassen, *The Scientific Image* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1980), 43–46. Newton C. A. da Costa and Steven French advocate a view of models as based on *partial* isomorphism in *Science and Partial Truth: A Unitary Approach to Models and Scientific Reasoning* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

in the model, a corresponding data point in the (massaged and idealized version of the) observed data.

A model needn't be a "mathematical model" in the strict sense to be isomorphic, however, so long as it is mathematically *describable*. For example, real physical scale models are not merely similar to but isomorphic to their targets, since a scale model copies the spatial proportions of its target. Each point on a perfect scale model will have a corresponding point on the real model, and these points will correspond according to a consistent function. Similarly, the model of a gas as consisting of perfectly elastic billiard balls is at least partially isomorphic to its target: each point in the trajectories of colliding, perfectly elastic billiard balls will correspond to a point in the trajectories of colliding gas molecules, and these points will correspond according to a fairly consistent function. In the above examples, the appeal of an account of models on which they function by virtue of isomorphism or partial isomorphism to their target is evident: it is certainly the isomorphism between model and target which *makes* the models described above serve as models of their targets.

However, as Weisberg has argued, isomorphism alone cannot serve to explain the usefulness and representational power of many scientific models. Some scientific models are not isomorphic to their targets, but are nonetheless similar to them in some other respects, and it is these non-isomorphic similarities that enable them to serve as models. Consider for example the model pendulum; specifically a highly idealized model pendulum which is unimpeded by friction or air resistance. This model pendulum will swing back and forth forever. By contrast, a real pendulum is affected by friction and air resistance, and so it will swing less and less widely until eventually it falls still. The model pendulum and the real pendulum thus do not display

isomorphism in their behavior.⁴² As Weisberg points out, the real feature of the model pendulum which *makes* it a model of a pendulum is that it reflects the “oscillatory character” of the real pendulum. But “oscillatory character” is not a property which can be captured by the notion of isomorphism, so if it is the oscillatory character of the model pendulum which is what is really essential to its serving as a model, then it is not isomorphism which accounts for why the model pendulum serves as a model. The isomorphism view attempts to cash out the relationship of scientific models to the world in a precisely quantified, mathematically definable manner. But an exclusive focus on isomorphism will ignore the relevant *qualitative* similarities between the model and the target.

However, the isomorphism account of models is not entirely wrong-headed. The key insight of the isomorphism theorist is that not just *any* old relationship of similarity suffices to enable one thing to serve as a model of another. A model must be, not just similar, but *structurally* similar to its target. By “structural similarity,” I mean a complex interrelated set of proportional similarities. For example, vision and comprehension are structurally similar, because there are many related proportional similarities between them. The eye is to vision as the mind is to comprehension; clear air or a transparent medium are to vision as “clear,” “transparent” writing or explanations are to comprehension; visual perspective is to vision as intellectual perspective is to comprehension; and so on. It is because vision and comprehension are structurally similar that we are able to use vision as a metaphor for comprehension so

⁴² On this point see also Giere, *Explaining Science*, 80-81. Of course, one can formulate a model pendulum that factors in friction and air resistance, and that pendulum *will* be isomorphic to the real pendulum. However, the fact that we can invent a model pendulum which *is* isomorphic to the real pendulum does not undermine Weisberg’s point, because the non-isomorphic, frictionless model pendulum is still *also* model of a real pendulum. Indeed, the idealized model illuminates some features of the real pendulum *better* than the damped version does.

effectively, and to extend that metaphor in so many different directions. The structural similarities between vision and comprehension are these proportional similarities of the form $a:b::c:d$ which include vision and comprehension as two of the four relata of the proportionality.

Isomorphism is one species of structural similarity—a particularly strict, mathematically tractable form of it. But not all structural similarity is a matter of isomorphism, even partial or approximate isomorphism, because not all structural similarities are quantifiable and mathematically tractable. The proportional relationship between comprehension and vision is one example of non-isomorphic structural similarity.

As a contrast to the above examples of structural similarity, suppose I tell a friend, “My new curtains are the color of blue hydrangeas.” This is an analogical statement, because it makes an implicit appeal to similarity: rather than describing my curtains via some direct, *de dicto* description like “My new curtains are a moderately vivid medium blue with a hint of lavender,” I have instead described them in terms of their similarity to blue hydrangeas. However, the similarity I am appealing to here is an entirely non-structural similarity. As a result, we would never say that I am using blue hydrangeas as an analogical *model* of my curtains; we simply don’t describe such simple, one-note similarity claims as employing “models.” For something to be a model, it is not enough that it represent its target via a similarity of some kind; it must represent its target via a complex set of interrelated proportional similarities.

Janet Martin Soskice brings out this thought in her distinction between “illustrative” similes and “modeling” similes.⁴³ An illustrative simile is a simple, single-faceted analogical statement. Soskice’s example is this one from *Portrait of a Lady*:

⁴³ Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 59.

A dissatisfied mind, whatever else it may miss, is rarely in want of reasons; they bloom as thick as buttercups in June.

This statement compares the reasons of a dissatisfied mind with the blooming of buttercups, but it would not be usefully described as *modeling* the reasons on the buttercups. The simile offers a lovely image, but the similarity conveyed is a very simple one: both the reasons and the buttercups are abundant. It would be a mistake to try to extend this similarity outwards, exploring *other* ways that reasons and buttercups may be similar; that would be to misunderstand the sentence. There is only one relevant similarity that the simile intends to communicate.

By contrast, consider Soskice's example of a modeling simile, taken from the same work:

Her mind was to be his—attached to his own like a small garden-plot to a deer park. He would rake the soil gently and water the flowers; he would weed the beds and gather an occasional nose-gay. It would be a pretty piece of property for a proprietor already far-reaching.

The male character referred to here, Osmond, intends that his wife Isabel be like a small garden-plot attached to a deer park. In contrast to the previous example, this simile involves not one simple similarity but a complex set of proportional similarities. Each key element of the garden simile—the garden-plot, the deer park, the soil, the weeds, the nose-gays, the gardener—has its counterpart in the target, which is Osmond's desired relationship to Isabel. These counterparts stand in proportional relationships: Isabel's mind is to be to Osmond's mind as a small garden plot is to a deer park to which it is attached; Isabel's ideas and intellectual achievements are to be to Osmond as pretty little nose-gays are to the gardener who gathers them; her opinions and tastes are to be to Osmond as flower-beds are to a gardener who lovingly tends them by weeding out all undesired elements. It is this set of numerous interrelated proportional similarities which makes this simile a modeling simile rather than a merely illustrative one.

Soskice's distinction between illustrative similes and modeling similes is of course not only applicable to *similes*, as she herself points out. The distinction also applies to metaphors: some metaphors are complex modeling metaphors, while others are simple, illustrative metaphors intended to express one simple property (e.g., describing a repulsive person as a "toad" or a pretty child as a "snowdrop").⁴⁴ Nor does the illustrative/modeling distinction apply only to figurative uses of language like similes and metaphors; it can be applied to analogical speech of any kind. My original example, "My new curtains are the color of blue hydrangeas," is neither a metaphor nor a simile but a perfectly literal, non-figurative statement. However, it is an analogical statement, and it is clearly an illustrative one: it posits no model. On the other hand, statements describing scientific models—for example, the statement that light consists in waves in a luminiferous ether—are not usually well described as metaphorical or figurative. Nonetheless, the statement "light consists in waves in a luminiferous ether," as uttered by a proponent of the ether theory during its heyday, is an analogical statement. It requires for its significance that we posit a medium, "ether," whose intrinsic nature is entirely unknown, and which is instead simply defined as whatever it is that stands to the "waves" of light as air stands to sound waves. Such a scientific claim, then, is an example of a non-figurative modeling analogical claim.

To sum up, to be able to serve as an analogical model of a certain target, an entity must bear similarities to the target, and these similarities must include *structural* similarities. What

⁴⁴ One might argue that even apparently simple metaphors like these are subject to extension into more complex comparisons. For example, if one initially describes an acquaintance as a "toad," meaning that the person is repulsive, this will invite elaboration in the form of describing the person as "slimy," whereas describing them as some other "repulsive" animal like a warthog or tick would not. However, while even simple metaphors are extendable to some extent, they do not all invite elaboration into anything like the complex interrelated network of proportional comparisons which are involved in modeling.

that means is that the relationship must involve a complex network of interrelated proportional similarities. And so while some analogical claims posit analogical models, others are merely “illustrative” and do not posit anything deserving the name of “model.”

However, in arguing that a model must involve complex proportional similarities, I do not intend to assert that the *only* similarities between the model and target which are relevant to the model’s modeling the target are proportional similarities. There will *also* be important direct, simple similarities between the model and target. For example, the model pendulum and the real pendulum are similar in respect of their “oscillatory character,” as Weisberg says, and also in respect of the fact that both possess mass. Such direct, simple similarities are relevant to the way that the model pendulum represents the real pendulum. What is important is that this direct similarity does not stand alone, but is part of a network of many interrelated similarities between the model and the target.

2.3 An analogical model must be substantially *dissimilar* to its target

Analogical models function by virtue of similarity to their targets. However, analogical models must also have some significant *dissimilarities* to their target. Something which is qualitatively *identical* with its target is not a model of that target, but simply a copy. And even something which is only *slightly* dissimilar to its target, in relevant respects, cannot serve as an analogical model. For example, suppose I use Myrtle and Maud, not as a model for understanding human beings, but instead as a model for understanding another pair of pet rats. That is not a case of analogical modeling, because to infer something from one pair of rats and

apply it to the next pair of rats is unlikely to involve analogical reasoning at all—instead, it is more likely to involve simple reasoning from a specific case to a general conclusion.⁴⁵

An analogical model must thus also be at least somewhat dissimilar to its target. It is the combination of similarity and dissimilarity which is the source of a model's usefulness. For example, my map of Chicago is a model of the city, and is useful for navigation. Its usefulness depends on its accurate proportional similarity to the actual city of Chicago in respect of the spatial relationships between the streets. However, the map's usefulness also depends on its *dissimilarity* to the actual city of Chicago in virtue of its being, for example, small enough for me to look at all at once.

2.4 We can use multiple models for the same thing

The fact that models are partly similar to their target and partly dissimilar to their target means that it is possible and in some cases desirable to have several different and superficially conflicting models of the same thing. Perhaps the most obvious example of this is the fact that light can be modeled both as a (classical, Newtonian) particle and as a (classical, Newtonian) wave. Nowadays, of course, we have available a way of modeling light as neither a classical particle nor as a classical wave, but instead as a *quantum* particle which, like all quantum particles, exhibits wave-like properties. However, this later development sprang out of an earlier stage in which scientists came to see light as usefully describable by two very different models:

⁴⁵ Similarly, model organisms are a common type of “model” in the biological sciences but in many cases these are not *analogical* models at all, but instead are models in the sense of “samples.” For example, fruit flies are often used as a model organism to test theories of genetics. At least in the ideal case, learning something about genetics from fruit flies and then applying it to other organisms does not involve analogical reasoning, but simple reasoning from specific to general and then from general to specific.

we used both a model of light as a particle, and a model of light as a wave, even though nothing could possibly be both a particle and a wave (in the classical sense of those terms). This use of multiple models of the same thing constitutes no inconsistency, because to employ a wave model of light does not commit one to thinking that light *is* literally and straightforwardly a wave.

2.5 A model is a model only insofar as it is *taken as a model*

So far, I have laid out the qualities an entity must have in order to serve as a model of some target: it must possess both important structural similarities to its target, and important dissimilarities from its target. There are things we call “models” that do not meet those criteria, but nothing could count as an *analogical* model without meeting those criteria.

However, one thing does not constitute a model of another thing *merely* by possessing the right sorts of similarities and dissimilarities to it. For a thing to be a model of some target requires that it be *taken as* or *used as* a model of that target by someone. In what follows I will focus on three elements of what it means to take some *m* as a model of some target *t*: First, to take some *m* as a model of some *t* is to use *m* to *represent t*, in virtue of *m*'s similarities to *t*. Second, to take some *m* as a model of some *t* is to employ *m* in *surrogate thought* about *t*. And third, to take some *m* as a model of some *t* is to take a certain *practical stance* towards *t*.

2.6 An analogical model *represents its target by virtue of its similarities to it*

Despite the widespread debate about the nature and function of analogical models in science, that models serve to *represent* their targets is one claim which receives general approval. R. I. G. Hughes goes so far as to assert that “the characteristic—perhaps the only characteristic—

that all theoretical models have in common is that they provide representations of parts of the world, or the world as they describe it.”⁴⁶ However, models represent their target in a unique way: model-representation⁴⁷ does not work the same as linguistic representation or pictorial representation, for example.⁴⁸ The particular way an analogical model represents its target is by virtue of its complex, interrelated similarities to the target. For example, the map of Chicago represents Chicago largely by virtue of the systematic structural similarities between the ordering and spatial relationships of streets on the map and the ordering and spatial relationships of streets in the real city.

As Giere notes, the fact that models represent their targets means that scientific theories that posit models involve two distinct levels of representation. First, scientific theories serve as model-descriptions, describing and thus representing a theoretical model. The model itself, however, is a representation (what we might call a model-representation, rather than a linguistic one) of some real-world phenomenon. Thus model-based scientific theories serve to represent the real world only *indirectly*, through the mediation of the model.⁴⁹

The above account of scientific representation is not uncontroversial. One prominent competitor account asserts that models represent, not in virtue of similarity, but instead in virtue of *isomorphism*. But I have already explained why I do not think that approach is promising.

⁴⁶ R. I. G. Hughes, “Models and Representation,” *Philosophy of Science* 64 (1997): S325.

⁴⁷ I borrow this term from Adam Toon, *Models as Make-Believe*, 20.

⁴⁸ The claim that scientific models represent their targets in a unique way has been challenged by Craig Callendar and Jonathan Cohen, who argue that all representationality reduces to mental representation, and thus that there is no special question of how models (or pictures, etc.) represent their targets. See Craig Callendar and Jonathan Cohen, “There Is No Special Problem about Scientific Representation,” *Theoria* 21, no. 1 (2006): 67–85. However, even if Callendar and Cohen are right about representationality, that will not change the fact that models very obviously do work differently, as representations, than sentences or photographs do. The means by which representation is achieved are different in these different cases.

⁴⁹ Giere, *Explaining Science*, 82-86. This position is similar to the one Nancy Cartwright takes in her later work; see, e.g., *The Dappled World: A Study of the Boundaries of Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

Alternately, Mauricio Suárez argues that a scientific model represents its target only insofar as it can “be employed by an informed and competent user in order to draw valid inferences regarding the target—what is known as ‘surrogative’ reasoning or inference.”⁵⁰ I agree with Suárez that the ability to enable surrogative reasoning is a crucial feature of models, and I will say more about that feature shortly. However, to take this feature of models to be the core element of model-representation seems like confusing an effect for the cause. Analogical models enable surrogative reasoning, yes, but the fact that analogical models enable surrogative reasoning must be due to some more fundamental feature of analogical models. That more fundamental feature is the structural similarity the analogical model bears to its target: it is only if the model is structurally similar to its target in relevant respects that it will be *feasible* to use the model in surrogative reasoning about the target.

However, in saying that a model represents its target by virtue of its similarity to that target, I do not intend to suggest that the similarities alone are *sufficient* for representation. My map of Chicago would not represent Chicago if it was the result of random ink-scratches on a piece of paper in medieval France, and Myrtle and Maud represent nothing whatsoever until they are *taken*, by me, to represent something. Representation requires more than similarity; it requires intention. As Paul Teller notes,

A model is an object, concrete or abstract, that bears some relevant similarity to what we want to represent. The similarity itself does not make the object a representation; it is we, the model users, who press the similarity into representational service We usually call the representing object itself the model, but it is a model of the representational target only in virtue of our treating the relevant similarities as representational.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Mauricio Suárez, “Scientific Representation,” *Philosophy Compass* 5, no. 1 (2010): 98. See also Mauricio Suárez, “An Inferential Conception of Scientific Representation,” *Philosophy of Science* 71, no. 5 (2004): 767–79.

⁵¹ Paul Teller, “Fictions, Fictionalization, and Truth in Science,” in *Fictions in Science: Philosophical Essays on Modeling and Idealization*, ed. Mauricio Suárez (New York: Routledge, 2009), 238.

Thus, similarity is not sufficient for model-representation, but it is nonetheless an essential element in how models represent.

Before further discussing the precise role similarity plays in model-representation, I want to first clear away one likely objection. Nelson Goodman has cautioned us against thinking that similarity is what makes for representation, pointing out that similarity is neither necessary nor sufficient for one thing's representing another. For example, given the established convention in the United States that Democrats are represented by elephants, a picture of an elephant might serve to represent a particular political figure in a political cartoon, but not by virtue of the drawing's *resemblance* to the person. On the other hand, a painting which looked exactly like Barack Obama, but which was the accidental result of a highly improbable series of paint spills, would also not be a representation of Barack Obama. Thus resemblance is neither necessary nor sufficient for representation. Furthermore, even resemblance *plus* intentional reference is not enough for representation. Consider, Goodman argues, a page of text that begins with "the final seven words on this page" and ends with the same seven words.⁵² The first occurrence of that phrase both refers to, and precisely resembles, the second occurrence of that phrase, but it is not a *representation* of that phrase in the sense that a painting of Barack Obama is a representation of Barack Obama.

Goodman's critiques of certain ways of appealing to similarity are cogent ones, and it is tempting to take Goodman's arguments as a basis for rejecting any and all similarity-based accounts of representation, including of model-representation.⁵³ But what Goodman's criticisms

⁵² Goodman, "Seven Strictures on Similarity," 437.

⁵³ As for example does R. I. G. Hughes in "Models and Representation," S329-30.

show is that representation is not simply *constituted* by similarity (or by similarity plus reference), and that there is no *necessary* connection in either direction between resemblance and representation. It would be a mistake to conclude that similarity is therefore always entirely irrelevant to representation.⁵⁴ Similarity is neither necessary for representation, nor sufficient for it, nor even jointly sufficient for it if combined with whatever makes for reference. But similarities can be a *means* by which representation is accomplished, and that is precisely the case with analogical models.

Another one of Goodman's own concepts will be helpful in demonstrating how this works. Goodman's *Languages of Art* highlights the concept of *exemplification*, which he characterizes as "possession plus reference."⁵⁵ For example, a swatch of cloth used by a tailor as a sample exemplifies certain of its properties, because it both possesses those properties and is intended to refer to those properties. Of course, any exemplifying object exemplifies only some of its properties, not all of them: a two-inch-wide swatch of purple cotton is intended to exemplify its color and texture, but it does not (in normal circumstances) exemplify the property of being two inches wide, since that is not one of the properties it is being used to refer to.

⁵⁴ Goodman himself really *does* seem to think that resemblance is entirely irrelevant to representation. On Goodman's view, the fact that a portrait of Napoleon resembles Napoleon is the *result* of a more basic representational relationship: it is only because we possess a certain culturally specific pictorial language that we perceive the painting as resembling its subject at all. Thus the resemblance of picture to subject is the *result* of the representationality; it isn't the basis of representationality. Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1976), 39. There's something very right about Goodman's observation that our feeling that a picture resembles its subject is largely generated *by* our understanding of it as a representation of that subject, rather than being something we could have had *prior* to understanding it as a representation. But to take this phenomenon to be the full story regarding the role of resemblance with respect to pictorial representation goes too far. The fact that a fairly realistic picture is objectively similar (in certain very limited respects) to its subject is ontologically prior to the fact that it represents its subject, and certain of those similarities are relevant to the fact that the picture represents that subject, and to the specific way in which it represents that subject. Which kinds of similarities are picked out as the relevant ones, for representational purposes, depends on the pictorial languages at work in our own particular culture.

⁵⁵ Goodman, *Languages of Art*, 52.

Exemplification is a relation something stands to a *property*, and thus exemplification does not itself involve similarity.⁵⁶ A tailor's cloth sample *possesses* the properties it exemplifies; it isn't *similar* to them. However, exemplification can function in larger representations, and when it does, those representations involve appeals to similarity. For example, Catherine Elgin points out that scientific models represent their targets by exemplifying certain of their properties.⁵⁷ The model pendulum, for example, exemplifies a certain set of interrelated properties like *being a mass suspended by a rod from a fixed support* and *oscillating* and *being subject to gravity* (among many others). One of the reasons why the idealized model pendulum is useful is that, precisely because it is idealized and simplified and leaves out complicating factors like friction and air resistance, it functions *more* effectively as an exemplar of these properties than any real pendulum does. A model, by exemplifying (i.e. both possessing and referring to) a large cluster of interrelated properties of its target, thereby represents its target as something with those specific properties. Thus, the way a model represents its target is by exemplifying specific properties possessed by the target. *Which* target the model represents is merely a matter of convention and intention, but the *content* of the representation is determined by the properties it exemplifies.

