

The “Grammar” of ‘God’ and ‘Being’: Making Sense of Talking about the One True God in Different Metaphysical Traditions

1. Introduction: is there a “grammar” of ‘God’?

Is there a grammar of the name ‘God’? In an obvious and trivial sense there certainly is. This term, being a part of the English language, has to obey the grammatical rules of that language. So, for example, by consulting the relevant textbooks and dictionaries we can establish that ‘God’ is a noun, so it can function as the subject or predicate of simple categorical sentences, but it cannot, for example, function as a verb or a preposition.

But perhaps it can, or at least *could*. After all, as our medieval colleagues often emphasized: *nomina sunt ad placitum* – names are conventional; we use them at will, as we please. For example, the “creators” of the popular search engine Google managed to introduce its name into our language in 1998, and they then succeeded in turning the name into a commonly used verb just two years later.¹ So what could prevent anyone from starting to use the word ‘God’ in a similar way, and from forming verbal derivatives from it analogous to, say, ‘googled’ and ‘googling’? Apparently, nothing.

But then again, does this mean that I can go ahead and use the word just *any way I want*? Would that yield anything but some strange stares from my audience? Most probably, my using the word in some odd way would simply be taken as a sign of my linguistic (or some other sort of) incompetence. So, even if we obviously *can* use a word any way we wish, not just any such use would be regarded as acceptable. But then, *whose* usage is it that should count as acceptable or, indeed, as setting the standard for acceptable usage? And why is this question important from a philosophical point of view?

Clearly, the philosophical relevance of the question consists in the fact that different uses of the same word may express its different senses. And the same word being used by different philosophers in different senses can easily lead to equivocations in their debates, yielding the well-known phenomenon of philosophers talking past each other, committing the fallacy of *ignoratio elenchi*.

¹ “Rarely do we know the exact circumstances surrounding the coining of a brand new word. But in the case of googol, a mathematical term for the number represented by a one followed by 100 zeroes or 10¹⁰⁰, we know exactly who coined it. In 1940, Mathematician Edward Kasner asked his nephew, nine-year-old Milton Sirota, to come up with a name for such a big number. Sirota came up with googol and also suggested the term googolplex for an even bigger number. Kasner assigned that term the value of ten to the googol power. The name of the search engine and software company, Google, is a deliberate variant of the mathematical term. The company's founders, Larry Page and Sergey Brin, came up with the name in 1998. They altered the spelling for trademark purposes. The verb to google, meaning to search for something on the World Wide Web, particularly to search using the Google search engine, is from the corporate trademark and dates to 2000.” URL: <http://www.wordorigins.org/wordorg.htm>. Last Updated 15 August 2004, © 1997-2004, by David Wilton. *Se non è vero è ben trovato*.

So, in order to avoid the misunderstandings and mere verbal quibbles characteristic of this situation, philosophers have to clarify their meaning, and have to agree on what they would regard as the proper sense of the terms causing the confusion. But is there such a thing as “the proper sense” of a term, and if so, who or what establishes it?

If we can use a term in some improper sense (as I would be using ‘God’ if I started using it as a verb), then it has to have some proper sense, for we call the improper sense “improper” only as opposed to what we take to be “proper”. But just because the term has to have *some* proper sense, it does not follow that the term has only *one* proper sense. It would be ridiculous, for example, to try to rule out the several verbal senses of the word ‘bat’ as improper (as in talking about batting an eye or the batting average of a baseball player), on the grounds that *the* proper sense of the word is that in which we use it to talk about certain flying mammals. So, of course, the same term may have several, equally legitimate and proper uses and senses in the same language, provided that the term in question is equivocal, or when at least it is not purely univocal. And, equally obviously, what establishes any of these uses and senses as proper and acceptable is the existence of the well-established common usage of that term in that sense, an existing linguistic tradition that in better dictionaries is also supported by citations of authoritative texts clearly illustrating, or even explicitly establishing, the sense in question.

Thus, although it is clearly within my power to use any word in any odd, idiosyncratic way I wish, I can only do so at the risk of disqualifying myself as a competent speaker of the language, at least with regard to some proper usage of the term in question. Of course, this is not to say that I cannot legitimately use a term in some improper way, say, for the sake of humor, irony, poetic expression, etc. But these “secondary language games” presuppose my competence in the “primary language game” of understanding and being able to use the term in its proper sense or senses in the first place. Thus, to “participate in the game” of speaking the language, I first must be able to align my usage with an existing linguistic tradition, which then of course I can also influence in my own ways, if I manage to establish some authority concerning some uses of some terms.

