

The Uses of Analogy

231

by Brian Wicker

An important theme of David Burrell's thoughtful and thought-provoking book¹ is that it is a mistake to elevate the discussion of analogous usage in language to a systematic theory. The difference between Aquinas and Duns Scotus, and even more Cajetan lies just here: Scotus turns analogy into a metaphysical theory, Cajetan turns it into formula for constructing the logical arguments. Aquinas, on the other hand, despite occasional gestures in that direction, is mainly concerned to avoid systematisation. If Burrell is right, then for Aquinas there is no such thing as a 'theory of analogy', only a need to examine and where necessary try to justify the way we actually use words analogically. Indeed, in a sense the burden of Aquinas' treatment is that there cannot be a theory. And of course if there cannot be a theory of analogy, *a fortiori* there cannot be such a thing as a theory of analogy for theologians in particular.

I say all this because it is the presumption of Humphrey Palmer's book² that there is such a theory, that it is designed for specifically theological purposes, and that it is no good. It is also his presumption that Aquinas had such a theory and that therefore what he says is no good. So if Burrell is right, then Palmer's critique, however valid against theorists and metaphysicians like Scotus or Cajetan, does not really touch Aquinas at all. Which is a pity, since there seems little point in attacking straw arguments when there are arguments of tougher metal to be dealt with.

Burrell begins by rejecting Cajetan's attempt to reduce Aquinas' work to a quasi-mathematical form. For Cajetan—and hence much subsequent text-book thomism—the foundation of analogy, especially as used by theologians, is the concept of 'proper proportionality' which amounts to a transposition into verbal form of a mathematical formula: $a:b::c:d$. This purports to justify talk about (say) God's wisdom by saying that since we know what relation wisdom bears to man, and we know what wisdom in the human sphere is, we can therefore affirm that a similar relation holds in the case of God: His wisdom is related to Him as our wisdom is related to us. Hence we have some inkling at any rate of what such talk means in God's case. But this is just a 'bag of tricks' that proves nothing. (Burrell and Palmer agree on this.) But—Burrell goes on to say—this is not what Aquinas is talking about, as we can see if we trace the history of 'analogy' through Plato and Aristotle into the middle ages. So the first part of his book is an historical examination of the thought of Plato and Aristotle on the subject, followed by a discussion of the way

¹*Analogy and Philosophical Language*. David Burrell. Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1973. 278 pp. £4.

²*Analogy*. Humphrey Palmer. Macmillan, London, 1973. 193 pp. £3.50.

Duns Scotus, dissatisfied with Aquinas' agnosticism, tried to make something more positive out of 'analogy' and elevated it into a metaphysical theory where Aquinas had simply used it as part of an analysis of how we use words.

An important plank in Aquinas' discussion is that analogical usage is not in itself out of the ordinary. His standard examples are humdrum: 'healthy' as applied to a man and his diet, or 'hot' as applied both to fire on the earth and to the sun (which for Aquinas was not made of any earthly element but was nevertheless hot). But there is a special subset of terms—the 'transcendentals' like 'good', 'one' and 'be-ing'—which are analogical through and through, as it were, in the sense that we cannot say of them that there is any one 'standard' use which is basic to the rest. For Aquinas, 'hot' primarily referred to fire, and it was perhaps stretching a point to call the sun hot, as it was not 'fiery'. But not so with 'good'. We can talk of a good book, a good man, a good forgery, a good argument, a good cause, a good leg-break: no one of these, or any other that we can think of, contains the 'basic' or 'standard' meaning from which all the rest are more or less drastic departures. To this extent, there is a serious philosophical problem about analogy—that is, a problem of how a word like 'good' is intelligible at all—whether or not we wish to go on to talk about a good God. But according to Burrell, it is just here that Aquinas shows it is useless to try to construct a *theory*, whether of mathematical proportions or of metaphysical entities, to account for the intelligibility of 'good'. For the point of such words is that they defy that kind of systematisation, that is indeed their very function; to show the limitations of the kind of rationality which seeks to reduce all our language to one kind of order. 'Analogy' is not a philosophical theory to cope with some awkward facts, but an awkward fact to be coped with as best he may by the philosopher.

From this point, if I understand him aright, Burrell develops Aquinas in a new direction. He points out that many of the terms most obviously subject to analogical use, whether in theology or elsewhere, are 'perfections' (e.g. 'just', 'wise', 'merciful', etc.) and as such their use always involves an element of *appraisal*. That is to say, wisdom, justice, mercy, etc., are not static qualities, but perfections aspired to, elements in a work of self-fulfilment. To say that Britain is a more just society than South Africa is a truth obvious to decent human beings: but not because they imagine (unless perhaps they are Reginald Maudling debating on TV with Peter Hain) that 'justice' *means* what goes on in Britain. Nobody knows what a truly just society would be like: yet we know injustice when we see it. Thus the use of an analogous word like 'just' always implies aspiration towards a perfection, and involves an act of appraisal since we don't yet have a standard of perfect justice against which to measure relative injustice. The implicit element of appraisal is present whenever we use a 'per-

fection' word like 'just', including of course when we use it in theological contexts. This is not to deny the intelligibility of talking about God as 'just', 'wise', 'merciful', etc., but to show that such talk cannot be wholly 'systematised' à la Cajetan: for it involves the talker himself. The presence of analogous words in language is one of the facts by which we come to understand how a language must also be a form of life.

Placed against Burrell's powerful and serious enquiry, Palmer's reasonings against analogy appear rather flimsy. Part of the trouble is that what he knocks down is not Aquinas' building but only a few badly-laid bricks in the lean-to put up later by Cajetan and the commentators. Another trouble is that he fails adequately to discuss how the analogical use of words by theologians is rooted in the analogical language of common parlance. The result is that his book is more of a critique of unnamed 'preachers' who use bad arguments to bolster up their case than it is a serious introduction to the philosophical issues. Because he spends so much time swiping at anonymous knaves and fools, Palmer finds no time for essential discriminations—for example between the various kinds of word-stretching involved in predicating of God such various terms as 'good' (transcendental), 'wise' (a 'perfection'), 'father' (arguably another 'perfection'), 'strong' (half-way to metaphor?) and 'with a mighty hand and outstretched arm' (outright metaphor). At one time or another all of these are treated as parts of the 'theory of analogy' as though they were all cases of 'analogical' stretching. Again, analogical usage is constantly being compared with something undefined called variously the 'literal', 'ordinary' or even 'superficial' meaning. This suggests that what is wrong with analogical usage in theological discussion is that a word is illicitly torn from its moorings in ordinary parlance. Yet at other times the complaint against it seems to be quite a different one, namely that it involves an illicit extension of a *term*, a term being a word consciously tied down by its user to a single meaning clearly delineated. A term, thus defined, cannot of course have an 'ordinary' meaning as well as its special meaning: hence the trouble with analogy, on this account, cannot be that it involves an illicit departure from the 'ordinary'.