Once we perceive the role of exemplification in model-representation, we can see that model-representation involves an implicit appeal to similarity. For example, in employing the model pendulum, we represent the target (the real pendulum) in terms of something else (the model pendulum) with which it shares certain properties—i.e., with which it is similar in certain

⁵⁶ Goodman himself takes exemplification to be a relation something stands to a *predicate*, because he is a nominalist about properties (see *Languages of Art*, 54-55). But as I am not a nominalist, I will put the point in terms of properties, as even Goodman occasionally does when speaking more loosely.

⁵⁷ Elgin, "Exemplification, Idealization, and Scientific Understanding," 80-84.

ways. An appeal to similarity involves representing one thing in terms of its similarity to something else, rather than by, e.g., a straightforward *de dicto* description of its properties. Because models operate by exemplification, model-representation is a form of representation which involves an implicit appeal to similarity.⁵⁸

As already noted, a model does not directly exemplify its target; it exemplifies certain properties of its target.⁵⁹ Thus, it would not be correct to say that exemplification is, *simpliciter*, the form of representation a model bears to its target. However, the fact that the model exemplifies certain properties of its target is essential to the way that the model represents its target. All analogical models represent by means of exemplification: the model exemplifies some of the properties of the target, and represents the target by virtue of this exemplification. This is simply another way of saying that a model represents its target by virtue of specific similarities it bears to that target.

2.7 To take something as an analogical model is to employ it in *surrogative thought* about the target

An analogical model represents its target, but it also does more than that. An analogical model invites us to think of the target *as* the model entity, or *as if it were* the model entity, or in

⁵⁸ This application of the concept of exemplification is not one Goodman himself would employ. For Goodman, exemplification and representation go in *opposite* directions: the tailor's swatch of cloth exemplifies the label "purple," while the label "purple" represents purple things like the swatch of cloth. And since he rejects any use of resemblance as a basis for representation, he would reject the idea that one thing's exemplification of the properties of another could serve as the basis for the former thing's representation of the latter. But the arguments Goodman offers for his view that similarity plays absolutely no role in representation seems insufficient to explain away the obvious fact that models are designed to exemplify specific properties of their targets, and that what the model represents and how it represents it is entirely dependent on which specific properties it exemplifies.

⁵⁹ Goodman notes that one might say of a certain car in a showroom, elliptically, that it "exemplifies a Rolls-Royce"—meaning that it exemplifies the property of being a Rolls-Royce (*Languages of Art*, 53). But it is important to recognize the ellipsis.

some other way to use the model entity as a sort of conceptual map for our thinking about the target. I will use the term “surrogate thought” as a description for this way of thinking, drawing partly on Chris Swoyer’s concept of “surrogate reasoning,” but my conception of surrogate thought is intended to encompass a much broader phenomenon.

Chris Swoyer argues that scientific models fall into the category of “structural representations.” A structural representation is something employed as a representation of its target in virtue of its common structure. The reason why the sharing of a common structure is so important is that it enables us to engage in what Swoyer calls “surrogate reasoning”:

Structural representation enables us to reason directly about a representation in order to draw conclusions about the things that it represents. By examining the behavior of a scale model of an aircraft in a wind tunnel, we can draw conclusions about a newly designed wing’s response to wind shear, rather than trying it out on a Boeing 747 over Denver. By using numbers to represent the lengths of physical objects, we can represent facts about the objects numerically, perform calculations of various sorts, then translate the results back into a conclusion about the original objects. In such cases, we use one sort of thing as a surrogate in our thinking about another, and so I shall call this *surrogate reasoning*.⁶⁰

As his example of numbers demonstrates, Swoyer takes surrogate reasoning to be fundamental to many kinds of representation, not only to model-representation.⁶¹ However, it is an essential feature of what it is to take something as a model of something else.

Surrogate reasoning is—must be—based on an underlying structural similarity. It would not *work* to test out a model aircraft in a wind tunnel, and then draw conclusions about a real aircraft on the basis of those tests, unless the model aircraft was relevantly similar to the real

⁶⁰ Chris Swoyer, “Structural Representation and Surrogate Reasoning,” *Synthese* 87, no. 3 (1991): 449.

⁶¹ Of course, the fact that numbers can be employed for the purposes of surrogate reasoning regarding the physical dimensions, speeds, etc., of physical objects is the reason why it is so easy and natural to construct mathematical models for scientific purposes. But Swoyer also takes very simple, non-scientific uses of numbers, like measuring the dimensions of a tabletop and multiplying the two numbers to find out its area, to involve surrogate reasoning.

one. Surrogative reasoning is thus entirely dependent on similarity between the model (or other surrogate) and the target. Swoyer defines structural representation in terms of isomorphism, which has the benefit of allowing a highly formalized account of the phenomenon. However, as I have already argued, even if we are concerned only with scientific models (let alone if we turn our attention to non-scientific ones), the phenomenon of modeling cannot be captured by isomorphism alone. Most models represent their targets at least partly through *other* forms of structural similarity. However, while Swoyer's account of structural representation is an isomorphism-based account, the concept of surrogative reasoning can naturally be extended to any case in which we reason about one thing by using another as a surrogate, on the basis of structural similarities between the two.

Surrogative reasoning, in this loosened sense I have just proposed, is particularly prominent in science, but it is also one of the main ways we use non-scientific models. For example, Myrtle and Maud serve, for me, as a model of certain human relationships. This was based on having observed many proportional similarities between human beings and domestic rats. However, merely to observe a similarity—even if it is a complex structural similarity of the right sort—is not yet to take one thing as a model of the other. To take Myrtle and Maud as a model of human beings, I had to actually use my understanding of them as a tool in reasoning about human relationships. For example, one of the things I observed about Myrtle and Maud was that Maud was calmer, braver, and psychologically more resilient, and yet for that very reason it was Myrtle rather than Maud who was dominant. Observing this factor in Myrtle and Maud led me to posit that a parallel social mechanism might occasionally operate in human relationships as well, and at the time, this was a mechanism it had never previously occurred to

me to imagine or look for. Thus, once I had come to take Myrtle and Maud as a model for human relationships, I was able to use reasoning and observations about Myrtle and Maud as a surrogate for thinking about human beings. Rather than learning something about human beings by directly observing them and reasoning about my observations, I learned it from observing Myrtle and Maud, and inferring from what I had learned about Myrtle and Maud that a proportionally similar pattern probably shows up in some human relationships too.

However, it would be too restrictive to say that taking something as a model of a particular target is *always* and *only* a matter of engaging in surrogative reasoning about the target using the model. (Swoyer certainly makes no such sweeping claim.) What is true is that anything properly described as a model is such as to *enable* surrogative reasoning. The only things which are viable candidates for being called “models” are things which have substantial structural similarities to their targets, yet are also unlike their targets in important respects, and it is this combination of properties which enables surrogative reasoning. If the model were not structurally similar to its target, then reasoning something out within the model and applying the conclusion to the target would not work. Surrogative reasoning only works insofar as the particular properties of the target one is drawing inferences about are properties which bear consistent relationships of proportional similarity to the corresponding features of the model. On the other hand, if the model were not importantly *dissimilar* from its target in certain *other* respects, there would be no point in using the model for surrogative reasoning, because the model would be no easier to reason about than the target itself. As Swoyer notes, “A map that reproduced every feature of Jamaica at a scale of a mile to a mile would be worse than

useless.”⁶² It is the combination of a substantial structural similarities and substantial, useful dissimilarities which makes something viable as a model of a particular target. And I would not call anything an analogical model which did not render surrogative reasoning viable.

However, it would be too restrictive to think that the only way to take something as a model of something else is to be actively engaging in surrogative reasoning, at least if we take reasoning to involve something like inference. Instead, I prefer to say that to take something as a model involves surrogative *thought* more generally.

For example, one form of surrogative thought which doesn't seem to be a case of surrogative *reasoning* is the kind of thought involved in understanding metaphors. It is often said that to understand a metaphor involves “seeing-as”—seeing one thing as another. Take, for example, the metaphor “Juliet is the sun.” We could express some of what Romeo means by this metaphor in literal paraphrase: Juliet is extremely beautiful, Juliet is the source of joy and life, Juliet is extremely important to me, and so on. But no such list of literal paraphrases could do the work that the metaphorical statement “Juliet is the sun” does, no matter how long and thorough we make it. One reason for this is that a metaphor doesn't *merely* communicate a proposition or set of propositions. A metaphor also invites us to *see* one thing *as* another, or in terms of another. The metaphor invites us to see Juliet *as* the sun, to take a certain perspective on Juliet, and that is an aspect of the metaphor's significance that goes beyond its propositional content.

One element of this seeing-as which Max Black describes is that the metaphor highlights some aspects of the subject while suppressing others. For example, if one describes a battle metaphorically in terms of chess, this

⁶² *Ibid.*, 463.

will lead some aspects of the battle to be emphasized, others to be neglected, and all to be organized in a way that would cause much more strain in other modes of description. The chess vocabulary filters and transforms: it not only selects, it brings forward aspects of the battle that might not be seen at all through another medium. (Stars that cannot be seen at all, except through telescopes.)⁶³

To see Juliet as the sun is to see aspects of Juliet that really are there, but which one only notices if one is considering her from this particular perspective.

But, as Black himself hints, seeing-as is not *only* a matter of emphasizing some properties and suppressing others. As Martin Davies points out, even a literal description of something can reorganize the way we understand it dramatically: if I discover that someone widely acknowledged to be a “pillar of probity and integrity” is in fact a thief, I will not merely add a new proposition to my set of beliefs about him and subtract a few others which are incompatible with it.⁶⁴ Instead, this new fact will lead me to interpret various facts about this person differently than I had before. His apparently honest actions in the past may now look like cynical ploys, and his unusual success in business will now strike me as suspicious rather than as a sign of hard work and uncommon acumen. And how I think about and feel about even his admittedly good qualities will be quite different. My whole view of him will be altered because I now “*see him as* (or *think of him as*) a thief.”⁶⁵ The same sort of reorganization happens, Davies argues, when we introduce a new metaphorical description of something.

We can see this, for example, in the biblical story of David and Nathan.⁶⁶ David sleeps with Uriah’s wife Bathsheba while Uriah is away. Upon learning that Bathsheba has fallen

⁶³ Max Black, “Metaphor,” in *Models and Metaphors: Studies in Language and Philosophy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1962), 42.

⁶⁴ Martin Davies, “Idiom and Metaphor,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 83 (1982): 75.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 76. Emphasis in the original.

⁶⁶ II Samuel chapters 11 and 12.

pregnant, he arranges for Uriah to die in battle and then marries Bathsheba, successfully covering up his crime. Some time after, the prophet Nathan visits David and tells him the story of a rich man who had many sheep. One day, this rich man needed to butcher a sheep to feed a visitor, but rather than taking one of his own, he instead stole his poor neighbor's only sheep, one who was beloved to him as a pet, and butchered that one instead. David, upon hearing this story, is outraged and declares that the rich man should be put to death. To this, Nathan replies: "Thou art the man."⁶⁷ This leads David to repent of his actions, as he had not done before. As Ted Cohen points out, David has not learned any new facts from Nathan. Nor has Nathan swayed him by, for example, offering arguments as to the moral unacceptability of adultery. Yet David certainly seems to have learned *something* from Nathan's story, given that he was content with himself before hearing it, but not after. The reason is that David has come to see himself *as* the rich man in the story, and accordingly to feel towards himself as he feels towards the rich man.⁶⁸

One aspect of the altered perspective a metaphor offers is that it highlights and emphasizes specific properties, e.g., those particular properties of Juliet which are exemplified by the sun. But furthermore, as Elisabeth Camp points out, the metaphor allows us to borrow the *structural relationships* between the different properties of the sun, and then apply those to Juliet. Understanding the metaphor means conceptually mapping those properties of Juliet onto the corresponding properties of the sun, such that one's conception of Juliet follows the structure of one's conception of the sun. For example, if the fundamental idea communicated by "Juliet is the sun" is that she is "the exemplar of beauty and goodness," and the other properties she has

⁶⁷ II Samuel 12:7 (KJV).

⁶⁸ Ted Cohen, "From the Bible: Nathan and David," in *Thinking of Others: On the Talent for Metaphor* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 19–24.

which are also exemplified by the sun (such as her great importance to Romeo) are ones that follow *from* that central property, then similarly to think of Juliet *as* the sun involves thinking of Juliet's great importance as following from her beauty and goodness (rather than the reverse).⁶⁹ Thus, to understand the metaphor "Juliet is the sun"—at least if one is taking the metaphor seriously enough to be really taking the sun as a model of Juliet—is to engage in a conceptual mapping of Juliet's properties onto the sun's.

This conceptual mapping or seeing-as is a weaker form of surrogative thought than the surrogative reasoning described by Swoyer. In the cases Swoyer describes, the model enables us to turn our attention entirely away from the target, at least temporarily, and engage in inferences and problem-solving using only the model. Once we have arrived at a conclusion using the model, we can then apply the corresponding conclusion back to the original target. But when we think of Juliet as the sun, we are more likely to continue thinking of Juliet the whole time, thinking of her *as* the sun, but not completely substituting thought of the sun for thought of Juliet. However, insofar as we are "seeing Juliet as the sun," there are aspects of our thought about Juliet—the structure in which we understand various of her properties to stand with respect to one another, for instance—which have simply been transferred over from our thought about the sun. This is one of the surrogative elements of seeing-as.

Thus, to take something as a model of something else is not merely to believe the model to be structurally similar to the target in relevant ways, nor merely to take the model to *represent* the target while also taking the model and target to be structurally similar in relevant ways. To take something as a model additionally means to have one's thought about the target be

⁶⁹ Elisabeth Camp, "Metaphor and That Certain 'Je Ne Sais Quoi,'" *Philosophical Studies* 129, no. 1 (2006): 4.

structured by the model or mapped onto the model. The strongest forms of such surrogative thinking are those cases in which we so thoroughly allow our thinking about the target to be structured by the model that we can mentally set the target aside for long periods of time and work solely with the model, turning our attention back to the target only once we have come to our conclusions using the model. However, there are also weaker forms of surrogative thinking which arise in phenomena like metaphorical seeing-as.

One final point to emphasize is that for any model m of a target t , there are *many* possible ways to take m as a model of t . Consider again Soskice's example of a modeling simile:

Her mind was to be his—attached to his own like a small garden-plot to a deer park. He would rake the soil gently and water the flowers; he would weed the beds and gather an occasional nose-gay. It would be a pretty piece of property for a proprietor already far-reaching.

The model, in this case, is an attached garden-plot tended by an owner, and it is a model of Isabel's mind, or rather of Isabel's mind as Osmond desires it to be. However, merely specifying the model and its target would not capture what this simile expresses in its entirety. The model must be *interpreted* in one particular way rather than another. To take the garden-plot as a model for Isabel's mind is to take it to represent Isabel's mind by virtue of a set of structural similarities, but we need to know *which* elements of Isabel's mind correspond to *which* elements of the model, and *which* structural relationships are the relevant ones. For example, Isabel takes the fact that the garden-plot is *attached* to the deer park to express dependence and ownership, not emotional closeness. Thus, no one ever merely "takes m as a model of t ": one always takes m as a model of t in some specific way.

Weisberg calls the *way* a model is interpreted its “construal,” and highlights four key elements in the construal of a model.⁷⁰ First, the construal tells us which elements of the model correspond to which elements of the target. For example, the construal tells us that the garden-plot corresponds to Isabel and the deer park and gardener both correspond to Osmond. Second, the construal tells us which elements of the model are meant to be taken seriously as representing something in the target, and which elements are not. For example, the fact that a garden-plot is something that can be nurtured is relevant to the metaphor, but the fact that a garden-plot is bound to one physical location is not. Finally, the construal includes two different kinds of “fidelity criteria” which tell us “how similar the model must be to the world in order to be considered an adequate representation.”⁷¹ To take a simple example, if the observed data differs by 10% from the values predicted by the model, should that be taken as compatible with the model’s success, or not? While the first two elements of the construal apply equally well to both scientific and non-scientific models, Weisberg’s fidelity criteria seem directly relevant only to scientific models. However, something very broadly like fidelity criteria must come into play in any analogical model which is seriously taken to be representational. So, for example, if we find that Osmond does not attempt to tend to or nurture Isabel’s mental life in any way (the activity which would seem to correspond to “raking the soil” and “watering the flowers”), to what extent would that undermine Isabel’s model as a representation of how Osmond relates to her? How

⁷⁰ Weisberg, *Simulation and Similarity*, 39-42. However, Weisberg defines a model as “a combination of structure and interpretation” (39), and thus as *including* its construal. I have described a model as simply constituted by a particular (real or fictional, concrete or abstract) entity, and so on my way of speaking, the construal of a model is something distinct from the model itself.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 41.

one answers that question will indicate the implicit fidelity criteria one is employing in understanding the model.

2.8 Accepting a model as a practical stance

One further point which deserves notice is that to take some m as a model of some t (in some particular way) involves a certain practical stance towards t . This feature of modeling follows from the way models function in surrogative thought. Indeed, to employ m in surrogative thought about t is *already* to be taking a particular practical stance towards t , insofar as thinking about something is an action which can be done in different sorts of ways to suit different practical purposes.

However, taking m as a model of t will generally have *further* practical implications. If one *thinks* of t as m in certain respects, the most reasonable outcome, at least in many cases, is to also *act* towards t as if it were m in those respects. This is obvious in scientific cases: one who takes waves as a model of light will have reason to attempt to experimentally determine the wavelengths of different kinds of light, whereas one who does not take waves as a model of light will not. Nor will scientific models affect only *experimental* practices; the scientific models one accepts will also affect how one attempts to, e.g., build a working machine or protect a house from lightning.

The above examples may seem to have practical implications only in the way that beliefs have practical implications. However, taking something as a model may also have practical implications that go beyond the content of any (non-analogically expressible) beliefs about the target which are associated with the model. The story of David and Nathan provides an excellent

non-scientific example here. Once he has come to *think* of himself as the rich man, David also modifies his actions accordingly by repenting, dressing in sackcloth, and so on (though he admittedly does not go so far as to insist that his prescribed penalty of execution be carried out). Having come to take the rich man as a model for himself, he adopts the practical stance appropriate to the rich man in relation to himself.

2.9 How models relate to analogical speech

To conclude my account of analogical models: An analogical model is an entity which bears relevant structural similarities to the target, but which is also dissimilar from the target in significant respects. This entity counts as a model when it is taken as a model by someone, meaning that the model is used to represent its target by virtue of the model's similarities to that target, in such a way that one employs the model in surrogative thought about the target. Most scientific models, and almost everything we would describe as a "model" in non-scientific contexts, constitute analogical models in the sense I have just described.

The claim I wish to defend in the rest of this chapter is that, if claims about God are irreducibly analogical, it is by virtue of their either serving to construct, or being based on, analogical *models* of God. Before I turn to that point, it will be useful to say a few words about the relationship between analogical *models* and analogical *speech*.

As Soskice's distinction between modeling similes and illustrative similes demonstrates, not all analogical speech involves models. Some analogical claims appeal only to simple, one-note similarities, whereas a model requires a multifaceted network of proportionally related similarities. Nor is Soskice's point applicable only to similes; the distinction between

“modeling” appeals to similarity and “illustrative” appeals to similarity applies equally well to metaphors and to non-figurative analogical speech. Thus the mere fact that one speaks analogically is no proof that a model is involved.

However, in those cases in which an analogical claim *is* associated with some analogical model, there are two different ways the analogical claim may relate to the model. One way is by serving as the model description, or as the model description plus the construal. For example, consider Isabel’s modeling simile. The model in this case is the small garden-plot attached to a deer park and tended by the gardener. Isabel’s analogical claim (i.e. the simile) serves in part as the model description of that model: it describes the garden-plot attached to the deer park. However, in addition to simply describing the model, the simile also explains the model’s construal, telling us how to interpret the model. It tells us what the model is a model *of*: the relation Osmond wants there to be between Isabel’s mind and his own. And it also at least partly indicates *how* we are to interpret that model as a model of that target: for example, the wording of the comparison makes it clear that the fact that the garden-plot is “attached” to the deer park is meant to represent ownership and dependence, not emotional closeness.

Thus some analogical claims serve to construct or describe models and to tell us how to interpret those models. However, there is also a second way an analogical claim can relate to an analogical model: it can be *based on* an existing model. For example, once we have Isabel’s garden-plot model in view, we will be able to continue to speak metaphorically in ways that draw on it. If Osmond recoils from Isabel’s expressing her own mind, she might muse to herself, “Ah, he’s found a weed he can’t uproot.” A statement like this does not serve to *construct* the model; rather, it presupposes it. On the construal of the model described in the previous

paragraph, the gardener corresponds to Osmond, and the plants in the garden correspond to Isabel's thoughts. Given that model and construal, an opinion Osmond disapproves of can be represented within the model as a weed, and so talking of an opinion as a weed is a way of speaking about the target phenomenon *based on* the model. Thus this second example is, like the original simile, an analogical statement, but it is one that relies on a prior understanding of the model, rather than one that serves to describe or construct the model.