The philosophically relevant lesson of these (rather trivial) points seems to be the following. In the first place, although (nay, *because*) linguistic usage is conventional, it cannot be entirely arbitrary. One can only qualify as a competent user of the language by aligning one’s usage with an established linguistic tradition, based on some commonly accepted authoritative usage. In the second place, joining a linguistic community as a competent speaker consists precisely in conforming to the authoritative usage of that community. However, even within the same language as well as across different languages there are various linguistic communities with various standards for usage based on various types of authorities, and, even within what may be identified as one and the same community concerning the usage of certain parts of their language or languages, modifications (indeed, *schisms*) may develop over time. Therefore, rational conversation within the same language and within the same linguistic community is inevitably exposed to the contingencies of this dynamic of emerging and falling linguistic authorities and correspondingly changing meaning and usage. To be sure, this is nothing to despair about. One only has to be constantly aware of and reflect on this dynamic in order to keep rational discourse across the board possible.

So, with respect to “the grammar” of ‘God’ and its equivalents in other languages, when questions arise as to “Whose God?” and according to “Which tradition?” philosophers of religion are talking about, then it is precisely this phenomenon that we need to reflect on. In view of the foregoing, therefore, these reflections should begin with what we should regard as the proper authoritative uses of the term, at least insofar as they are relevant to the particular issues we are considering.

2. Linguistic authority, imposition, sense and reference

To be sure, talking about some “linguistic authority” above, I certainly didn’t mean a policeman with a baton in his right hand and a dictionary in his left one. A linguistic authority is just anybody whose usage is regarded in some community of speakers as authoritative, as setting the standard for some proper sense of some phrase in that usage. The usage setting this standard may be provided in the form of an explicit definition, as for example Boethius’ definitions of ‘person’ (*substantia individua intellectualis naturae*; an individual substance of intellectual nature) or ‘eternity’ (*interminabilis vitae tota simul perfecta possessio*; the perfect possession of an interminable life, the whole, together) were regarded in the Middle Ages, or may be taken to be embedded in authoritative, axiomatic statements, as for example Aristotle’s descriptions of unity (*unum est ens indivisum*; what is one is an undivided being) or goodness (*bonum est quod omnia appetunt*; the good is what everything desires), which, being transcendentals, are strictly speaking indefinable.

One of the foremost authorities for Western Christianity’s usage of ‘God’ and its equivalents (‘Deus’, ‘Dieu’, ‘Gott’, ‘Isten’, etc.) spelled with a capital letter is certainly St. Augustine. In his *On Christian Doctrine*, Book I. Chap. 7, he describes what “all men understand by the term ‘God’” as follows:

For when the one supreme God of gods is thought of, even by those who believe that there are other gods, and who call them by that name, and worship them as gods, their thought takes the form of an endeavour to reach the conception of a nature, than which nothing more excellent or more exalted exists. And since men are moved by different kinds of pleasures, partly by those which pertain to the bodily senses, partly by those which pertain to the intellect and soul, those of them who are in bondage to sense think that either the heavens, or what appears to be most brilliant in the heavens, or the universe itself, is God of gods: or if they try to get beyond the universe, they picture to themselves something of dazzling brightness, and think of it vaguely as infinite, or of the most beautiful form conceivable; or they represent it in the form of the human body, if they think that superior to all others. Or if they think that there is no one God supreme above the rest, but that there are many or even innumerable gods of equal rank, still these too they conceive as possessed of shape and form, according to what each man thinks the pattern of excellence. Those, on the other hand, who endeavour by an effort of the intelligence to reach a conception of God, place Him above all visible and bodily natures, and even above all intelligent and spiritual natures that are subject to change. All, however, strive emulously to exalt the excellence of God: nor could any one be found to believe that any being to whom there exists a superior is God. And so all concur in believing that God is that which excels in dignity all other objects.²

² “Deum omnes intellegunt, quo nihil melius. Nam cum ille unus cogitatur deorum Deus, ab his etiam qui alios et suspicantur et vocant et colunt deos sive in caelo sive in terra, ita cogitatur ut aliquid quo nihil sit

As Augustine concludes in this passage, the idea of ‘God’ with a capital ‘G’, i.e., when the term is used to refer to what people take to be the God of gods, is that of something that is absolutely better than everything else. Now, it is important to notice here that under this characterization of the intended sense of the term, it can only apply to one object. For if something is better than everything else, absolutely speaking, then there cannot be another such thing, given the irreflexivity and transitivity of the relation ‘is better than’. For if there were two such things, say **a** and **b**, then **a** would have to be better than **b**, and **b** would have to be better than **a**. But then, by the transitivity of ‘is better than’, **a** would have to be better than **a**, which is impossible, because of the irreflexivity of the same relation.³ So, there can only be one “God of gods”, which at once establishes that whoever is talking about other “gods” is not talking about the same God. Therefore, the word with a capital ‘G’ is only properly used if it is intended to refer to the God of a monotheistic religion, given that the uniqueness of its intended referent is built into its intended meaning (for those who are willing to accept Augustine’s text as at least linguistically authoritative).