3. The IRAM account of religious language

3.1 Models of God

At last it is time to turn to the crucial question. How do claims about *God* serve to construct analogical models? And how does the introduction of models into our account solve the problem of unspecified similarity and enable us to escape theological evisceration?

What I propose is that believers take either some or all positive and intrinsic claims about God to be irreducibly analogical model (IRAM) claims. By an IRAM claim I mean a claim which either serves to construct an irreducibly analogical model, or one which is made on the basis of an existing irreducibly analogical model. Any interpretation of a particular theological claim as an IRAM claim I'll call an IRAM interpretation of that claim, and a general approach to interpreting theological claims in this way I'll call an IRAM approach or an IRAM interpretation of theological language in general.

In laying out my IRAM approach to understanding theological language, I do not intend to argue that the IRAM interpretation is the *correct* way of understanding claims about God in the Western religious traditions (though the arguments for appealing to analogy I offered in

Chapter 2 give *some* theological basis for embracing it). Nor do I intend to argue that the IRAM interpretation is an accurate interpretation of what ordinary believers actually *do* mean by their claims about God. My goal in this chapter and in the next is only to demonstrate that it is a *coherent* way of understanding claims about God, and that one who adopts such an approach can, without inconsistency, have a robust religious faith with a fully satisfactory set of theological and practical commitments.

In order to have a set of examples handy, let's consider a few of the major models of God in the monotheistic traditions. One major model of God is the model of God as a human being, or at any rate a person, but importantly different from the persons we are familiar with in that he is incorporeal, all-knowing, all-powerful, morally perfect, eternal, and so on. Perhaps I ought to describe this instead as a family of models, for there are several different versions of the model of God as a person which play central roles in the Western monotheistic traditions: God as loving father (or sometimes mother), God as righteous lawgiver and judge, God as faithful husband or friend, God as architect or artist, etc. On the other hand, there are also non-personal models: the model of God as the form of the Good, Tillich's model of God as the Ground of Being, or Spinoza's model of God as the infinite substance of which we are accidents. These latter models are rather more abstract than the personal ones, and not so easily pictured in the imagination, but in that they do not differ from some of the theoretical models employed in science.

Most theists take one or more of the above models as their core models of God. Individualist theists in particular will likely take the personal models of God as their core models, while theists of a more classical bent may take one of the abstract models of God to be just as central as or more central than the personal ones. In addition to these core models, there

are also many other more limited, less central models of God which show up in the more obviously metaphorical or pictorial language about God: God is a rock, a consuming fire, the wind, the sun, etc. Those things can also serve as models of God, but they are far more limited in what they exemplify than the core models, and so tend to remain peripheral rather than central in theistic thought.

My goal in this project is not to argue for any particular theology, but instead to argue for the general viability of appeals to analogy in theology. Which particular analogical descriptions of God are the best ones is thus a topic outside the scope of this project. My own view is that *all* of the core models I just listed are good models of God, and that the most appealing position for an Abrahamic believer is to accept and employ all of them. However, that is not a position I can argue for here. In what follows I will employ the model of God as an incorporeal (etc.) person as my main example, simply for the purposes of illustration. However, my arguments do not rely on the details of any particular model, so if my defense works for the particular model of God as an incorporeal (etc.) person, it should serve equally well as a defense of other models.

Consider, then, the model of God as a person who is incorporeal, all-knowing, all-powerful, morally perfect, eternal, and so on. Of course, some theists would deny that this account of God posits an analogical model at all: if one thinks that God just *is* an incorporeal (etc.) person, in senses of those words that can be understood without appeal to analogy, then that description describes God, not merely a model of God. However, as I argued in Chapter 2, there are several good reasons to find such an account of God undesirable. Here, I will simply take for granted, for the purposes of illustration, that “God is an incorporeal (etc.) person” is an analogical statement. If we grant that it is an analogical statement, then it is assuredly a modeling

analogy rather than a merely illustrative analogy, because it (along with other associated descriptive claims) serves to construct a theoretical model of God. On this account, the incorporeal (etc.) person, as understood by us, is a *fictional* entity: an imaginary construct. But the believer who accepts this fictional entity as a good model of God thinks that the model resembles God in important respects, despite also being dissimilar from God in important respects.

3.2 How appealing to models *doesn't* help

The idea that believers employ models of God is, as I noted at the beginning of this chapter, not a new one. But it might not seem immediately obvious how saying that “God is an incorporeal (etc.) person” posits an irreducibly analogical *model* of God is any real improvement on simply saying that “God is an incorporeal (etc.) person” is an irreducibly analogical claim. The fundamental problem with appeals to irreducible analogy, as laid out in Chapter 3, is that appeals to irreducible analogy involve claims of unspecified similarity, and claims of unspecified similarity seem to be empty of content. But the switch from simple analogical statements to analogical *models* hasn't done anything to eliminate our reliance on claims of unspecified similarity: if the model of God as an incorporeal person is an irreducibly analogical model, then in positing this model, the believer is asserting that there are similarities between God and the model, but that we are unable to specify what those similarities are. So if we are trying to solve the problem raised in Chapter 3, how does it help anything to observe that the analogical claims made about God are the sort which invoke analogical models, as opposed to more simple or merely “illustrative” analogical claims?

To elaborate, recall that Alston's criticism of appeals to irreducible analogy was that they lead to an "eviscerated" theology which has no implications, either practical or theoretical. For example, Alston argues, if the claim

(1) God commands us to love one another

is irreducibly analogical, then it means something like

(1a) God is in some significant respects similar to a being who commands us to love one another.

And if that is what (1) means, then (1) does not entail that we actually ought to love one another—nor does it entail anything else in particular about God or about what we ought to do. If we interpret claims about God in such a way that they entail nothing at all, then those claims are useless, "stripped of virtually all . . . impact for human life."⁷²

Now, initially, it might not seem like appealing to models rather than to simple similarity claims will be of any help in avoiding this unwelcome conclusion. For example, suppose we reject Alston's analogical interpretation of (1) in favor of the following model-based interpretation:

(1b) One good model of God is that of a being who commands us to love one another.

If we take this claim to be *irreducibly* analogical, then we cannot infer, of any particular property of the model, that God also has that property. Given that, (1b) doesn't seem like much of an improvement over (1a): it no more entails that we ought to love one another than (1a) did. The only way (1b) could entail that we ought to love one another was if we imported in some assumptions about *in what respects* a being who commands us to love one another is a good

⁷² Alston, "Irreducible Metaphors," 35.

model of God, but if we interpret (1b) in that way, we will no longer be interpreting it as an *irreducibly* analogical claim. And so it seems that (1b) is just as thoroughly eviscerated as (1a).

However, (1b) seems a bit dubious as an analogical interpretation of (1); a better paraphrase of (1) interpreted as an implicit appeal to an analogical model might instead be this:

(1c) One good model of God is that of an incorporeal (etc.) person, and on that model of God, God commands us to love one another.

The first half of this claim is like (1b): it describes a certain model and asserts that it is a good model of God. The second half of this claim, however, does not serve to construct or describe the model, but instead to say something *based on* the model, or *in terms of* the model. Consider, for comparison to (1c), this example:

(2) One good model of an argument is that of a building, and on that model, A's argument looks from a distance like a stately marble edifice, but up close turns out to be a papier-mâché theatre prop.

A building can serve as a good model of an argument, because there are structural similarities between buildings and arguments. The premises are to an argument as the foundations are to a building, the reasoning is to an argument as the structural supports are to a building, the conclusion is to an argument as the roof is to a building, the superficial rhetoric is to an argument as ornamental details are to a building, and so on. Once we have this model clearly in view, we can then begin to talk about what's true *in terms of the model* (just as Isabel could speak about her opinions as "weeds," once she had established her garden-plot model). If the building feature which corresponds to poorly defended premises in an argument is a lack of a foundation, then "on the model of an argument as a building," an argument with poorly defended premises is a building that lacks a foundation.

To return to the original example, what (1c) claims is that there an incorporeal (etc.) person is a good model of God, and that incorporeal (etc.) person would command us to love one another, and that God does something proportionally *similar* to commanding us to love one another—something relevantly *like* commanding us to love one another, but proportioned to the sort of thing God *actually* is.

While (1c) strikes me as a better interpretation of (1) than (1b), it unfortunately evades theological evisceration no better than (1b) did. The first half of (1c) is, like (1b), just an assertion that a certain thing is a good model of God, and thus it fails to have any specific entailments for the same reason (1b) did. And the second half of (1c) is entirely dependent on the first half for its content. Knowing that God does something proportionally similar to commanding us to love one another doesn't by itself entail that we are actually obligated to love one another, if we do not know in what specific *respects* God is proportionally similar to an incorporeal (etc.) person, and as a result don't know in what specific respects God's action is similar to commanding us to love one another.

I can infer positively contentful claims about A's argument from (2), because the analogical model in (2) is reducible: I know how the model of a building corresponds to the target phenomenon of an argument. So from the claim that, in terms of the model, A's argument is made of papier-mâché, I can infer that A's argument is weak. But the model of God as an incorporeal (etc.) person is supposed to be *irreducibly* analogical, so I do not know how the model lines up with the reality, and so I cannot carry out that same sort of inference in interpreting (1c). And so the claim that, on the model of God as an incorporeal (etc.) person, God

commands us to love one another, doesn't entail that we *actually* ought to love one another. Nor does it entail any other specific thing about God or about what we ought to do.

3.3 Taking something as a model of God

I have asserted that once we see that analogical claims about God are not *simple* analogical claims, but ones that posit analogical *models* of God, this opens a path to escaping theological evisceration. However, it should be clear by now that this cannot work if all we do is translate claims about what things God is similar to into claims about what things are good models of God, and what other claims are true in terms of those models. A mere *claim* about an analogical model is no more successful at avoiding theological evisceration than the claim that God is significantly similar to some *x*.

What *does* make a difference is one's actually *taking* a certain thing as a model of God. To *take* some *x* as a model of God does presuppose the belief that *x* is a good model of God in at least some respects. But it is also more than that. As I explained earlier in this chapter, taking something as a model of the target involves *seeing* the target *as* the model, or in ways structured by the model, and it entails a particular practical stance towards the target. This active, practical dimension of taking something as a model is essential to the religious life of the believer, but we will entirely overlook it if we think of irreducibly analogical claims about God as simple, isolated similarity claims.

What does it mean to take an incorporeal (etc.) person as a model of God? Well, that depends: everything rests on the construal of the model. As I noted earlier, there are many different ways to take one thing as a model of another. In the case of scientific models, any given

model (such as the billiard ball model of gases) is taken as a model in some particular *way*: one takes certain aspects of the model to be the relevant, applicable ones, and other aspects of the model to be mere artifacts of representation which do not represent aspects of the target. We rely on an established understanding about what ways of using the model are correct and what ways are incorrect. And we must do the same with religious models. Merely to say that *x* is a good model of *y* entails almost nothing at all; everything depends on the particular *way* one takes *x* as a model of *y*. So, if we want to avoid theological evisceration, we cannot *merely* offer up an analogical model of God; we must offer an analogical model of God accompanied by at least some guidance about *how* it is to be taken.

Models of God do come with such guidance as to how they are to be interpreted, however, in the context of any given religious community. For example, in the model of God as an incorporeal (etc.) person, God is understood as having a personal relationship of sorts with his creatures, to whom he relates as an authority. And one of the features of how this model is standardly construed is that if, within the model, God commands someone to do something, that person is in fact obligated to do that thing—not merely within the model, but in reality. Similarly, on the model of God as a person, creatures can relate to God personally and in some cases even have conversations with God. One of the rules for how this model is construed is that one ought to speak to God as to another person.

The construal of the model also tells us how to think about God in terms of the model. For example, the construal may tell me that in praying, I should think of myself as praying to a personal being, in the sense that I think of myself as praying to a “who” and not a “what,” to one who listens to what I am saying. And it may tell me to think of God as caring about what I do,

and as being saddened if I do evil, and to trust that God is not indifferent to my suffering, and so on. Thus in many ways I will think about God in just the same way someone would who thinks God just *is* an incorporeal (etc.) person.

However, another aspect of how we interpret the model is that we will take some elements of the model *not* to correspond to the reality, and think some elements of it should *not* be acted on or thought in terms of. For example, recall that in Chapter 2 we considered several undesirable implications of taking God to be (literally and non-analogically) a concrete personal being. For example, Tillich argues that to take God as a being among others turns God into an “invincible tyrant”: it means God is a person who sees everything I do or think, who has absolute power over me, and whose perfect omniscience and omnipotence undermines my own subjectivity.⁷³ And Wynn argues that to take God as a being among others entails that God is dependent on something extrinsic to himself and greater than himself, and that he should view worship towards himself as misplaced.⁷⁴ Now, whether one finds these two arguments compelling, it is certainly right that they evoke powerful intuitions for at least *some* theists. As one such theist, I take “God is an incorporeal (etc.) person,” if taken as a literal and non-analogical claim, to entail extremely unwelcome consequences, namely, “my life is lived out under the gaze of an invincible tyrant” and “God is not an appropriate object of worship.” However, this doesn’t mean that my employment of the *model* of God as an incorporeal (etc.) person commits me to thinking of my life as one lived out under the gaze of an invincible tyrant, or to abstaining from worshipping God—any more than my employment of the simple model pendulum as a model of real pendulums commits me to thinking real pendulums will swing back

⁷³ See pp. 119-21.

⁷⁴ See pp. 113-14.

and forth for all eternity. It is a general feature of models that some of the possible implications of the model are right and some are wrong, and each religious tradition offers guidance about how *not* to take up its models.

One might object, however, that in appealing to some particular *interpretation* of the model, I am now backing off from my commitment to taking my analogical models of and analogical claims about God to be *irreducibly* analogical. I seem to be arguing that any given analogical model of God is meaningful enough to avoid theological evisceration so long as it is accompanied by clear, well-understood claims which explain how the model is to be interpreted, what it implies and what it doesn't imply. Doesn't this mean I am actually treating the model as only *reducibly* analogical? Doesn't clear, non-analogical guidance about how to interpret the model make the model reducible to univocity, at least in practice?

If my construal of the model of God as an incorporeal (etc.) person works like my construal of the model of arguments as buildings, such that I take myself to be able to spell out non-analogically what features in God correspond to what features of the model, then yes, my interpretation of the model would render it reducible. If our construal of a religious model tells us which S-properties of the model are shared with God, then we will be able to infer positive, intrinsic, non-analogical claims about the God from the model. That sort of interpretation of the model would enable us to avoid theological evisceration, but only by abandoning the claim of irreducible analogy altogether.

However, the construal need not involve any such reduction of analogy to non-analogy in order to yield a contentful, usable set of religious practices and religious ways of thinking about God. There is a lot the construal can tell us *without* entailing any positive, intrinsic, non-

analogical claims about God. First, the construal can indicate purely negative implications of the model. For example, the model of God as an incorporeal (etc.) person is ordinarily interpreted to mean that God is, literally and non-analogically, not a physical entity or force. Second, it can indicate purely extrinsic implications. For example, the model of God as the Ground of Being entails that no concrete being would have existed had God not existed.⁷⁵ Third, it can tell us how to *think* about God. For example, the model of God as an all-knowing, all-powerful person might be accompanied by interpretive advice like this:

You should think of God as a person who knows everything in the sense that you should think of God as always knowing what each person needs and what's best for the world, you should think of God as unable to misjudge or err, and you should think of your moral failings as unable to be hidden from God. But you should not think of God as knowing everything in the way you'd think of any other person as knowing everything—as a fact which removes your privacy or undermines your subjectivity, as Tillich suggests in his talk of the “invincible tyrant.” For the model is after all only a model; God is not in any *familiar* sense of the words a person who knows everything about you.

And fourth, the construal can tell us how to act based on the model. For example, one standard part of how the model of God as an incorporeal (etc.) person is construed is this:

In accepting this model, you should take yourself to be (non-analogically) obligated to do whatever God commands (analogically speaking).

None of these varieties of claim tell us what positive, intrinsic properties of the model are shared by God and what ones aren't, and so they don't render the model reducible. It is possible to follow the guidance given in such construals without taking oneself to know what God's actual properties are. I can, in my prayer and worship and religious practices, *think* of God as knowing everything (in certain ways, in certain contexts, for certain purposes). I can do this while simultaneously believing that God does not *actually* know everything in any sense of that claim I

⁷⁵ I will say a bit more about this claim in Chapter 6 (pp. 307-9).

can understand, because my conceptions of God are at best only analogical ways of dimly, imperfectly indicating the real truth. What the believer needs to know is how to think about God and how to act. The model plus its construal can offer us that, without our needing to take any of the positive, intrinsic analogical claims associated with the model and its construal to be reducible to non-analogical ones.

Not only can we draw practical conclusions about how to think and act on the basis of an irreducibly analogical model, it is in some cases even possible to draw *theoretical* conclusions about God, of a limited kind, from such a model. I will use an autobiographical example. I take as one of my central models of God the model of God as a morally perfect and loving father. I am also familiar with the Calvinist doctrine that God predestines some human beings to be saved and others to be damned, and that those who are damned suffer eternally in hell. As a matter of autobiographical fact, I would find it *impossible* to continue taking a morally perfect and loving father as a model of God in *any* substantial way if I also believed in this strict version of Calvinism, even if I were also taking the Calvinist doctrine analogically.

It is possible, of course, to hold multiple, conflicting models of the same target. For example, a scientist before the development of quantum mechanics might adopt both a wave model and a particle model of light, even though something's being a (Newtonian) wave is entirely incompatible with its being a (Newtonian) particle. But when we are able to successfully employ multiple conflicting models of the same target, it is because the models serve to exemplify *different* aspects of that target. A wave exemplifies certain aspects of the way light behaves, and a particle exemplifies certain others. Thus, one who adopts both models can do so consistently, by thinking of light as a wave in certain ways and for certain purposes, and thinking

of light as a particle in certain other ways and for certain other purposes. The models themselves conflict, in a sense, but the person who *takes* both models as models of the same thing is not doing anything contradictory or incoherent. Both models really are good models of light, just in different ways.

But the Calvinist model of God and my preferred model of God don't seem like they can work that way. They don't seem to me to illuminate different aspects of the same being; instead, they seem to genuinely conflict in the guidance they offer. My model of God as a loving father tells me to think of God as loving, compassionate, and fair, and to trust in his goodness not only towards myself but towards all people. But if I attempt to try on the Calvinist doctrine, to think of God in the terms *that* model sets for me, the result is always that I find myself thinking of God as tyrannical, unfair, and lacking in compassion. One option here is to conclude that these are all among the ways the model is *not* to be taken. Perhaps it's just part of the construal of the model that while I should think of God as predestining some for eternal salvation and some for eternal damnation, I should *not* then conclude that God is unfair or lacking in compassion. (Certainly actual Calvinists would universally insist that I am mistaken to draw those conclusions from the doctrine.) But the trouble is that I just cannot accomplish that bit of mental gymnastics. I cannot find any way to put space between the one set of claims and the other; once I have thought of God as predestining some for eternal damnation, my conception of God is already through-and-through one of an unjust being. And so, speaking only for myself, I cannot reconcile my model of God as a loving father with Calvinism. To accept the Calvinist model would require me to abandon or radically downgrade the model of God as a loving father which currently occupies a central position in my conception of God.

But it's not just that my commitment to the model of God as a morally perfect and loving father leads me not to *think* of God in terms of the Calvinist model. It leads me to draw the conclusion that the model of God posited by Calvinism is *not a good model of God*. How could it be a good model, if the guidance it offers directly contradicts that offered by what I take to be the good and trustworthy model of God as a loving father? Furthermore, on an IRAM theology, theological beliefs are cashed out in terms of what models one accepts and takes to be good models: when I assert that "God is a loving father," what I mean is that I believe the model of God as a loving father is a good model which really does indicate some deeply important truth about God. The flip-side of this position is that to conclude that the Calvinist model is *not* a good model of God is equivalent, for the IRAM theorist, to concluding that Calvinism is false.⁷⁶ Thus the conclusions I draw from the model are not merely practical ones; it's not merely that my preferred model leads me not to *think* of God as predestining most human beings to eternal damnation. Rather, my model commits me to rejecting Calvinism entirely.

This example might sound at first like merely a new example of a point I already noted earlier: that the construal of a model can specify that it has certain *negative* implications (for example, that God is not a physical force) without violating the restrictions of the global IRAM account. However, the Calvinism example is a bit different. It is true that, on a global IRAM account, we can freely assert purely negative claims about God non-analogically. And so such claims can also be part of the construal of a model; for example, our construal of the model of

⁷⁶ One might object that one adopting the radically analogical theology I endorse has no right to positively conclude that any model of God is a bad one. Instead, perhaps the most I can say is that I can't *understand* how it could be a good model—but that it might nonetheless be a good one in ways I cannot understand. I am somewhat inclined to agree with this point, but a wholehearted commitment to the analogical model of God as a good and loving father, joined with a complete inability to render that model compatible with the Calvinist model, really does seem to commit me to believing that Calvinism is a bad model. I should admit that I could be *wrong* in the latter belief, but that fallibilist caveat does not nullify the belief altogether.

God as an incorporeal (etc.) person might tell us that it is meant to entail that God is not a physical entity or force. However, in this example, the negative claim is one that we have *before* models are brought into the picture, and the fact that it can function as part of the construal of an irreducibly analogical model, rather than just as an ordinary theological claim, makes no real difference. The fact that I take the model of an incorporeal (etc.) person to entail that God is not a physical force is just a matter of taking back out of the model something I had already explicitly put into it.

By contrast, my commitment to thinking Calvinism is false is actually generated *by* the model, or by my employment of the model. The claim that Calvinism is false is not part of the construal of my model of God as a loving father and is not something I had *before* employing the model. And so it is actually my taking the model as a model of God that is doing the work of leading me to the conclusion that Calvinism is false. This is important because it demonstrates that even an irreducibly analogical model need not be epistemically sterile—contrary to the objections raised by Palmer and Alston in Chapter 3.

However, while I am committed to my theoretical conclusion that Calvinism is false on the basis of my model, the path that leads from my taking a morally perfect loving father as a model of God to my rejecting Calvinism is not an *inference* or a *deduction* from premises to conclusions. Rather, I am committed to the theoretical conclusion that Calvinism is false on the basis of its *practical* incompatibility with my model, in the sense that it is impossible for me to continue taking a morally perfect loving father as a model of God without rejecting Calvinism. This is not an *argument*: if someone else finds in themselves no such practical difficulty, I will not have anything to say to them about why they ought to adopt the same position I do.

Nonetheless, what this example demonstrates is that in practice, irreducibly analogical models have not only practical implications but also theoretical implications for the believer. Thus we have escaped both halves of Alston's threatened evisceration.

To take another example, the model of God as a loving father, combined with the model of God as an all-powerful, all-knowing, morally perfect creator, would reasonably lead us to expect that the universe would be arranged so as to be maximally nurturing of every person and free from unnecessary suffering. This model might then lead us to be surprised by the actual state of affairs we see around us. We then have several possible guesses available as to why the universe is not like our model would have led us to believe: perhaps one of those models is not actually a good model, or perhaps the universe actually *is* arranged so as to be maximally nurturing of every person and free from unnecessary suffering even though it doesn't seem like it, or perhaps the models really *are* good ones, but the properties of God which make them good models do *not* include the properties which would have entailed that God would arrange the universe to be free from unnecessary suffering. The crucial point here is that the two models listed above will—and *should*—lead us to *see* the problem of evil *as* a problem, and to feel the force of it. Even though we take those models to be irreducibly analogical, they ought to make us at least slightly *surprised* that the universe is so full of apparently needless suffering. Just as I (speaking, again, only autobiographically) would have to abandon my model of God as a loving father in order to accept the Calvinist model of God, I would also have to abandon my model of God as all-powerful, all-knowing, and morally perfect in order to stop seeing the apparently needless suffering in the universe as surprising and puzzling.

Drawing positive expectations from my models in this way does not entail that I am really taking the models to be only *reducibly* analogical after all, so long as the conclusions I draw are tentative. As we noted in Chapter 3, one cannot legitimately deduce anything from a claim one takes to be irreducibly analogical. But if the claim one takes to be irreducibly analogical is a claim like, “One very good model of God is that of a loving father,” one can make educated guesses about what this model *might* entail, so long as they are taken as highly tentative, rather than as confident inferences.

As we saw in Chapters 3 and 4, there are serious difficulties with any theory of religious language on which some or all claims about God are irreducibly analogical. But the really decisive, eviscerating problems arise only if one takes the irreducibly analogical claims to be *simple* analogical assertions like “God is significantly similar to a wise person.” Analogical models are more substantial than that, because to take something as a model of God, in some defined way, is to embrace a complex network of ways of thinking and acting. Given a substantial model-based way of thinking about God, it is possible to avoid theological evisceration and to maintain a robust theology which includes both genuine claims about what God is like and adequate guidance about how to think and act. Such a theology is sufficient to enable a meaningful religious faith and way of life.

Chapter 6: Some Loose Ends: Fixing the Referent and Having Grounds to Believe

On the IRAM account of religious language outlined in the previous chapter, claims about God are irreducibly analogical, but are not just isolated analogical claims. Instead, they are IRAM claims: ones which either serve to construct an analogical model of God or to say something about God in terms of an existing analogical model of God. Having laid out the core of an IRAM approach in the previous chapter, this chapter will address a few remaining difficulties, developing the details of the account more fully in the process.

1. How to fix the referent of “God” on a global IRAM account

In Chapter 2, I presented a few reasons why a theist might want to appeal to irreducible analogy. Those reasons fell into one of two broad categories. On the one hand, I offered some arguments for adopting a *globally* analogical theology, on which all positive, intrinsic, true claims about God, with the sole possible exception of “God exists,” are irreducibly analogical.¹ On the other hand, even someone who rejects such a globally analogical theology might nonetheless have strong local reasons for asserting that some *particular* set of claims about God are irreducibly analogical. Plausible candidates for local appeals to analogy include claims about God’s emotions or love, or claims about the trinity. While I intend my account to serve either function, my focus in developing my account has been on the challenge posed by a globally analogical theology. The reason for this is that, if my account is sufficient to render a globally

¹ As I noted in Chapter 2, the ontological pluralist can take even “God exists” to be said analogically, but the ontological “monist” must take “God exists” to be non-analogical. See pp. 88-91.

analogical theology coherent and religiously adequate, it will *a fortiori* be sufficient to do the same for local appeals to analogy in theology too.

If my goal is to defend a *globally* analogical theology, however, the account I have offered might currently seem to have a fatal flaw. If believers are to successfully say anything—even something irreducibly analogical—about God, there must be something that fixes the referent of the name “God.” But it is quite difficult to see how to satisfactorily fix the referent of “God” if all our positive and intrinsic claims about God are irreducibly analogical.

There are two main accounts of how the referent of a name could be fixed: the descriptivist and the causal. The descriptivist account, associated especially with Frege and Russell, asserts that the referent of a name is fixed by definition description.² On this approach, the way to fix the referent is to find some description which would apply to God and only to God—say, “the unique creator of the physical universe”—and then define “God” as referring to the unique creator of the physical universe. The causal account, first proposed by Kripke, asserts that the referent of a name is originally fixed by some kind of initial dubbing, which could be either by description or by ostension.³ From that point on, the name is passed on from person to person, forming a sort of chain of communication leading back to the initial dubbing. Those who have learned the name in a way that makes them part of this chain are able to use it to refer to

² See Gottlob Frege, “On Sense and Reference,” in *Translations from the Philosophical Writings of Gottlob Frege*, ed. Peter Geach and Max Black, trans. Max Black (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1960), 56–78 and Russell, “On Denoting.” As Kripke points out, Frege and Russell actually take definite descriptions not only to fix the referents of proper names, but also to give the meaning (or “sense,” in Frege’s terminology) of those names (Saul A. Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980], 53–59). It is no part of my goal here to find a definition that gives the *meaning* of “God”; I only need to show that it is possible to in some way fix the *referent* of “God” to secure the coherence of the IRAM position.

³ Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, 96.

that person by virtue of their connection (however distant) to those present at the initial dubbing, whether or not they are able to offer a definite description of the person.

1.1 The trouble with fixing the referent via irreducibly analogical description

Since both of the above accounts agree that it is possible to fix the referent of a name by description, at least initially, I'll start with that approach. Is there any way to fix the referent of "God" descriptively, if all positive and intrinsic claims about God are irreducibly analogical?

On a non-analogical theology, fixing the referent of "God" by description is a fairly trivial matter: we simply need to assert, "Let 'God' name the eternal, all-knowing creator of the universe," or something of the sort. If there exists a being fulfilling that description, then the term "God" refers to that being, and if not, the word fails to refer. But this approach breaks down if we suppose that all such descriptions of God are irreducibly analogical.

Suppose I am committed to the model of God as an incorporeal, all-powerful, all-knowing, morally perfect, eternal person, and accept IRAM interpretations of all of the claims associated with that model (e.g., "God is all-knowing"). If I am to say what I mean by "God," it seems that I will only be able to do so by appealing to my models: I will explain that God is the incorporeal (etc.) person who created the universe, but is those things only analogically, not literally and straightforwardly. Thus the actual cognitive content of my claims about God will be only that God is such that an incorporeal (etc.) person is a good *model* of God, and that God is in some significant respects *similar* to an incorporeal (etc.) person. But once my claims about God have been interpreted analogically in this way, they are no longer specific enough to pick out

God and only God. There will be *multiple* things such that an incorporeal (etc.) person could be good models of them.

For example, an incorporeal, all-powerful, all-knowing, morally perfect, eternal person could at least arguably serve as a good model for something like the conscience: one's conscience can seem like an outside voice rather than simply a part of oneself, but if it is, that outside voice must be that of someone who is invisible and intangible, who knows everything you do or think, and whose moral judgment is right if only you will heed it. The part of the model which says that this being is "all-powerful" is tricky to explain on this interpretation, but perhaps one can interpret it as a metaphorical way of expressing the foundational importance of morality in the life of human beings, or something of that sort. Alternately, an incorporeal (etc.) person could at least arguably serve as a good model for something like the ultimate fundamental laws of physics: they cannot be seen or touched, yet they are that on which everything in the universe depends, and they determine and therefore "know" everything that happens in the universe. To think of them as knowing is already then to be thinking of them as a person. The "morally perfect" part of the model is less natural here, but one who views the universe with awe at its beauty and general magnificence may find moral goodness an appropriate metaphor for this magnificence. And these are only two possible examples. Given the intrinsic flexibility of modeling, and the way one entity could function as a model for innumerable vastly different things, there will surely be things other than God which an incorporeal, all-powerful, all-knowing, morally perfect, eternal person could work as a model of.

We could take an initial stab at solving this problem by taking the referent of "God" to be whatever *best* fits all of our core models of God. In that case, so long as an incorporeal (etc.)

person is a *better* model of God than it is of the conscience or of the laws of physics (or of anything else), then the description “the thing which is best represented by the model of an incorporeal (etc.) person” would succeed in picking out God and only God. However, this solution gives rise to another equally troubling problem. If we fix the referent of “God” as whatever *best* fits our core models, then “God” will have a referent no matter what reality is actually like—no matter whether there actually is anything theists would want to call “God” or not.

This is a problem because the IRAM approach to interpreting theological statements is intended to be a realist approach. But in order for one’s theological claims to be realist in purport, it must be imaginable that one’s claims about God could turn out to be wrong, or that the term “God” could turn out not to refer. What I mean by this is not that it must be *possible* for God not to exist, for if the classical theist is right, then if God exists at all, he exists necessarily, in which case it is not metaphysically possible for God not to exist. However, it must be *epistemically* possible, so to speak: it must be the case that, for all we know, we might discover that God does not exist.⁴

For an IRAM theology to be a realist theology, whether the believer’s claims are true or false must turn on what reality is actually like. If my theology is such that it is unimaginable that I could turn out to be wrong about God, or that I could discover that the word “God” turns out not to refer—if my theology were such that *no matter what the universe is like*, “God” will exist either by definition or by virtue of truths that any non-religious person also believes—that theology would be one most believers would find unacceptably empty. Such a theology would

⁴ Kripke makes something like this point when he notes that something can be necessarily true while also being something we can know only *a posteriori* and uncertainly (*Naming and Necessity*, 34-38, 101-03).

either be a non-realist theology, on which God “exists” only in the sense that a fictional entity exists, or a radically deflationist theology, on which “God” means something like “the universe” or “the laws of physics” or “moral goodness,” etc., meaning only what any non-religious person means by those terms. I will not argue here against non-realist or deflationist theologies, but because of their lack of any special propositional content, non-realist and deflationist theologies can be made sense of *without* the complications of the IRAM approach. My goal is to defend the possibility of an irreducibly analogical theology which is a realist and non-deflationist one. With rare exceptions, believers intend their claims about God to be claims about what reality is really like, and they take the content of those claims to involve some degree of genuine disagreement with non-believers.

But at this point, it isn’t clear how an IRAM theology can be a realist, non-deflationist theology. Given the problem of reference-fixing I have just noted, it seems as if no matter what reality is like, IRAM claims about God will refer and probably even be true, simply because they are so easily satisfied.

1.2 An attempt to fix the referent via negative descriptions

One tempting option in dealing with this problem might be to try to fix the referent of the term “God” using only negative or extrinsic descriptions. On the global IRAM approach to understanding theological claims, it is only claims which are positive and at least partly intrinsic which are to be interpreted analogically. Purely negative and purely extrinsic claims, I have assumed, can be (truly) asserted of God quite literally and non-analogically, since taking purely negative and purely extrinsic claims to be non-analogically true of God does not conflict with the

quasi-classical theology I argued for in Chapter 2 the way taking positive or intrinsic claims to be non-analogically true does.

Fixing the referent of the term “God” solely through negative descriptions may seem initially promising, because so many of the core theistic claims about God are already negative. God is *not* corporeal, *not* temporal, *not* in any way flawed, *not* dependent on anything else for his existence, and so on. But there are two ways one can interpret a negative claim. One way is to take the negative claim to entail something positive to which it is opposed. For example, if God is described as “incorporeal,” one natural way to interpret that is as meaning that God is a *spirit*, or an incorporeal *person*, or something else of that sort.⁵ Gricean maxims even support this tendency: to describe something as “incorporeal” is only appropriate if it’s relevant, and in general, it is only relevant to describe something as “incorporeal” if it is the sort of thing which one might otherwise suppose to be *corporeal*—like a person, or at the very least a concrete being. One does not describe numbers as “incorporeal.” Thus, one way to interpret the negative claim that God is incorporeal is as including some positive content as well.

However, on an IRAM approach it is only *purely* negative claims which can be ascribed to God without appeal to analogy.⁶ And *purely* negative claims—ones which do not imply anything positive at all—seem precisely for that reason not to say anything substantial enough to fix a referent. I might attempt to describe God as not corporeal, not temporal, and so on, for all the attributes I can think of—but I would have no justification for thinking that, once I had gotten

⁵ For example, Aquinas takes the apparently negative claim that God is incorporeal to entail the positive conclusion that God has knowledge (*ST* 1 q. 14 a. 1).

⁶ Maimonides takes something like this approach. He asserts that we can describe God only through negations, and that these negations must be interpreted as categorial: to deny that God is corporeal is not to affirm that God is an incorporeal being, but rather to deny that God is the sort of thing that could be corporeal *or* incorporeal (*Guide* 1.58). Thus negative claims about God, correctly understood, have no positive entailments at all.

to the end of that list, I had ruled out literally everything in existence other than God. To pick God out solely by a process of elimination in such a way, I would need to know in advance every other kind of thing that exists, in order to fix the referent of “God” as that which is *not* any of those kinds of thing. But I see no reason to think I know about every kind of thing that exists other than God, so defining God merely as that which is *not* characterized by any of the properties I understand will not work.

Ehud Benor suggests an alternate route, however. Benor notes that Maimonides faces the same puzzle I am discussing here, though perhaps in an even more radical form, given Maimonides’s more radically negative theology. Benor’s question is this: since according to Maimonides we lack any true description of God and any experience of God, how can any talk ever succeed in being about God at all? Benor argues that Maimonides’s solution to this problem can be found in the *via negativa*: God can be uniquely identified as that about which *all* negative claims are true.⁷ Rather than fixing the referent of the term “God” by some finite list of negative claims about God, as I proposed above, Benor’s proposal is that we fix the referent by describing God as “that about which all possible negative attributions are true.”

I certainly cannot adopt Benor’s exact strategy, because it relies on a Maimonidean theology on which *no* positive attributes can be correctly ascribed to God, even analogically. By contrast, on an IRAM approach, it is not the case that *all* negative claims are true about God. For

⁷ Ehud Z. Benor, “Meaning and Reference in Maimonides’ Negative Theology,” *The Harvard Theological Review* 88, no. 3 (1995): 347-49. Hilary Putnam offers an analysis and partial defense of this argument in Hilary Putnam, “On Negative Theology,” *Faith and Philosophy* 14, no. 4 (1997): 407–22. It’s not clear that Benor’s account of Maimonides’s position on this point is quite accurate: Maimonides does not seem to think negative claims about God are actually *true*, but perhaps only that they’re as good as we can do. For example, he says of negative attributes not that they truly apply to God but that “they are those that must be used in order to conduct the mind toward that which must be believed” (*Guide* 1.58). However, to think both positive and negative claims about God are all false would eliminate the possibility of even an irreducibly analogical theology. I will simply take Benor’s account of Maimonides for granted in what follows.

example, it is true that God is significantly similar to a wise person, which means the negative claim “God is not significantly similar to a wise person” is false. However, suppose we modify Benor’s referent-fixing definition to take into account the fact that the IRAM approach, unlike Maimonides’s account, accepts the legitimacy of analogical claims about God. The result will be this position: God is that about which all negations of *positive, intrinsic, and non-analogical* predicates are true. Will this description work to fix the referent of “God”?

Unfortunately not. Benor’s strategy makes sense in the Maimonidean or quasi-Maimonidean framework he endorses, on which no positive or intrinsic attribute of any kind can be correctly ascribed to God. However, the global IRAM approach supposes that it is correct to ascribe positive and intrinsic properties to God, so long as those properties are either ascribed to God *analogically*, or they are themselves analogical properties like *being similar to a wise person*. But since similarity always entails the sharing of S-properties, God couldn’t have the property *being similar to a wise person* if there weren’t also some other, non-similarity-involving S-property God shares with wise human beings. So if there is a similarity between God and wise human beings, it follows that there is some (non-analogical, non-similarity-involving) S-property, perhaps merely a formal one, which God and wise human beings share. And so the global IRAM approach seems to entail that some positive, intrinsic, non-analogical propositions about God *must* be true.

This may seem like a surprising conclusion. Wasn’t the whole aim of a global IRAM approach to allow for the view that human beings can say *nothing* positive and intrinsic about God except by analogy? If there *are* positive, intrinsic, non-analogical propositions about God, then why can’t we simply *assert* those propositions, and thus speak truly and non-analogically

about God and avoid the complications of an analogical theology altogether? The answer is that there is an important difference between asserting that there *are* some true, positive, intrinsic, non-analogical propositions about God, and being in a position to assert those propositions themselves. On my view, there must in fact be true, intrinsic, positive, non-analogical propositions about God, but we are not in a position to know what they are. What's more, we have good reason to think all of our best candidates for the job of being positive, intrinsic, non-analogical propositions about God turn out to be false, for the sorts of theological reasons I raise in Chapter 2. The most natural (though not inevitable) conclusion to draw is that the propositions about God which are positive, intrinsic, non-analogical and *true* are ones beyond our powers of comprehension, presumably because the properties they ascribe to God are not ones we can grasp.

Whereas some classical theologians like Maimonides and even Aquinas take it to be in principle impossible for *any* subject-predicate claim about God to be adequate to God, because such claims implicitly violate the doctrine of divine simplicity, my own arguments for a global doctrine of analogy in Chapter 2 did not appeal to divine simplicity or any other doctrine which would rule out the very possibility of true predications about God. Instead, my arguments for a global doctrine of analogy were based on theological reasons for thinking that God cannot be accurately described by any of our own ontological concepts. My conclusion in Chapter 2 was that God is not a concrete being or substance in any sense we understand (but not by virtue of being an abstract entity or an accident). If we accept this premise, then it doesn't seem like we can say anything about God except by analogy, because the "kind of thing" God is (so to speak—that very phrase is of course misleading) is so utterly outside the scope of the kinds of

thing we currently understand. But this is a claim about our ignorance; it is not a claim to the effect that God actually *has* no properties, or that no positive, intrinsic propositions are true of God. And as a result, it won't work to try to fix the referent of "God" by describing God as that of which all negations of positive, intrinsic, non-analogical predications are true.

1.3 An attempt to fix the referent via extrinsic descriptions

Since fixing the referent of "God" through negations doesn't work, let's try instead to fix the referent through extrinsic claims. It is only positive and *intrinsic* claims about God that, on the IRAM account, must be analogical. The most fundamental extrinsic claim believers make about God is that God is the creator or cause of the universe, and since these are extrinsic claims, one might think it possible to take "the unique creator of the universe" or "the efficient cause of the existence of the universe" to be non-analogical descriptions of God, ones which might therefore be specific enough to uniquely pick out God as their referent.

However, this approach doesn't look viable either, because in fact, talk of God as a cause or as causing anything else must also be analogical on a global IRAM account. On a global IRAM account, it is only *purely* extrinsic properties like loneliness (i.e., *being the only thing in existence*) which can be ascribed to God without appeal to analogy. Most "extrinsic" properties include at least some intrinsic elements, or have at least some intrinsic implications. For example, to be a sister is an extrinsic property, but it entails the intrinsic property of being female. So on a global IRAM approach in which we interpret all ascriptions of intrinsic properties to God analogically, we must also interpret all ascriptions of this sort of "impurely" extrinsic property to God analogically as well. But *being the cause of the existence of the*

universe seems clearly like an extrinsic property of the impure rather than the pure variety. Whereas a purely extrinsic property like loneliness tells us nothing at all about what the thing having that property is like in itself, knowing that a being is the cause of the existence of the universe tells us a great deal about that being as it is in itself: it tells us that that being has the power to cause the universe to exist. And so being a cause of something can never be a *purely* extrinsic property, and so on the IRAM approach this claim about God must be interpreted analogically right along with “God is wise” and all the rest. And the same will hold true for all of the extrinsic properties of any interest to us that we might wish to ascribe to God. The only sorts of claims which would escape this argument would be those properties like loneliness which are *completely* empty of intrinsic content, and such properties will all, by virtue of their emptiness of intrinsic content, be valueless as descriptions of God.

One might object that God *can* be said to cause things in a strictly literal and non-analogical way, if we stick to a sufficiently stripped-down concept of causation. David Lewis argues that causal dependence between two events can be analyzed as a counterfactual: if *x* happens, and then *y* happens, but *y* would not have happened if *x* had not happened, then *x* is a cause of *y*.⁸ The appeal of this account is that it seems to offer a plausible way of reducing the somewhat mysterious concept of causation to the more tractable concept of counterfactuality, eliminating any reference to *actions* or *powers* on the part of the cause. For our purposes, this account of causation seems useful because it seems to eliminate the *intrinsic* aspect from claims of causation: The claim that *x* is such that *y* would not have happened if *x* had not happened doesn't seem to entail anything intrinsic about *x*, unlike the claim that *x* *caused* *y* to happen (in

⁸ David Lewis, “Causation,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 70, no. 17 (1973): 556–67.

the normal sense of “caused”) does. The counterfactual analysis of causation has real difficulties as an analysis of causation, because many counterfactual claims (of the appropriate form) are *not* causal claims, and there doesn’t seem to be any non-circular way of distinguishing the causal ones from the non-causal ones.⁹ But let’s set that worry aside for the sake of argument, and simply accept Lewis’s counterfactual account of causation as one possible sense the word “cause” could have.

The trouble with trying to employ the counterfactual account of causation as a way of speaking about God’s causal activity is that it requires us to take causation as a relation between two *events*, not between an agent and something else. So if we want to use a counterfactual interpretation of the claim that God is the cause of the existence of the universe, we will need to say that it is some *event*—say, God’s willing that the universe exist—that is the cause of the existence of the universe. And on this account, the existence of the universe causally depends on God’s willing it, in the sense that if God had not willed that the universe exist, the universe would not exist. But if our goal was to find some claim about God which the IRAM theorist could accept as non-analogically true and yet sufficiently contentful to fix the referent of “God,” this approach will not be of any help to us. Lewis’s approach gives us a way to understand the term “causally depends on,” in the sentence “The existence of the universe causally depends on God’s willing it,” without appeal to (irreducible) analogy. By “causally depends on,” in this context, we mean only that there is a counterfactual relation between the two things. However, the *rest* of the sentence—including, importantly, the parts of the sentence that are actually about God—will still be irreducibly analogical for the IRAM theorist. The claim that God *willed* the

⁹ See Jaegwon Kim, “Causes and Counterfactuals,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 70, no. 17 (1973): 570–72.

universe must be analogical, for the IRAM theorist, as will *any* description of an “event” involving God, because if God is not a concrete being in any sense we understand, God cannot be an actor or participant in events in any sense we understand either. And so there will be no way to make the claim that God caused the universe to exist an entirely non-analogical claim, even if we employ the stripped-down conception of causation that Lewis proposes.

At this point, however, one might object that all this really shows is that *efficient* causation is not the right concept for expressing the relation God bears to the universe. Efficient causation is a horizontal relation, and on the classical conception of God presupposed by the global IRAM interpretation of religious language, nothing can exist in a horizontal relation with God. Instead, God is that on which everything is *non-mutually ontologically dependent*—that is, God is that on which everything else is ontologically dependent, but which is not ontologically dependent on anything else. For some x to be ontologically dependent on some y is for it to be the case that, if y did not exist, x would not exist either. For example, macroscopic objects are ontologically dependent on atoms, and, on a materialist conception of the mind, the mind is ontologically dependent on the brain. Ontological dependence of this sort is a vertical relation, and so is clearly the more appropriate concept to express what it means for the classical theist to describe God as the creator or cause of the universe. This idea is implicit in Tillich’s description of God as the “Ground of Being”: God is the ultimate foundation on which everything else rests. Can the claim, “God is that on which every concrete existing thing is non-mutually ontologically dependent” be said non-analogically, on a global IRAM theology, and if so, is this claim sufficient to fix the referent of the term “God”?

The concept of ontological dependence, like Lewis's concept of causation, takes the form of a counterfactual. The difference is that whereas Lewis describes causation as a counterfactual relationship between two *events*, ontological dependence is a counterfactual relationship between two *existing things*. The claim that God is that on which every concrete thing is non-mutually ontologically dependent is just the claim that if God did not exist, then no concrete objects would exist, but if no concrete objects existed, God would still exist. This means that whether "God is that on which every concrete existing thing is non-mutually ontologically dependent" can be said non-analogically depends on whether "God exists" can be said non-analogically.

In Chapter 2 I briefly noted that whether "God exists" can be said non-analogically depends on whether one is an ontological pluralist or an ontological monist. If one takes the position that "existence" has a different sense when applied to abstract entities than when applied to concrete things, then it surely has yet another sense when applied to God, who is neither abstract nor concrete in any sense we understand. But if one takes the more mainstream view that "existence" signifies only the minimal formal concept expressed by the existential quantifier, and hence that it applies to abstract things and concrete things in the same sense, we must say that God "exists" in this same sense also. However, if one takes this latter position, the fact that we can say that God "exists" in the same sense as a creature is due to the fact that we are employing a concept of "existence" so thin that it signifies nothing at all about the nature of God. So we did not need to take a position on which of those two approaches is the right one.

If one takes the ontological pluralist position that "existence" is said analogically of God, then the claim "If God did not exist, neither would any concrete being" is also analogical, and is no more help to us in fixing the referent of "God" than the claim "If God had not willed it, the

universe would not exist” was. But if we take “exists” to mean only that formal concept signified by the existential quantifier, then the claim “If God did not exist, neither would any concrete being” can be said without any appeal to analogy: God can be said to exist, in that sense, univocally with creatures, and the rest of the claim ascribes to God only the purely extrinsic claim of *being such that if he had not existed, neither would anything else*. So here we seem to have one descriptive claim about God which, even on a global IRAM account, the theist can take to be simply, straightforwardly, non-analogically true.

However, while the claim that God is that on which every concrete thing is non-mutually ontologically dependent certainly goes *some* way towards indicating what we’re speaking of when we speak of God, it is unfortunately still too thin to uniquely fix the referent of “God.” The reason is that God doesn’t seem like the only thing on which every concrete thing is non-mutually ontologically dependent. One plausible example is that of numbers (if one is not a nominalist about numbers). At least on Lewis’s analysis of counterfactual claims, any counterfactual proposition is entailed by a necessarily false proposition.¹⁰ So, since “the number 7 exists” is necessarily true, it follows that “If the number 7 didn’t exist, nothing would exist” is also true. However, it must be admitted that this example requires that we accept both Lewis’s account of counterfactuals and the view that numbers are rightly said to exist, and both can be challenged. A second example, then: suppose that there is some physical force or physical entity in the universe, of which we are currently ignorant, which is such that if it had not existed, nothing else would have existed. This supposition seems at least *possible*. But if there were such

¹⁰ David Lewis, *Counterfactuals* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), 24-25.

a force or entity, most theists would not think it should rightly be called “God,” at least not if it didn’t also have some *other* God-like qualities.

What the classical theist really wants to say is that God has the unique status of being that on which the universe genuinely *depends*, not in the merely counterfactual sense discussed above, but in a substantial sense. What I mean by that is that the classical theist doesn’t think it just *happens to be the case* that if God didn’t exist, neither would anything else. The theist takes there to be a *reason* for the truth of the counterfactual, and takes that reason to be that God is something like the *foundation* or *source* of everything else. But to say that God is the “foundation” or the “source” of everything else is to speak analogically. If we reduce that claim to a bare-bones counterfactual, the result does capture, non-analogically, *some* of the content of saying that God is the foundation of everything. But this reduced version of the claim has lost much of its force—too much for it to be able to successfully fix the referent of “God.”

An alternative might be to describe God, not merely as that on which all *concrete* existing things are non-mutually ontologically dependent, but rather as that on which *all* existing things are non-mutually ontologically dependent—including not only the physical universe but also abstract objects.¹¹ The description “that on which all concrete things are non-mutually ontologically dependent” doesn’t work to fix the referent of “God” because, as I have just suggested, it could also refer to numbers or to some mysterious physical force. But no such

¹¹ This position is taken by Leibniz, who asserts that “in God is not only the source of existences but also the source of essences,” because they depend on God’s ideas (*Monadology* 43). Translation taken from *Leibniz’s Monadology: A New Translation and Guide*, trans. Lloyd Strickland (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014). Plantinga similarly holds that all necessarily existing abstract objects are dependent on God’s affirming their existence (“Does God Have a Nature?”, 255-57), though he holds that God *necessarily* affirms their existence, which might suggest—though he does not say this—that the dependence is mutual rather than one-sided. Similar positions are also taken by Thomas V. Morris and Christopher Menzel in “Absolute Creation,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 23, no. 4 (1986): 353–62 and Brian Leftow in “God and Abstract Entities,” *Faith and Philosophy* 7, no. 2 (1990): 193–217.

alternative examples arise (as far as I can see) for the description “that on which *all things*, abstract or concrete, are non-mutually ontologically dependent,” so long as one thinks there actually are such things as abstract entities. However, I cannot accept this solution, because I can make no sense whatsoever of talk of numbers or other abstract objects being non-mutually ontologically dependent on something else. There are three options I *can* make sense of: (1) that it’s improper to speak of numbers and the like as existing at all, (2) that numbers do exist and couldn’t possibly have failed to exist and hence exist independently of God, or (3) that all abstract objects are somehow bound up with God’s nature, either by being somehow *identical* with God’s nature, as some advocates of divine simplicity would have it, or by being *components* of God’s nature, in which case the dependence would be mutual. But I cannot make sense of the idea that numbers genuinely exist, and are ontologically dependent on God, without God’s being either identical with or mutually dependent on them. At best, to say that would be to have already strayed into analogical speech, since no such claim could be true in any sense we understand—but if we interpret the claim analogically it will, again, no longer be specific enough to uniquely fix the referent of “God.”

Thus attempting to fix the referent of “God” via extrinsic descriptions seems to have failed: all the plausible extrinsic descriptions of God either turn out to be too thin to successfully fix the referent, or to be only partly extrinsic and thus to be applicable to God only analogically on an IRAM approach. If the IRAM account is correct, the only contentful way to describe God’s relationship to the universe is to appeal to analogies and metaphors: God is the creator who spoke the universe into existence, God is the potter and we the pots, God is “that in which we live and move and have our being,” God is the mind which imagines a world and we the

characters in the world he has imagined, God is the “Ground of Being,” God is the is-ness of the things that are, and so on. But all such claims are irreducibly analogical. And once we grant that it is irreducibly analogical, the claim that God is the cause or source or ground of the universe is no longer sufficiently determinate to properly fix the referent of the term “God,” because such analogical descriptions could *also* work as analogical descriptions of something else which the theist would *not* want to call “God”: the fundamental laws of physics, for example. One difficulty with that is that the term “God” would then not pick out any one unique referent. But more importantly, even if we specified that “God” picks out whatever is *best* represented by one or all of these analogical claims, the resulting description would have a referent even if the universe was exactly the way an atheist takes it to be. Thus “God” would refer no matter what the universe is actually like—a conclusion which is unacceptable to a theological realist.

1.4 Why we can’t fix the referent by appealing to religious experience

At this point I must conclude that the attempt to fix the referent of the term “God” by (non-analogical) description has failed. The remaining option is to see if there’s any way to fix the referent of “God” by something like ostension—i.e., by appealing in some way to religious experience of God. Supposing there exist people who have in some sense directly encountered God, those people could then simply apply the name “God” to that which they have encountered. In a Kripkean manner, everyone else’s use of the name “God” could then be traced back to and grounded on the mystic or prophet’s initial use of that name, the same way my use of the name “Aristotle” is grounded ultimately on the use of the name by people long ago who actually encountered Aristotle.

One might object that Christians, at least, need not appeal to *mystical* experience of God, but could instead appeal to the experiences of those who met Christ. Since orthodox Christians take Christ to be God, those who encountered Christ on earth encountered God, and so, one might argue, the referent of “God” could be fixed in *just* the same way the referent of “Aristotle” can be fixed, without any need to appeal to more mysterious sorts of experience. However, this approach won’t work: the claim that Christ is God cannot serve to *fix* the referent of the name “God,” or else “Christ is God” would be merely the attribution of a rather odd alias to a rather odd man, rather than the deeply paradoxical theological claim which it is meant to be. The doctrine of the incarnation requires a *prior* conception of God, and thus a prior ability to refer to God, in order to be formulated in the first place. So if what fixes the referent of “God” is something like acquaintance, it will need to be in the form of some sort of mystical religious experience.

However, I think appealing to mystical experience in this way will actually get us nowhere. I’ll explain why using a series of disjunctive arguments. First, there are two positions one might take about the conceptual content of mystical experience. One position is that of W. T. Stace, who argues that mystical experiences are somehow non-conceptual or unconceptualizable. Alternately, one might think that mystical experience, like more ordinary kinds of experience, is conceptualizable, and that it offers some degree of conceptual information about God.

W. T. Stace argues that mystical experience is fundamentally unconceptualizable in his *Time and Eternity*.¹² This radical position is made tempting by the fact that mystics themselves sometimes suggest that their experiences are unconceptualizable. But to claim that an experience

¹² W. T. Stace, *Time and Eternity: An Essay in the Philosophy of Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952), 44-49.

is truly unconceptualizable is simply incoherent, as Stace himself recognized in his later work.¹³ An experience one is able to remember at all will be remembered in the form of concepts; if there is unconceptualizable content in an experience, it would not be accessible to thought in any way, and hence would be to the individual as if it never happened. To remember or recognize an experience at all is to employ at least a hazy concept of it, and so any experience one is able to think about in any way at all is conceptualized. If it were not for having some sort of concept of the experiences they have, mystics would not be able to recognize new experiences of the same kind as *being* of the same kind as their previous ones—but of course mystics can do that. So while mystical experiences may often fail to fit within *ordinary* conceptual categories, it cannot be right to describe them as genuinely unconceptualizable. And if, *per impossible*, they were wholly unconceptualizable, they would be inaccessible to thought and thus utterly useless.

So if we wish to ground reference to God on mystical experience, it must be that these experiences have conceptual content, even if of an unusual and elusive sort. And if these experiences have conceptual content, it must either be conceptual content about God (i.e. it must involve a perception or conception of God), or not about God. If the conceptual content is *not* about God, then the mystical experience cannot count as an “encounter” with God in anything like the way meeting Aristotle is an “encounter” with Aristotle which could ground one’s use of the name “Aristotle” to refer to him. That is, if the conceptual content of the mystical experience is not taken to directly include information about God, then the only reason to take the mystical experience to have anything to do with God at all would be to rely on some *prior* beliefs about God on which God is often the source of such experiences. That would presuppose that the name

¹³ W. T. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1960), 291-94.

“God” *already* has an established referent, and it was establishing the referent of “God” that our appeal to mystical experience was meant to accomplish. So, if mystical experience is to ground reference to God, it must be that these experiences not only have conceptual content, but also that this conceptual content is *about God*—that the experience is taken to be an experience *of God* in something analogous to the way seeing a person is an experience of that person.

But if we are incapable of conceiving of God as he is, as the IRAM approach presupposes, then no experience of God in a mystical vision could present God as he is. If we are incapable of conceiving God as he is, then whatever the conceptual content of the mystic’s experience of God, it cannot be conceptual content which involves a non-analogical (and accurate) depiction of God’s nature. The IRAM approach presupposes that we lack access to such depictions of God. And so, if we accept the IRAM approach to understanding religious language, we must suppose that the conceptual content of the mystic’s experience of God is *itself* analogical in nature—that the mystic’s experiences present models or analogies for the truth about God, but do not present to the mystic true, positive, intrinsic, non-analogical representations of God. And if this is so, then appealing to mystical experience has merely led us back to appealing to analogical claims about God, and has not offered us any way of escaping the problem we set out to escape.

1.5 Summation of the problem

To summarize my conclusions up to this point: if we can explain what “God” is only through irreducibly analogical descriptions, that seems to entail that the term “God” will either be too broad to uniquely pick out one referent at all, or (if we add a condition like “whatever is

best described as . . .”) will have a referent no matter what the universe is like, and no matter whether there is in reality anything a theist would want to call “God” or not. This conclusion is unacceptable if we want a non-realist, non-deflationist theology. I have attempted to resolve this problem by appealing either to purely negative or purely extrinsic descriptions of God, because on the global IRAM approach, it is only positive and intrinsic claims about God which must be interpreted analogically. However, purely negative and purely extrinsic claims turned out to be too empty of content to fix the referent of “God.” And as we have just seen, we also cannot legitimately fix the referent of “God” by direct experience: any appeal to religious experience would involve claims about God which would yet again need to be interpreted analogically.

One might wonder at this point if perhaps it has been a mistake all along to insist that the content of the theist’s beliefs must contradict the contents of an atheist’s beliefs about the universe, or to insist that it must be imaginable that the term “God” might *not* refer (in the case that God doesn’t exist). After all, one of the key implications of the quasi-classical conception of God the global IRAM account presupposes is that the difference between the theist and the atheist is *not* that there is some (univocally) concrete being the existence of which the theist accepts and the atheist rejects. The whole question of whether God “exists” or not (and thus the whole basic disagreement between theism and atheism, as standardly understood) is rendered somewhat dubious on a conception of God which takes God to be, not a concrete being or substance (in any sense we understand), but instead to be something like Tillich’s “Ground of Being” or “Being itself.” And indeed, Tillich doesn’t seem to think the religious person and the

atheist really disagree, at least not in the ideal case.¹⁴ And so perhaps the moral here is that, if one accepts a global IRAM theology, one ought to just abandon the idea that there *is* a clear distinction between the theist and the non-theist. There is of course a perfectly clear distinction between the theist who posits the existence of an *individualist* God—a God as a particular sort of concrete being—and the atheist who denies the existence of such a being. But perhaps there just is no such distinction in the case of the kind of theism the global IRAM approach has been designed for.

But I think this cannot be right. It is true that once one has shifted to the non-individualist conception of God as something other than a concrete being, the distinction between a theist and a non-theist becomes a *somewhat* ambiguous one. There may be people who identify as atheists who believe in something very much like what some non-individualist theists call “God,” and there may be certain positions about which one is unsure whether to say they involve belief in God or not. But although a non-individualist theism doesn’t involve positing the existence of some distinct concrete being which the atheist disbelieves in, I want to defend the possibility of a non-individualist theism that posits *some* uniquely theistic and non-empty claims about reality.

For example, consider a conception of reality on which all there ultimately is is physical stuff behaving according to physical laws, on which there is nothing like a *reason* (as distinct from a mere cause) why the universe exists, and on which the thought that the universe is guided or created by something in some way *like* a mind is not an illuminating analogical expression of a deep truth but a misguided personification of something sheerly impersonal. If the content of

¹⁴ Tillich argues that faith in Being itself “has no special content” (*Courage to Be*, 176), i.e. no propositional content, and that as a result it cannot be undermined by doubts. While I have wanted to embrace Tillich’s model of God as the “Ground of Being,” my own conception of religious faith diverges from Tillich’s here.

the theist's claims about God do not at least entail that *that* conception of the universe is false, then it seems to me that it is not really theism at all. Now, one might disagree that the contrast case I have just drawn is really the right one to draw. But if a theology is to be a realist and non-deflationist one, there must be *some* such contrast case which that theology is intended to rule out.

I won't deny that there might be value to a theology like Tillich's which (at least as I understand him) does not make any distinctively religious claims about reality, but instead simply urges us to see the universe in a certain way and to take a certain attitude towards it. But I have intended to defend a more robust theological stance: one whose content is irreducibly analogical *and yet* which still makes contentful claims about God. But if the claims about God a theology makes are to be genuinely contentful, it must be imaginable that they could be wrong, and so far we have not seen a way to account for that. In order for the global IRAM account of religious language to be one with genuine cognitive content which is neither non-realist nor deflationist, we must find a way to fix the referent of "God" in such a way that the term won't have some-or-other referent by default no matter what reality is like, and in such a way that believers' claims about God won't be true by default no matter what reality is like.

1.6 Part one of the solution: the irreducibility condition

To solve this problem requires that we add some additional conditions to the IRAM approach laid out in Chapter 5. On the IRAM approach, as I have described it so far, a claim like "God is wise" serves to describe one particular aspect of one of the core theistic models of God: the model of God as an incorporeal, all-powerful, all-knowing, morally perfect, eternal person. A

believer who is committed to an IRAM interpretation of the claim that God is wise, and who is also committed to the other major claims associated with the above model of God, is thereby also committed to the model of God which those claims serve to describe. To be committed to the model involves believing the analogical proposition, “an incorporeal (etc.) person is a good model of God,” which entails more specific propositions like “God is in some significant way similar to a wise person.” But to be committed to that model involves more than just a commitment to a series of abstract analogical claims like “God is in some way similar to a wise person.” To be committed to a model also involves *thinking* of God in terms of the model in at least some respects, and also *acting* in accordance with the model in certain respects. And it is for this reason that model-talk can satisfactorily serve as the foundation for a real, robust religious faith and practice, even if one takes the models in question to be genuinely irreducibly analogical.

However, the account described above isn't quite enough. If the *only* propositions about God the believer asserts are claims like “an incorporeal (etc.) person is a good model of God” or “God is in some significant way similar to a wise person,” that leaves us unable to properly fix the referent of the term “God” in a realist fashion. No matter what reality is like, an incorporeal (etc.) person will be a good model of *something*. And so if the referent of “God” is fixed solely by means of such irreducibly analogical descriptions, then “God” will exist by default, and the core analogical claims about God which serve to construct those models will be true by default. And so the account I have given so far is not yet a properly realist account, because all the claims such a theology makes would be true no matter what reality actually turned out to be like.

One initial condition we need to add to the IRAM approach is this: the believer must not *merely* believe that God is in some significant way similar to a wise person, and that an incorporeal (etc.) person is a good model of God. The believer must *also* believe the higher-order claim that these claims are irreducibly analogical (for human beings).

The difference this higher-order claim makes is that it rules out all deflationist or non-realist interpretations of religious claims. To illustrate why, let's consider one particularly appealing deflationist theology: that of Mark Johnston.¹⁵ Johnston argues for his religious view as an interpretation of Western monotheism and especially of Christianity, and thus he employs much of the traditional language of Christianity to describe his position. However, Johnston argues for a purely naturalistic form of religion, on which "God is partly *constituted* by the natural realm, in the sense that his activity is manifest in and through natural processes *alone*."¹⁶ More generally, Johnston's form of religion involves no distinctive claims about what reality is like. He has distinctive *ethical* claims to make, and a distinctive perspective on the universe and on human beings. Johnston's religious framework serves primarily to inspire an ethical stance of radical self-renunciation, and so his theology is by no means empty of significance, humanly speaking. But it makes no claims about (non-ethical) reality which any non-religious person would disagree with once they properly understood what he meant by them. And this is what makes his interpretation of Christian theism deflationistic: he subscribes, verbally, to claims like "God is good," but once we see what we mean by them, we see that he is committed to only those claims about reality that any non-religious person accepts. The difference between Johnston and a straightforwardly non-religious atheist is that Johnston employs different words

¹⁵ Mark Johnston, *Saving God: Religion after Idolatry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

¹⁶ Johnston, *Saving God*, 119.

and images to describe reality, and takes different attitudes toward reality, and perhaps also holds different ethical views (though not necessarily). There is no difference in non-ethical beliefs between Johnston and a straightforwardly non-religious atheist.

For example, Johnston defines God as “the outpouring of Existence Itself by way of its exemplification in ordinary existents.”¹⁷ This description might sound initially like something a classical theist might say about God. However, as I argued in Chapter 2, all of the classical descriptions of God as something like “existence itself” must be interpreted analogically.¹⁸ When Aquinas describes God as “subsistent existence,” he is not saying that God just is “existence” in any of the familiar senses we can assign to that word. By contrast, Johnston’s definition of God is *not* intended as an irreducibly analogical one. Of course, there are analogical elements of his description: talk of Existence Itself as “outpouring” is clearly a metaphor, for example. But these are not *irreducibly* analogical elements; Johnston goes on to explain precisely what he means by them. Johnston’s idea is that “God” names whatever the ultimate, deepest ontological principle is, that principle by virtue of which some sorts of existing things are possible and other sorts aren’t. Every existing thing expresses to some degree this underlying principle, and in a sense owes its existence to it. To name this “God” is a way of valuing the fact that anything exists at all, of valuing all that is. And so Johnston intends to be offering an actual definition of his term “God,” not merely an evocative analogical description which points beyond itself to a reality we do not have any conception of.

Similarly, Johnston notes that “perhaps the most distinctive part of Christian revelation is that the Highest One [i.e. God] is by its nature Love,” but that this of course must be an

¹⁷ Ibid., 113.

¹⁸ See pp. 93-94.

analogical description, not a literal one.¹⁹ The reason God is described as “Love,” for Johnston, is that there is “an analogy between self-giving love and the outpouring of Existence Itself by way of its exemplification in ordinary existents.” And this analogy between love and a feature of existence any non-religious person could recognize (once Johnston had spelled out what he meant by it clearly) constitutes the total cognitive content involved in describing God as “Love.” He does not take the description of the outpouring of Existence Itself as “Love” to be true in some *deeper* analogical way which is beyond his grasp. Of course, choosing to describe this aspect of existence via the analogy of “Love” rather than via some other analogy is a way of evoking a particular way of thinking about the universe, and a particular emotional and perhaps ethical or existential response to it; it is these emotional and ethical and existential associations which lead Johnston to use this particular analogical way of speaking rather than some other. But the *cognitive* content of the claim that God is love, on Johnston’s interpretation—the content of what is actually being *asserted*—is purely deflationist; it is a minimal claim about the nature of existence which anyone at all would recognize to be true once they understood what Johnston meant. And he offers similar accounts of what it means to talk of God as the creator, as all-powerful, and so on.

Now that we have at least a few key fragments of Johnston’s deflationist interpretation of theism in view, we are in a position to see how the irreducibility condition added to the IRAM account serves to rule out such interpretations. As we have seen, IRAM analogical claims seem too permissive to rule out deflationist readings. Because the cognitive content of a theological claim like “God is an incorporeal (etc.) person” amounts only to the claim that an incorporeal

¹⁹ Johnston, *Saving God*, 113.

(etc.) person is a good model of God, that seems to mean that Johnston's deflationist version of God would fulfill such descriptions just as well as any properly theistic God. But once we add to these analogical claims about God the higher-order claim that they are to be taken as *irreducibly* analogical, that rules out interpretations like Johnston's, because while Johnston's interpretations of words like "God" and claims like "God is Love" are analogical, they are very much *reducibly* so. The "deflation" which takes place in Johnston's interpretation of "God is Love" is precisely the reduction of that claim to the claim about the fact that the most basic ontological principles are in some sense the source of everything that exists, where *that* claim can be explained without appeal to analogy. And this is not true only of Johnston's particular deflationist theology; it is in the very nature of a deflationist interpretation that it is reducible. A deflationist account of a theological claim is always an account intended to tell us what certain theological expressions *really* mean, and what they *really* mean is some straightforward, non-analogical claim. And so, if we add to the global IRAM account the condition that all analogical claims about God must be taken by the believer to be irreducibly analogical, this will rule out deflationist accounts of the meanings of those theological statements, along with all other accounts on which those statements are only reducibly analogical.

The position I am arguing for is similar to one advocated by Edwyn Bevan. Bevan takes religious language to be "symbolic," by which he roughly means "analogical." However, he notes that the position that religious claims are merely symbolic is widely viewed with distrust, and misinterpreted as a position destructive to actual religious faith. The key, Bevan says, is to distinguish between "the symbols behind which we can see" and "the symbols behind which we

cannot see.”²⁰ Taking as his example Marcel Hébert’s interpretation of the virgin birth as a “symbol” for “the luminous superiority of the union of the divine with human nature,”²¹ Bevan notes that this way of taking the doctrine of the virgin birth as a “symbol” is really just a thinly disguised rejection of the doctrine. The reason is that Hébert thinks this “symbol” is one he can “see behind”; he tells us what the claim that Jesus was born of a virgin really means (and it’s not that Jesus was born of a virgin). By contrast, for Bevan,

When we speak of the love of God or the will of God, we know that we are speaking of something different from any love or any will we can know in men, and the idea ‘love of God,’ ‘will of God’ may, in that sense, be regarded as an element in the life of man taken to symbolize something unimaginable in the life of God. We cannot see behind the symbol: we cannot have any discernment of the reality better and truer than the symbolical idea, and we cannot compare the symbol with the reality as it is more truly apprehended and see how they differ. The symbol is the nearest we can get to the Reality.²²

Bevan thinks, and I agree, that this way of taking a particular claim to be symbolic (i.e., analogical) is quite different from Hébert’s. It rules out any deflationist interpretations on which religious claims are just high-sounding ways of saying something that could have been more clearly said in some other way. Thus whether one takes an analogical model to be reducible or irreducible makes a big difference. To interpret a particular description of God as in fact only the model-description of a reducibly analogical model of God is more a way of rejecting that description of God than a way of accepting it. It is to deny that God is *really* like that. But to interpret a particular description of God as the model-description of an *irreducibly* analogical model of God is not a way of rejecting that description of God: it’s to take it to be the best possible way of expressing some particular truth.

²⁰ Bevan, *Symbolism and Belief*, 256.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 257.

²² *Ibid.*

1.7 Part two of the solution: the irreplaceability condition

However, adding an explicit claim of irreducibility to the IRAM theist's beliefs still doesn't fully solve the problem of fixing the referent of the term "God." With the added condition, the global IRAM account now rules out all actual deflationist accounts of theological claims as illegitimate. It is no longer possible to take "God" to stand for any particular, non-analogically defined thing such as the outpouring of Existence Itself, or the laws of physics, because that would entail that these defining claims about God are not *irreducibly* analogical. But this doesn't rule out the possibility of the term "God" having some other referent we *haven't* named or perhaps aren't even aware of. There could be something which an incorporeal (etc.) person is a good model of, but which we still wouldn't want to call "God" if we were in a position to consider the question. The added condition does nothing to rule *this* thing (whatever it is) out as a possible referent of the term "God," and that seems like a problem.

So to solve the referent problem, we must go a step further. A global IRAM approach to interpreting religious claims must not only make the higher-order assertion that its first-order claims about God are to be interpreted as irreducibly analogical; it must also make the higher-order assertion, about at least one of its core analogical models of God, that that model is as *close* to the truth about God we human beings can come.

However, the claim that the model is "as close to the truth about God as we can come" is rather vague and must be developed more carefully. First, it would be rather arrogant for the theist to assert that her entire set of core models for God are literally as close to the truth about God that human beings could come, so I think it is unwise to make *that* the higher-order claim one must make as part of an IRAM theology. Nor do we want to say that any one particular

model of God is *the* best model, as that seems like too strong and too general a claim: which model of God is the best model will probably depend on the context or the purposes of our inquiry. But on the other hand, if we were to say merely that some model of God is the best model for highlighting some *particular* aspect of the divine nature—thereby avoiding making a claim about which model of God is the best one in *general*—that would be too weak.

Innumerable different models will be the best model of some or other aspect of God's nature, because there will be infinitely many possible aspects of God's nature that a model could represent.

Instead, what the theist should say is that at least one of her core models of God is *irreplaceable*. A model *m* of some *t* is irreplaceable if no set of core models of *t* that did not include *m* could come as close to the truth about *t* as at least some sets of core models of *t* that do include *m*. This avoids positing that *m* is the best model of God *in general*, and it also avoids the implausible arrogance of positing that one's entire set of core models is the best possible set.

More specifically, the theist must ask: which particular models of God (or particular elements of complex models of God) are such that they are essential to something's counting as "God" at all? Different theists will have different answers to that question, but whatever one takes to be the answer, it is *those* models which the theist takes to be irreplaceable.

It will help at this point to consider a specific example. My own view is that, if there's anything that could legitimately be called "God" at all, it must be the foundation of everything else that exists (in the analogical sense discussed earlier in this chapter), and it must also be similar to a mind or person. (It also seems essential that this foundation be *good*, but I will focus for simplicity's sake on just the above two claims, because of the way they clearly contrast with

any non-theistic view.) The most natural view from a non-religious perspective is that personality, mind, reason, and intelligence are phenomena which occur only at very high levels of organization and hence which are far from foundational. From this perspective, if there is anything that deserves to be called the “foundation” of reality, it is utterly sub-personal, consisting of something like natural forces or natural laws, or perhaps of something even more basic but still non-personal. By contrast, the theist takes that which is ultimately foundational to be something similar to a person or mind (and not in some trivial deflationist sense).²³ So, if I want to fix the referent of the term “God” in such a way that it will only refer to something I would actually want to call “God,” and such that it will have no referent if the non-theist is right about the nature of reality, I should focus on the models of God as foundation and as person.

Admittedly, some theists of a classical bent may not agree that this is really the core disagreement between a theist and a non-theist, or that this is really the best way to explain what “God” refers to. The position I have described above is intended as an example for illustrative purposes, and not as part of my general IRAM account. I do think the position I’ve just described expresses a fairly widely-shared intuition among theists, but it would be entirely compatible with a global IRAM interpretation of religious language to locate the core disagreement between theists and atheists somewhere else.

To continue, then: *if* the IRAM theist takes the models of God as foundation and as person to be the truly essential ones, then what she believes is this set of claims:

- (1) The foundation of everything else that exists is a good model of God.
- (2) A person is a good model of God.

²³ For example, the theist is not claiming that the ultimate foundations are “rational” merely in the sense that they are *intelligible*, nor that they are “personal” merely in the sense that they have the capacity to give rise to persons.

- (3) Both of the above models are *irreducibly* analogical.
- (4) Both of the above models are *irreplaceable*, in the sense that any set of core models of God that did not include those two models would not be as close to the truth about God as at least some of the sets of models that did include both of them.

What this means is that if I could, *per impossibile*, see clearly and with full comprehension the nature of all of reality, and I discovered that there was nothing that seemed to warrant analogical description as “the foundations of reality,” or that the foundations of reality were not strikingly or importantly similar to a person, I would conclude that I had been wrong to believe in God. But if I discovered that the foundations of reality were similar to a (good) person in such a way that it seemed appropriate to describe them, analogically, as *personal*—and in such a way that there wouldn’t be any *better* way, analogically or non-analogically, of getting at that same feature of reality—then I would conclude that I had been right to believe in God.

Now, this counterfactual utterance about what I *would* conclude in some utterly impossible set of circumstances is obviously quite speculative, and not something I can test or argue for. Nonetheless, it is this counterfactual claim which seems implicit in the form of theistic belief I have described myself as holding. In describing God as *personal*, while also asserting that this claim is irreducibly analogical, what I am saying is that I trust that if I *could* understand God’s nature, I would think it right to describe him (analogically) as personal, and not for deflationist reasons, and not for unimportant reasons, and not on the basis of properties which could *better* be expressed through some *other*, non-personal model. And so I take it that at least some of my models of God are not merely “good models” of God in some minimal respect, but are in fact sufficiently good that no representation of God which doesn’t include them can be as good a representation of God as one that does.

It is these additional claims of irreducibility and irreplaceability that will enable us to satisfactorily fix the referent of the term “God.” Having taken the stance described in (1) through (4) above, the IRAM theist can fix the referent of “God” thus:

- (5) Let “God” refer to whatever fulfills (1) through (4), or whatever *best* fulfills (1) through (4) if more than one thing does.²⁴

The difficulty we were having before was that it seemed like there was no way to fix the referent of “God” using only analogical claims without the term “God” being such that it would have a referent no matter what the universe was actually like. But having added to the IRAM account the two conditions listed as (3) and (4) above, it is now possible to specify a referent for “God” in such a way that the term will have a referent if and only if something the theist would consider worth calling “God” actually exists.

Suppose, for example, that the universe is as the atheist thinks it is, and not as the theist thinks it is—that is, that if I could, *per impossibile*, understand the universe perfectly, I would conclude that I had been wrong to believe in God. In this case, it might be that there is *nothing* which is well modeled both by a person and by the foundation of everything that exists—in which case “God” will clearly have no referent. But suppose that there are still some things in the universe which *both* the model of a person *and* the model of the foundation of everything that exists could serve as a good model of (in at least some respects). Let’s call the entity which is *best* represented by those two models taken together “Shmod.” Shmod would *not* be the referent

²⁴ Keith Donnellan distinguishes two kinds of definite description: “attributive” definite descriptions serve to pick out whoever or whatever happens to fit the description, whereas “referential” definite descriptions serve to pick out some particular thing one means to be talking about, by means of some description one takes to apply to that thing. See Keith S. Donnellan, “Reference and Definite Descriptions,” *The Philosophical Review* 75, no. 3 (1966): 285. On the account I am offering, when if asked to say what I’m referring to when I say “God,” the description I give will be of the *attributive* variety, not the referential variety. By “God” I mean whatever fits a certain set of descriptions.

of “God,” by the referent-fixing definition I have stated above as (5). For Shmod to be the referent of “God,” Shmod would have to be such that the person model and the foundation model were two of the *best* possible models for representing Shmod’s nature, and Shmod would have to be such that there is no *better* way of representing those of Shmod’s properties which the person model serves to represent than by that person model, and no *better* way of expressing those of Shmod’s properties which the foundation model serves to represent than by that foundation model. But if all those things were true of Shmod, I would conclude that Shmod *was* God, and that the theist had been right after all.

1.8 Similarity claims with an embedded counterfactual

However, the account I have offered so far is still relying on the as-yet unexplained concept of one set of models being “closer to the truth about God” than some other set of models. And this might seem like a very problematic concept to be taking for granted.

In Chapter 3, as part of a discussion of Swinburne’s account of analogical speech, we considered the question of whether there is such a thing as something’s being, in general, more similar to x than to y .²⁵ Swinburne takes the claim that God is W , interpreted analogically, to entail that God is more similar to standard examples of W things than to standard examples of non- W things. His account thus presupposes that there *is* such a thing as one thing’s being, in general, more similar to x than to y . However, in Chapter 3 I raised some doubts about this: while there may be a general fact about whether two things are similar in some particular respect, it seems unlikely that there is any such thing as a general, context-independent and objective fact

²⁵ See pp. 145-48.

about *how* similar two things are. More importantly, even if there *were* some such fact of the matter, it would not be the sort of fact we are interested in. Our judgments of similarity are heavily based on context and on our own sense of what properties are relevant or important. A wax apple and a real apple will strike us as more similar if we are trying to set up a still life than if we are trying to find lunch. And so even if there *were* some general, context-independent and objective fact about whether a given thing was more similar to x than to y , that would be no guarantee that *we* would find it more similar to x than to y in any sense we would find relevant or have reason to care about. On the other hand, if we are trying to appeal to analogical speech to explain how we can speak about God, we cannot appeal directly to our own actual *perceptions* of similarity either, since by hypothesis we lack the independent understanding of God's nature that would be required for us to directly perceive or judge God's degree of (relevant) similarity to other things.

The worry I raised about Swinburne's talk of something's being "more similar to x than to y " seems to apply equally well to talk of one model's being "closer to the truth" than some other model. What I want to say is that a set of models that includes some particular core model (such as that of God as a person) will be *closer* to the truth about God than the same set of models minus that core model. That is basically equivalent to saying that God is *more* similar to that described in the one set of models than to that described in the other, and so the problem that arises with Swinburne's definition of analogical speech arises for my definition of irreplaceability as well. In ordinary life we would often be able to say which of two descriptions of a thing is closer to the truth, but such judgments rely on our own sense of what's relevant or important in that context. It's dubious whether there is any context-independent and objective

fact of the matter which of two analogical models of the same thing is truly closer to the truth, and if there *is* such a fact of the matter, there's no reason to think it would matter at all to us, or that it would align with our own judgments of closeness to truth, dependent as they are on subjective or context-specific considerations of importance and relevance.

In Chapter 3, the solution I proposed to the difficulty with Swinburne's account was to cash "being more similar to x than to y " out in counterfactual terms. To say that God is more similar to x than to y is to say that we *would* judge God to be more similar to x than to y if we understood God's nature fully and were in a position to compare God directly to x and to y . A different but mostly equivalent version of this claim would be to say that an objective observer who fully understood God's nature, and also fully understood our perspective, would judge God to be more similar to x than to y in those respects we would find relevant and important. Claims of this sort take into account what is relevant and important to us, without supposing we are in the position to actually judge for ourselves, from our own perspective, what God is similar to.

The counterfactual approach we used to make sense of Swinburne's concept of analogy is also the approach we need to apply to make sense of the concept of a model's being irreplaceable. A model of God is irreplaceable if any set of core models of God that did not include it would be less close to the truth about God as a set of models that did include it. In saying that one set of models would be "less close to the truth," what I mean is that this is a judgment we *would* make, if we were in a position to know God's nature, or that an objective observer *would* make for us, if that observer were in a position to fully comprehend both our perspective and God's nature.

1.9 Conclusion to Section 1

To sum up the argument of Section 1, my solution to the problem of fixing the referent of the term “God” involves adding two kinds of higher-order claims to an IRAM theology. First, the IRAM theorist the higher-order claim that some core set of her analogical models of God are irreducible analogical. This criterion will rule out any deflationist readings of the theology’s central analogical claims about God. Second, the IRAM theorist also asserts, about at least one of the core models of God she employs, that this model is not merely irreducible but *irreplaceable*, in the sense that no account of God’s nature that didn’t include that model could come as close to the truth about God as one that did include it. This claim, made about those models the theist takes to be truly essential to something’s counting as “God,” serves to fix the referent of the term “God” in such a way that its only possible referents are things the theist would actually want to call “God” if she understood their nature.

With this addition to the IRAM approach, we have also addressed a second worry one might have had about it. One natural objection to the IRAM approach is that the cognitive content of religious claims on an IRAM interpretation seems, at least on first glance, extremely thin. The key challenge I have tried to overcome in developing a doctrine of analogy is Alston’s objection that an irreducibly analogical theology is “eviscerated” of any theoretical or practical content. Alston makes this point by noting that if what it means to say “God is wise” is merely something like “God is in some substantial way similar to a wise person,” then the claim “God is wise” means almost nothing, because almost anything will be substantially similar to a wise person in *some* way. But as I pointed out in the previous chapter, an analogical assertion framed in terms of models has little more cognitive content than one framed in terms of substantial

similarity. For instance, the cognitive content of the claim “A wise person is a good model of God” is barely more substantial than that of “God is in some substantial way similar to a wise person,” because just as almost anything will be substantially similar to a wise person in some way, a wise person could in principle serve as a good model for a million different things if we were imaginative enough.

Now, in the previous chapter, I argued that a theology based on analogical models, rather than solely on simple analogical assertions like “God is in some substantial way similar to a wise person,” *does* enable us to escape Alston’s theological evisceration. The reason is that on an IRAM interpretation, the believer is committed not only to such analogical *claims* about, but also to one or more full analogical *models* of God. And to be committed to a model involves more than a commitment to a series of abstract analogical claims like “God is in some way similar to a wise person.” To be committed to a model involves actively *thinking* of God in terms of the model in at least some respects, and in other ways *acting* in accordance with the model in certain respects. And it is for this reason that models can serve as a satisfactory theological foundation for a robust religious faith and practice, even if one takes them to be irreducibly analogical.

However, while irreducibly analogical models are sufficient to ground religious faith and practice, one might have found something unsatisfying about the position described above. On the account I offered in Chapter 5, the actual cognitive content of the claims believers make about God is just as weak, or nearly as weak, as that of those claims about God Alston rightly rejects as eviscerated of theological content. Thus, my solution for avoiding theological evisceration was *not* to interpret irreducibly analogical claims in such a way that the *propositions* to which one is committed are sufficiently contentful to ground a robust religious faith and

practice. Instead, my solution was to show how the *non-propositional* aspects of commitment to a model are sufficiently contentful to accomplish that. But one might protest that there is still something unsatisfying about adopting a theology whose actual claims about God are so very thin in terms of propositional content.

But once we add to an IRAM account the claim that certain of its models are *irreplaceable*, the account no longer looks nearly so sparse in terms of its propositional content. It's true there are many things which are in some way similar to a person, and many things which a person could be a good model of. But there is, at most, only one thing such that both of the core theistic models I selected above—that of a person, and that of the foundation for everything else that exists—are *irreducible* and *irreplaceable* analogical models of it. The reason is that anything which those two models were irreducible and irreplaceable analogical models of would for that very reason be something that I would want to call “God” and that I would take as the fulfillment of theistic belief. For these models to be both irreducible and irreplaceable means that there is no better way for us to describe the thing than as, analogically, the foundation of everything that exists which is also a person. And it certainly seems to me that if there is something such that there is no better way for us to describe that thing than as, analogically, the foundation of everything that exists which is also a person, that something is God. Thus, once we have added these additional conditions to the IRAM account, the claims an IRAM theology makes about God are a bit thicker and more contentful; it is no longer the case that the IRAM theology's claims would be true of nearly anything.

2. How could anyone have reason to *believe* an IRAM theology?

Let's suppose that the account of religious language I have offered is coherent, and that analogical claims about God which work in the way I have described would avoid theological evisceration, and would be sufficiently contentful to support a meaningful religious faith and practice. Nonetheless, one might worry that one could never have any grounds, of any sort at all, to actually *believe* an irreducibly analogical claim, or at least to believe the sort of irreducibly analogical claims I have just described.

In the previous section, I offered a way for us to understand analogical model claims as substantially contentful. In one sense, those who adopt an IRAM theology know precisely what they are asserting: that such-and-such are good models of God, that these models are irreducibly analogical, and that such-and-such of them are irreplaceable. However, there is also an important sense in which the believer in an IRAM theology does not know what she is saying about God: she does not know in what way God is similar to a wise person, or what actual state of affairs in reality *makes* all those things good models of God. What *makes* the IRAM theorist's claims about God true are facts about God's nature, about what S-properties God has, and the IRAM theorist does not know any of those facts.

The question, then, is this: what possible basis could someone have for believing a model claim under these circumstances? Consider by contrast the state I am in when I know that my pet rats Myrtle and Maud are a good model of some human couples. In this case, my knowledge that they are a good model is based on my prior knowledge that Myrtle and Maud have some S-property P, and that some human couples also have P. In normal cases, the knowledge that one thing is a good model of another thing is impossible without that more basic knowledge of the

properties of the model and target. I could not have any sort of rational basis at *all* for believing that Myrtle and Maud are a good model of certain human couples if I had not first been aware of particular similarities between Myrtle and Maud and some human couples. Yet on my interpretation of religious language, this sort of grounding is precisely what the believer doesn't have. The believer believes that a wise person is a good model of God, but lacks any more basic beliefs about the actual S-properties God shares with wise people.

This problem becomes even more striking once we consider the added complications to the IRAM account developed in the previous section of this chapter. In the previous section, as one particular example of an IRAM theology, I asserted that God is not merely such that an incorporeal (etc.) person is a *good* model of God, but that the model is irreducible, and that at least the "person" element of the model is irreplaceable. And so what I assert there is that there is something which is *not* a person in any sense of the word I can understand, including in any metaphorical or reducibly analogical sense I am able to come up with, and yet which is sufficiently similar to a person that any set of core models of it that *didn't* include the model of it as a person would not be as close to the truth as a set of core models that *did* include it. Furthermore, I want to make an analogous claim about the model of God as the foundation of everything that exists. And that's only what I have to assert merely to fix the referent of "God." Once the referent is fixed, we of course want to make many further analogical claims about God. For example, I am committed to a model of God as an incorporeal (etc.) person, and take this model to be sufficiently reliable that it is appropriate to simply think of God *as* such a person (though with some mental caveats). This position can be cashed out yet again as involving a similarity claim that takes the form of a counterfactual: that an objective observer who

understood God's nature and also understood my perspective would think that God is sufficiently similar (in those respects I would find relevant and important) to an incorporeal (etc.) person that thinking of God *as* such a person is about as close to the truth as I'm likely to get. And so on for all my core models of God.

But all these elaborations of the IRAM approach which I made in order to solve the referent-fixing problem and thereby ensure that an IRAM theology is genuinely contentful might also seem to render any IRAM theology totally incredible. What possible grounds could I have for asserting so many very specific analogical claims about God, if I don't know a single positive, intrinsic, non-analogical claim about God, and hence don't know a single one of the actual states of affairs which would *make* any of these models good models of God? At this point, the IRAM believer sounds a bit like someone who asserts that there is a rock formation of *precisely* such-and-such dimensions and shape at *precisely* some specified location on some planet human beings have never observed. It's not that this claim couldn't possibly be true. But one couldn't possibly have any grounds at all to *believe* it.²⁶

In saying it seems like one couldn't possibly have grounds to believe in the God posited by an IRAM theology, I don't mean merely that one couldn't have sufficient *evidence* to believe in it. I mean something stronger. After all, Plantinga has argued that belief in God is properly basic, in the sense that one does not need evidence or reasons to be justified in believing that God exists.²⁷ But this does not necessarily make belief in God *groundless*, Plantinga argues. If I

²⁶ The objection I am raising against myself here is very similar to the one I raise against Swinburne's account of analogical speech in Chapter 3 (see pp. 165-66). The defense I will go on to offer of my own position is not, I think, available to Swinburne.

²⁷ See Alvin Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," in *The Analytic Theist: An Alvin Plantinga Reader*, ed. James F. Sennett (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), 102-61.

believe “I see a tree,” that belief is basic for me, because it does not rest on any other belief. But the belief is still not *groundless*, because it is grounded in a particular kind of experience—the experience of “being appeared treely to.”²⁸ Plantinga thinks that belief in God works in a similar way, and that there are certain experiences (e.g., gazing up at the heavens, or feeling moral guilt) which ground beliefs like “God has created all this” or “God disapproves of what I have done.”²⁹ And so on Plantinga’s view, there are belief-forming mechanisms which, if they are working as they ought to, would constitute sound epistemic grounds for our belief in God, even if the starry sky is not *evidence* of God’s existence. But an IRAM theology couldn’t be grounded in *this* way either. The sorts of experiences Plantinga imagines as occasions for properly basic belief in God are ones which could ground belief in a good Creator or in an all-seeing moral judge, but they would not ground anything like the intricately specific set of beliefs about God associated with the IRAM account.

The question of whether there are any truly good reasons for holding any particular IRAM theology is one I cannot hope to answer here. However, the worry I have raised above seems to suggest that it is in principle impossible that anyone could *ever* be even *slightly* justified in believing any IRAM theology. And if the epistemic status of IRAM theologies were *that* dire, there would be little point in having defended the coherence of the IRAM approach in the first place. In what follows, my goal is merely to neutralize the argument given above for thinking that it must be futile even to *try* to justify an IRAM theology. I aim to open up some space for the *possibility* that an IRAM theology could be justified. Whether any IRAM theology actually *is* justified is a question outside the scope of this project.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 152.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 154.

2.1 Testimony (i.e. revelation) as grounds for an IRAM theology

I just compared an IRAM theology to a belief that there is a rock formation of precisely such-and-such dimensions and shape at precisely such-and-such location on some planet no human being has ever observed, to explain why it seems incredible. However, there is one way I *could* have grounds to believe such a thing: if a trustworthy authority told me so. If a member of an intelligent alien species who had observed this planet told us about it, that would provide grounds for this otherwise ungroundable belief.

The solution to grounding an IRAM theology is similar. We cannot from our own epistemic resources, without the help of an authority, come to have anything remotely resembling grounds for an IRAM theology—not even weak and inadequate grounds. But if a reliable authority communicated the core claims of an IRAM theology to us, *that* would ground it. Of course, the only authority who would be in a position to know what God is like would be God, or perhaps something like an angel. Appealing to some other *human* authority would only push the problem back a step, since we are presupposing that claims about God are irreducibly analogical for human beings in general, not just for some of us. And so what this means is that if we are to have any grounds for believing it at all, an IRAM theology must be grounded on something the believer takes to be divine revelation.

It will help to consider an analogous non-religious case. Suppose Jack has never been taught anything about atoms or molecules. One day his neighbor, a high school science teacher and someone he has always found trustworthy, explains to him about atoms:

Every object in the world is made up of atoms, which are sort of like little balls. That's an analogy, but it's the best way to describe it. In a solid thing like a table, the atoms are packed close together. But in a liquid they're a little further apart, so they can slide around each other easily, and in the air they're really far apart.

What we call “heat” is the movement of these atoms: the faster the atoms move and the more forcefully they bounce off each other, the hotter the thing is.

Something like this is of course very much like what we are told when first taught about atoms.

To complete the analogy to the religious case, we’ll imagine that Jack doesn’t get a chance to ask his neighbor any follow-up questions, and soon afterwards ends up stranded on a desert island with no one who knows anything about science, no books about science, no means of engaging in scientific experimentation on his own, and a lot of time to ponder what he has been told.

Does Jack know something about the world which he didn’t before his neighbor told him about atoms? It seems to me undeniable that he does. The teacher’s story is very simplistic, and leaves out a lot. Nonetheless, it provides Jack with a picture of a truth about the world—an imperfect picture, but a decent approximation to the truth nonetheless. We wouldn’t teach children such stories if we didn’t think this.

However, the model he has been given is irreducibly analogical for Jack, given his ignorance. If Jack is very clever, it may occur to him that one reason why the description of atoms as “little balls” can’t be literally accurate is that if what we call “heat” just *is* the speed of movement of atoms in an object or in the air, it follows that the atoms *themselves* have no temperature. And Jack’s concept of a macroscopic object like a bouncy ball cannot be reconciled with the claim that such an object has no temperature at all. If Jack’s concept of a “physical object” is the concept of a *macroscopic* object, then atoms are “physical objects” only analogically. Having realized this point, Jack might further reflect that if what it *is* for an object to be solid is for its atoms to be packed close together, whereas what it is for something to be a gas is for its atoms to be very far apart, then an atom *itself* is neither solid nor liquid or gas. And so it is also a mistake to think of an atom as a *solid* object like a ball. And so on.

So if Jack were to try to eliminate the analogical element in the claim that atoms are “like little balls,” and to reduce this model to a set of non-analogical claims, he would have to choose some way or set of possible ways to cash the story out. He might perhaps think that atoms are probably “like little balls” in that each one is located in some precise region of space. But if he has just thought through the fact that atoms are “like little balls” but are not solid and have no temperature, he might reasonably regard this supposition as dubious. Perhaps even the spatially located element of the teacher’s story was merely an analogical element, and the truth is stranger yet. And if Jack thinks that atoms do literally move through space, he might guess that they follow the same laws of motion that a macroscopic object does, but this too should seem doubtful. And so on. Jack cannot know (without finding another science expert, or becoming an expert scientist himself) what particular non-analogical interpretation of this IRAM story about atoms would be the correct one. So his best bet is to stick with the initial analogy, since it was given to him by a trustworthy and knowledgeable authority.

One might argue that it’s still possible for Jack to reduce the analogy to a set of non-analogical claims, by creating a comprehensive list of all the different possible ways of cashing that analogy out in non-analogical terms, complete with some weighting formula for which characteristics of the model atom seem most important or for other reasons most likely to be true of real atoms. But it doesn’t seem plausible that such a set of interpretations and such a formula could actually be given, even in principle. And so Jack has reason to prefer the science teacher’s initial analogical description of the world over any attempt at a reduction of that description to non-analogical terms. He cannot eliminate the analogy and also keep the full descriptive content

of the model, and any departure from that full initial content would constitute a reduction of knowledge, not an epistemic gain, given that the science teacher is an expert and Jack is not.

On the story I have laid out, Jack is in a similar position to that of the believer in an IRAM theology, on the assumption that the IRAM theology has been revealed by a trustworthy authority (i.e. God or an angel). Jack holds an irreducibly analogical (for him) belief about the world. Because his belief is irreducibly analogical, he will not be able to infer anything from it with any confidence, because any non-analogical claim he might try to infer from it might, unbeknownst to him, be drawing on one of the aspects of the model which does *not* correspond to the target.³⁰ Nonetheless, Jack's model does tell him something importantly true about the universe; his neighbor really has taught him something about what the world is like.

Furthermore, the content of Jack's belief, if he were to spell it out, would be fairly similar in form to an IRAM theology. What Jack believes, or should believe, is not *merely* that a little ball is a good model of an atom. Jack should also believe that this model is irreducibly analogical, and he should also believe that this model is irreplaceable: that it is one of the very best models of an atom for a beginner like himself—or else his neighbor would not have taught it to him. This claim will take the same counterfactual form that the core claims of an IRAM theology have. What Jack believes (or should believe) is something like this:

If I were in a position to understand the nature of atoms, I would think that they are very similar to little balls that make up everything that exists and that move faster when the temperature of the thing is hotter, and I would think that this about as close to the truth about atoms that can be achieved for a beginner who has only a few minutes to learn about them.

³⁰ As I noted in Chapter 5, there are cases in which one's commitment to a particular model can also commit one to rejecting claims that are incompatible with one's chosen model. So Jack's commitment to the atom model *may* have some implications, in the form of beliefs about the world he will be committed to rejecting. However, there will be very few such implications, and they will not be things that are strictly speaking *inferred* from the model.

As in the religious case, Jack's trust in what the science teacher has told him entails an odd-looking counterfactual claim about what he *would* think if he were in a different epistemic position, and this counterfactual is one he is in no position to verify. And as in the religious case, his belief in atoms involves believing that a particular model is a good model of atoms *without* that belief being grounded on any more basic, direct beliefs about what atoms are like and what properties they share with macroscopic objects like billiard balls. But if Jack has good reason to trust the science teacher, he has good reason to believe this irreducibly analogical claim, despite its utter lack of any *other* sort of grounding for him.

One might object that Jack's situation is importantly different from the religious believer's because scientific models are not *truly* irreducibly analogical, because they have both empirical justifications and empirical consequences, both of which will take the form of clear, non-analogical claims about the behavior of observable things. But while this is an important difference between religious models and scientific models *in general*, in this context it is a red herring. Jack, as we have described him, has no non-analogical empirical justification for his model claims, and can infer no empirical consequences from them. Whatever the correct analysis is of how scientific models work *for scientists*, that analysis will not apply in the case of someone like Jack who is completely ignorant of science.

If the religious believer can be in the same position with respect to God as Jack can be in with respect to atoms, the religious believer could have good grounds for believing even in the rather intricately specific analogical claims that make up an IRAM theology. If a reliable, trustworthy source for information about God's nature—say, God—has made it known that God is like the foundation for everything else that exists and also like a person, and yet I am also in a

position to understand that these descriptions are not accurate if taken non-analogically, the details of the sample IRAM theology I developed in 1.7 will follow from that revelation fairly naturally. That is, the content of the revelation need not *include* the higher-order claims of irreducibility and irreplaceability that my IRAM account of theological claims includes, any more than Jack's neighbor would have needed to include a set of higher-order claims about how Jack should interpret her talk of atoms in order for Jack to be justified, after mulling it over, in taking his models of atoms to be irreducible and irreplaceable. The content of the revelation would only need to include the core models; all that is needed to ground the rest of the details of an IRAM theology is (a) the realization that these models cannot be non-analogically true and hence must be analogical, and (b) trust that the source of the models is someone who will give us representations of God which are approximately as close to the truth as possible given our current limitations and our current perspective.

2.2 The circularity objection

However, the solution I have proposed here may seem to involve a fatal circularity. I have argued that the only way one could be justified in believing an IRAM theology is on the basis of divine revelation. But to take something to be divine revelation is just to take it to have been communicated by God. And so any reason I have for thinking some event is an instance of divine revelation will rely on some prior conception of God. But the IRAM theist's conception of God is precisely what I was trying to *defend* by appealing to divine revelation, so it doesn't seem like I can simply take that prior conception of God for granted.

Suppose, for example, that the IRAM theist affirms that God is, analogically, an incorporeal (etc.) person, in the specific way outlined by the IRAM account. This claim, I have argued, can only be justified on the basis of the claim that the model of God as an incorporeal (etc.) person has been divinely revealed. And *that* claim must be based on the claim that a particular event of divine revelation (in which that model of God was revealed) has occurred. But to take a particular event of divine revelation to have occurred involves the claim that *God* has revealed these models—and the IRAM theist of course takes the “God” who has revealed those models to be the one described by her IRAM theology. Furthermore, even if we grant the concept of divine revelation, to think any *particular* event was an event of divine revelation (rather than a bizarre coincidence, a meaningless hallucination, a hoax, an event we simply lack a satisfactory scientific account of yet, a message from a demon, etc.), one must have at least some substantial prior beliefs about God—about what God is like, what powers God has, and so on. If the beliefs about God the IRAM theist uses to justify taking a particular event to be an event of divine revelation are exclusively analogical beliefs, in accordance with the IRAM theology, then she will be begging the question, assuming the truth of her IRAM theology as the basis of her attempted justification of that IRAM theology.

One simple way to avoid this circularity is to posit that it is not *God* who has revealed the truth about God to human beings, but instead some other being who is nonetheless in a superior epistemic position compared to us—say, an angel. If, hypothetically, some shining being visited me and was able to predict the future and otherwise demonstrate that it knew much more than I, then I might be justified in thinking that being probably knew what it was talking about when it told me things about God. The IRAM theist doesn’t strictly need to think that a particular model

was revealed *by God* in order to have a good reason to accept it; all the IRAM theist needs is to think that model was revealed by *some* being who is trustworthy and whose epistemic position is significantly better than her own.

However, this approach is not especially satisfactory, because this hypothetical story about the shining being does not match up very well with most actual claims of revelation in the Western traditions. While these traditions involve claims about angels, revelation-by-angel has traditionally *not* been taken to involve some entity showing up, demonstrating its knowledge and trustworthiness in a religiously neutral fashion (predicting lottery numbers, perhaps?), and then leveraging the epistemic authority it has thereby accrued in order to share its knowledge of God. In scriptural accounts of revelation, angels generally operate as messengers or mouthpieces for God—in which case the circularity simply recurs.

A more appealing way of evading the circularity involves turning the circle into a spiral. The very first Abrahamic believers did not, I think, start out with globally irreducibly analogical theologies. Suppose, then, that one does not *start* with a global IRAM theology, but instead starts with some conception of God which involves at least some positive, non-analogical descriptions. For example, we might initially take God to be, *non-analogically*, an incorporeal, all-powerful, all-knowing, morally perfect, eternal person who created the universe. If this is where one starts, there are at least some slight grounds to justify that belief—the argument from design, for example. A theology of *this* sort does not give rise to those special difficulties associated with the IRAM theology which made it seem like no one could ever possibly have even the slightest grounds for believing it. Furthermore, on the basis of this conception of God, one could then reasonably have grounds to take certain events (visions, etc.) as communications from God, i.e.,

as divine revelation. Whether any belief in divine revelation is ever *actually* justified is a difficult question, of course, but the difficulty here would only be the *ordinary* difficulty of justifying claims of special revelation. The circularity problem raised above would not arise here, because here we've posited that we already have a clear non-analogical conception of God to serve as the basis for thinking a particular event was an event of divine revelation.

So, supposing we have this initial non-analogical conception of God, and supposing that on the basis of that conception we have reason to take a certain event as an instance of divine revelation, the content of that revelation might give us good reason to modify our previous understanding of God. Perhaps the model of God as the foundation of everything that exists (rather than merely as one being who created the others as a potter creates a pot) is revealed, along with some guidance about how to interpret that model. Once the implications of this model are properly absorbed, with the help of philosophical analysis, we will see that it must be irreducibly analogical. We will also see that if it is a good model, God cannot be a "person" in any sense of the word we understand, and thus that the model of God as an incorporeal (etc.) person must *also* be irreducibly analogical. And so, perhaps over a long series of progressive revelations, believers could gradually move from a non-IRAM theology to an IRAM theology. For each stage of the process, if we have grounds for believing in our particular conception of God at that stage, and also have grounds for taking a certain event as revelatory given that conception of God, then we will have grounds for believing whatever the revelatory event tells us about God, even if what it tells us is that our prior conception of God was partly mistaken. And so someone who knew and understood the whole progression from beginning to end would have grounds to believe the IRAM theology which is its ultimate output. I've told this as a just-

so story, but it seems at least plausible to think that the Judeo-Christian theological traditions historically involved something a *little* bit like this process.

At the final stage of the process, the IRAM theist's justification of her own beliefs will look circular. Her belief that certain events were instances of divine revelation must now rely, not on the earlier non-IRAM conceptions of God, but on her current IRAM conception of God. But her current IRAM conception of God will rest on her belief that those events were instances of divine revelation. So at this point, her beliefs about God and about God's self-revelation come together holistically and stand in a justificatory circle of sorts. However, there will have been a reason for her to *adopt* this stance in the first place—that reason being the historical progression from previous, non-IRAM forms of theism. And that prevents the circularity from being vicious. The IRAM theist's position, at the end of this progression, is one she could have some reasonable grounds to hold.

Now, this story I've told does not by any means show that any IRAM theology actually *is* rationally justified—as I've said, showing *that* is outside the scope of the project. But what the story above shows is that an IRAM theology is not, in principle, unjustifiable. If the non-IRAM theist's beliefs about God and claims of special revelation can be justified, then then it's at least possible that IRAM beliefs about God could be rationally justified too, as an outgrowth from them.

2.3 Barbour and Wisdom and the inadequacy of appeals to *natural* revelation

I have argued that an IRAM theology can only be justified if it is based on divine revelation, in a particularly strong sense. Specifically, the believer must be in the position of

being explicitly told something by a trustworthy authority, so as to be in the same sort of position with respect to God as Jack is in with respect to atoms. Theologians sometimes distinguish between “natural” revelation and “special” revelation. Natural revelation is God’s revelation of his nature simply by virtue of having created the universe: given that the universe is God’s creation, it will surely express something of God’s nature, in the same way that a picture I paint will express something of my nature. But for the religious believer to be in a position relevantly analogous to Jack’s position, it doesn’t seem like natural revelation will cut it. Nothing short of explicitly propositional claims about atoms, delivered by a trustworthy authority, would have given Jack grounds to adopt his IRAM beliefs about atoms. And likewise, nothing short of explicitly propositional claims about God, delivered by a trustworthy authority, could give the believer grounds to adopt a global IRAM theology. In the religious case, this trustworthy authority cannot be another human being like a prophet, because that would simply push the question back to how the *prophet* has grounds to believe these things. And the only remaining option is that it is either God, or something like an angel, who delivers explicitly propositional analogical claims about God’s nature, perhaps via the prophet’s visions.

Ian Barbour’s account of religious language, like mine, takes it to involve irreducibly analogical models of God. But unlike the position I have outlined here, Barbour argues that such models can be based solely on *natural* revelation. I do not think this approach works, but it is worth considering.

As I noted in the previous chapter, Barbour takes religious models to offer a particular *interpretation* of certain forms of experience, one which contrasts with non-religious

interpretations. In making this claim, Barbour draws on John Wisdom's famous essay "Gods."³¹ Wisdom notes that there are different kinds of disagreement people can have. On the one hand there are disagreements about what we might call the "cold hard facts,"³² things like whether a certain species of animal has a central nervous system, or whether a certain "Mr. A . . . handed his long trusted clerk signed blank cheques."³³ When we disagree about the cold hard facts, we at least know how we might go about achieving agreement, and the parties could agree on what would count as good reason to conclude one way or the other. On the other end of the spectrum are disagreements that are not about facts at all, but simply about attitudes or preferences: whether one likes or approves of the thing or not, or whether one prefers to call a certain thing by one name or by another.

Much of Wisdom's essay aims to demonstrate that there is a middle ground in the above spectrum—a sort of in-between category of things that are to *some* extent questions about the facts, but that are not questions about what I have called "cold hard facts." This in-between category includes disagreements about what *pattern* a certain thing fits, and answering questions in this category requires *judgment* to a degree that determining "cold hard facts" does not. For example, consider the question of whether dogs reason.³⁴ There are cold hard facts which are relevant to this question—facts about the observable behavior of dogs, facts about their brain structure, and so on—but those facts do not determine the answer to the question of whether dogs reason, because that question is partly a question about whether we think all the observable

³¹ John Wisdom, "Gods," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* XLV (45 1944): 185–206.

³² This phrase is my own, not Wisdom's. Unfortunately, Wisdom sometimes uses the word "facts" to refer to what I am calling "cold hard facts," and at other times to refer to a broader category. I will use the simple term "facts" only in the broader of the two senses, to avoid confusion.

³³ Wisdom, "Gods," 193.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 188.

behavior of dogs best fits the *pattern* of mind-behavior or of reasoning-behavior, rather than some other sort of pattern. Another example he considers is legal cases:

In courts of law it sometimes happens that opposing counsel are agreed as to the [cold hard] facts and are not trying to settle a question of further [cold hard] fact . . . but are concerned with whether Mr. A who admittedly handed his long-trusted clerk signed blanked cheques did or did not exercise reasonable care, whether a ledger is or is not a document, whether a certain body was or was not a public authority.³⁵

The question of whether someone showed *negligence* goes beyond any of the purely objective, cold hard facts of the case, yet Wisdom insists that this doesn't make the question purely subjective either. If two people disagree about whether the defendant was negligent, they aren't disagreeing solely in the sense that they take different attitudes toward the defendant, or have different preferences about what words we should use to describe his actions (though those things are likely true as well). We think that someone can be *right or wrong* about whether a person's actions constituted negligence. Just as someone who looks at R. C. James' famous gestalt picture of a Dalmatian but sees only blotches sees it *less well* than the person who perceives the Dalmatian in it, it is also possible to do a better or worse job at discerning the sorts of patterns that we label with words like "mind" or "reason" or "negligence."

Wisdom's key claim about religious language is that the claims believers make about *God* characteristically fall into this in-between category. Wisdom notes that religious people tend not to disagree with the non-religious about many cold hard facts anymore. (He is thinking, presumably, of the religious believers that populate his own social circle, those who embrace science and would view contemporary miracle claims with skepticism.) But this doesn't mean, as some of Wisdom's contemporaries thought it did, that religion is really just a matter of attitudes

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 193-94.

and “picture preferences” rather than facts. The religious believer’s claims about God are claims about the world, and they are in some sense claims about the facts: they are claims about what *patterns* the world displays. Just as deciding whether a dog has a mind involves deciding whether the dog’s behavior displays mind-patterns, deciding whether there is a God involves deciding whether the *universe* displays mind-patterns. And these sorts of interpretive claims are in some sense claims about the facts—claims about what the world really is like.

Barbour endorses this position of Wisdom’s. For Barbour, one who employs a model of God as a personal creator is endorsing a particular interpretation of the universe, an interpretation on which it displays a certain set of patterns. By contrast, a non-religious sees a different set of patterns in it. Thus model-talk about God has genuine, realist representational content, even though that content is not “literal.”

One feature implicit in both Wisdom’s account and Barbour’s is that religious believers’ beliefs about God are based entirely on “natural” revelation. Special revelation plays no role in the story. The way one acquires a belief in God is by observing one’s experiences, and discerning certain patterns in those experiences—patterns of apparent purpose in the universe, for example. These patterns lead one to adopt a corresponding model, of a purposive creator, for example.

Barbour makes this rejection of special revelation explicit in his criticism of Austin Farrer’s account of the role of religious images. For Farrer, as for me, the central models employed by religious believers have their central status because they have been supernaturally revealed by God.³⁶ God tells us what he is like and what models are good models of himself, just

³⁶ See Austin Farrer, *The Glass of Vision* (Glasgow: Robert MacLehose, 1948), lectures 1 and 3.

as the science teacher tells Jack what atoms are like. The believer's trust in these models is based on trust in their authoritative source. But Barbour objects to that position for two reasons. First, he argues, taking certain models of God to have been directly revealed by God renders those models inappropriately immune to criticism. Second, it ignores the influence of cultural and personal influences on the choices believers make about what models to embrace or reject. Thus, Barbour takes the position that models "are not directly God-given but arise from man's analogical imagination."³⁷ For Barbour, as for Wisdom, the models of God believers adopt are the result of observation of the universe and imaginative interpretation of those observations.

Wisdom's reflections on religious language strike me as deeply insightful ones. His point that religious claims may be best understood as claims about which *patterns* the universe best expresses, and hence that they will have an odd in-between status as factual claims, seems both plausible and quite friendly to my own account. Wisdom's claim that we can discern patterns of purpose in the universe, and that to discern such patterns is to be getting something *right* about the universe which is missed by those who do not discern such patterns, fits well with my own view on which the foundations of everything that exist are analogically personal, such that an objective observer who understood God's nature would think that the model of God as a person is about as close to the truth as we human beings can come. And I think Wisdom is also right that some such discernment of patterns of personality or purpose in the universe is an important contributor to theistic belief.

However, the approach Barbour and Wisdom take is not ultimately satisfactory. First of all, it simply isn't the case that anyone arrives at monotheistic belief by observing the universe,

³⁷ Barbour, *Myths, Models, and Paradigms*, 18.

discerning patterns in it, and developing analogical models on the basis of those observations. If one did attempt to arrive at a religious belief solely through this method, one would just as likely arrive at a belief in a dueling pantheon, in animism, or in an amoral creator as at anything like a Judeo-Christian God. That Wisdom and Barbour *do* accept a belief in something like the Judeo-Christian God is surely not just a result of their pattern discernment; it is a result of the fact that the real source of their beliefs is the Judeo-Christian tradition. And *that* tradition is based on claims of special revelation. Having imbibed this tradition, Barbour and Wisdom offer a just-so story about how their religious views could hypothetically have developed without any such appeal to miraculous visions and the like—but this just-so story is not very convincing.

The deeper problem with the account Barbour offers to justify his irreducibly analogical claims about God is that it just does not make sense to think a globally irreducibly analogical theology could be based on simple observations of the universe. The sort of discernment of patterns in the universe that Wisdom describes *could* serve perfectly well as a basis for believing, for example, that the universe was created by something like a person—along with other analogical claims of that sort. And the sort of discernment of patterns in the universe Wisdom describes could serve perfectly well as a basis for adopting an *individualist* theism on which at least some of these claims are non-analogical, or only reducibly analogical.

But suppose one has been convinced, perhaps by the sorts of arguments I offered in Chapter 2, that for God to be a proper object of worship at all requires that our creaturely concepts fail to accurately describe him. If so, one will need to take one's belief in God as a personal creator, along with all one's other positive and intrinsic descriptions of God, to be irreducibly analogical. Having taken that position, one will need to adopt something very much

like the IRAM account I have offered simply in order to avoid theological evisceration and to be able to fix the referent of the term “God.” But the vague discernment of patterns of purpose in the universe Wisdom describes will no longer be suitable grounds for *this* set of theological beliefs. A reason to think that God (if there is a God) is radically outside all our creaturely categories is a reason to think God is *not* like a person, since nothing I can think of that is remotely like a person falls outside the category of “concrete being,” and I cannot imagine how anything that isn’t a concrete being could possibly be like a person in any sufficiently strong or relevant sense. And in the other direction, a reason to think God *is* like a person is a reason to think God *isn’t* radically outside all our creaturely categories. Thus the reasons for accepting the classical theistic view that God is radically outside our creaturely categories are utterly at odds with the sort of models of God which Wisdom’s pattern-discernment would give rise to, and the reasons for adopting those models are utterly at odds with the classical theistic view. As a result, Wisdom’s pattern-discernment could never be reasonable grounds for adopting the sort of theology I am defending in *this* project, which is a theology on which it is *both* the case that God cannot be accurately described by our creaturely concepts *and* the case that models of God as an incorporeal person are sufficiently good analogical representations of God that we should think of God in terms of them. *That* kind of theology—combining as it does two strains of thought which are radically opposed and pulling in opposite directions, while not being able to offer any explanation for how they might nonetheless be compatible—could only be justified on the basis of special revelation, on the word of a highly trustworthy authority. Mere pattern-discernment cannot give us an IRAM theology.

This point is no criticism of Wisdom, who never claims that religious believers ought to adopt an irreducibly analogical theology. But Barbour, who *does* seem to want to appeal to irreducibly analogical models, is wrong to think that Wisdom's pattern-discernment and other forms of natural revelation could ground such a theology. This is not to say that the sort of natural revelation Barbour and Wisdom emphasize is irrelevant, however. If the claim that the universe was created by a good and intelligent being did not sound a chord of recognition—if it did not seem to harmonize with patterns that we really can discern in the universe—then claims of special revelation would not be sufficient to make us believe that in that picture. A prophet who receives a vision claiming that the universe was created by the Flying Spaghetti Monster may believe her own vision, if it is psychologically forceful enough, but her attempts at converting others will have little success. People are willing to take the words of a prophet as revelation from God only when the claims seem to make sense of the universe they actually live in. And so something like the pattern-discernment Wisdom describes seems like an essential element of revelation after all. But that doesn't mean that natural pattern-discernment of the sort Wisdom describes could be, by itself, *sufficient*. The mere fact that certain features of the universe make me willing to accept certain claims about God as revealed truths, once they are offered to me, does not mean that I could have arrived at those claims about God on my own simply by observing the universe.

2.4 Conclusion to Section 2

An IRAM theology, if one is to have grounds to believe it at all, must be grounded on something one takes to constitute special revelation. This of course raises the question of how

one could ever be justified in taking something to be revealed, and that is a question I cannot address. However, I have shown that it is at least plausible that claims of special revelation could be justified for an IRAM theology, and that the prospects of justification for an IRAM believer are somewhat comparable to the prospects of justification for an ordinary individualist theist. So, while special revelation poses difficult questions *in general*, it isn't much *more* of a problem for my particular version of theism than for other versions of theism.

Nonetheless, some religious believers will not be satisfied by my proposed solution here, because some religious believers find claims of special revelation too suspect to be believed. Those who adopt a strongly analogical theology and a conception of God as radically transcendent—that is, those who are most likely to find my IRAM account congenial—are alas, also those most likely to think that claims of special revelation are mistaken, and that God is “revealed” solely through his creative upholding of the universe at every moment. But I can simply see no satisfactory way an IRAM theology could possibly be grounded—even weakly and inadequately grounded—*without* an appeal to special revelation.

Conclusion

What I have shown with the IRAM account of religious language laid out in Chapters 5 and 6 is that it is possible for a believer to embrace a theology on which all positive, intrinsic, and true claims about God are irreducibly analogical, while still having a sufficiently contentful set of beliefs about God to support a robust religious worldview and way of life. Adopting an irreducibly analogical theology need not lead to theological evisceration.

My defense of an IRAM theology has focused exclusively on a *global* IRAM theology—one in which *all* positive, intrinsic, and true claims about God are irreducibly analogical. However, if a global IRAM theology can be rendered satisfactorily contentful, it follows *a fortiori* that local appeals to irreducible analogy can also be rendered satisfactorily contentful. So, while I think there are good reasons for theistic believers to adopt a global IRAM theology, the account I have offered also supports the approach of taking just a few specific areas of a theology to be irreducibly analogical—claims about emotions in God, for example, or claims about particularly paradoxical doctrines like the Trinity.

A global IRAM theology will be much more limited than a non-analogical theology would be. An irreducibly analogical model may not be altogether lacking in practical or theoretical implications, as Alston thought, and it need not altogether destroy the possibility of argumentative theology, as Palmer thought. Nonetheless, it is certainly true that our ability to infer things from a theological premise like “God is wise” is dramatically reduced if we take that premise to be irreducibly analogical rather than straightforwardly and non-analogically true. The conclusions we are able to draw from our theological claims, if we are IRAM theists, will be at best quite modest and tentative ones, accompanied by caveats to the effect that we don’t really

understand what God is like, and that while we trust that our models *are* good models, we cannot “see behind” them and don’t know what actual properties of God they exemplify.

One other consequence of the account I have offered here is that it allows a friendlier approach to religious difference in some cases. If I believe that God is x non-analogically, then this entails that anyone who believes something incompatible with God’s being x is simply wrong. The only way to evade that outcome would be to cease to be a realist about my own religious beliefs. However, suppose I am an IRAM theist committed to an irreducibly analogical *model* of God as x , and I meet a believer in a different tradition who embraces a model of God as y , where something’s being (literally and non-analogically) y is incompatible with that thing’s being (literally and non-analogically) x . In this case, I need not actually conclude that this other believer is wrong, despite the fact that we embrace conflicting models. It is possible that we are both right, and that x and y are *both* good models of God, just as the wave model and the particle model were both good models of light even though something’s being a (Newtonian) wave is entirely incompatible with its being a (Newtonian) particle. Like the story of the blind men and the elephant, the two of us may simply have hit on different aspects of one greater reality. This approach will not work for *all* cases of religious disagreement, as my autobiographical example of my disagreement with Calvinism shows. However, it might work for the sorts of large-scale disagreements that exist between, say, Western monotheism and certain strains of Eastern thought.

The greatest strength of the IRAM account, however, is simply its necessity, given certain premises. As I argued in Chapter 2, there are key things that the theist has strong reasons to want to say, which she *cannot* consistently say without adopting the position that everything

positive and intrinsic that we say about God is irreducibly analogical. And for those willing to bite all the bullets needed to avoid a globally analogical theology, there still remain other theological dilemmas—about God’s susceptibility to emotion and suffering, about the doctrine of the Trinity, etc.—for which an appeal to analogy is the only fully satisfactory way out. If I am right that this is the theist’s situation, then interpreting at least some theological claims as irreducibly analogical ought to be an appealing prospect, so long as we can successfully clear away worries that such claims are intrinsically illegitimate. That is what the IRAM account accomplishes: it demonstrates that it is possible to take claims about God to be irreducibly analogical *without* inconsistency or theological evisceration.

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