Still, it is important to note here that this does not turn the name into a grammatically *proper noun*. A proper noun has a unique referent because it is given to one individual in an act of name-giving, or as our medieval colleagues would put it, an *act of imposition* (*impositio*), directly targeting that individual as the intended referent of the name. Indeed, this is the reason why if the same name happens to be given to several persons as a result of several impositions, the persons will be named by that name homonymously. A common term, on the other hand, is not imposed on one object: as far as its imposition is concerned, it might apply to several individuals, for the name-giver is not giving it to one individual with the intention of referring only to that individual. This is precisely why it could apply to several individuals univocally, whether there actually are, or just can be, several individuals it applies to or not. Still, it can be the case that the specification of the meaning of the name along with other semantic principles implies that there cannot be

melius atque sublimius illa cogitatio conetur attingere. Sane quoniam diversis moventur bonis, partim eis quae ad corporis sensum, partim eis quae ad animi intellegentiam pertinent, illi qui dediti sunt corporis sensibus, aut ipsum caelum aut quod in caelo fulgentissimum vident, aut ipsum mundum Deum deorum esse arbitrantur. Aut, si extra mundum ire contendunt, aliquid lucidum imaginantur idque vel infinitum vel ea forma quae optima videtur, inani suspitione constituunt, aut humani corporis figuram cogitant, si eam ceteris anteponunt. Quod si unum Deum deorum esse non putant et potius multos aut innumerabiles aequalis ordinis deos, etiam eos tamen prout cuique aliquid corporis videtur excellere, ita figuratos animo tenent. Illi autem qui per intellegentiam pergunt videre quod Deus est, omnibus eum naturis visibilibus et corporalibus, intellegibilibus vero et spiritalibus, omnibus mutabilibus praeferunt. Omnes tamen certatim pro excellentia Dei dimicant, nec quisquam inveniri potest qui hoc Deum credat esse quo est aliquid melius. Itaque omnes hoc Deum esse consentiunt quod ceteris rebus omnibus anteponunt.” Translated by the Rev. Professor J.F. Shaw; Excerpted from *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series One, Volume 2; Edited by Philip Schaff, New York: The Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1890.

³ Cf.: “Non enim possibile est esse duo summe bona. Quod enim per superabundantiam dicitur, in uno tantum invenitur. Deus autem est summum bonum, ut ostensum est. Deus igitur est unus.” – “There cannot be two things that are supremely good. For what is predicated in the superlative, applies only to one. But God is the supreme good, as has been shown. Therefore, there is one God.” (When not indicated otherwise, translations are mine.) Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, lib. 1, cap. 42, n. 2

more than one thing to which the name applies. This is the case with the name 'God' as its intended meaning is specified by Augustine.⁴

But then, if the name in the intended sense can apply only to one object, it seems to follow that whoever is talking about God must be talking about the same God. Therefore, at least *all monotheistic religions must be talking about the same God*. But then, if the sense in which the term is used is nothing but what its users understand by it (if, that is, it is the same as the conception they form in their mind when they use the term with understanding), does this mean that all monotheistic believers must have the same conception of God? Or, conversely, does it mean that believers in polytheistic religions cannot use the term in the same sense, and therefore cannot have the same concept of God, and therefore cannot even talk about the same God?

3. Sense, reference and use

Let me begin with this last question first, because it raises most obviously the issue of the difference in sense and reference of the term 'God' with a capital 'G' (that in Augustine's intended sense is not properly applicable in the plural form) and the small case 'god' (that is properly used in plural form).

On standard semantic accounts of sense and reference, sense determines reference (intension determines extension, connotation determines denotation, etc.). And on pure semantic grounds this is how it should be. After all, a term is supposed to refer to what satisfies the conditions of its applicability specified by its sense. So, if a term has different senses, it may refer to different sorts of things in accordance with those different senses. But the same sense of the same term determines the same reference. Therefore, difference in reference should indicate difference in sense. So, if in one of its senses only one thing can satisfy the conditions of the term's applicability, then in that sense it can refer only to that one thing, even if it is not a singular term by imposition. But then, if the term is used to refer to something else, then it can only be used in a different sense. So, it may seem that the pagan Romans whose beliefs Augustine recalled in this passage must have used the term 'deus' in a sense that is different from Augustine's intended sense of the same term when he is talking about the God of gods, and so it may seem that they just did not have the same conception that Augustine presents here, despite what he says about what *all* people understand by the name.

However, in actual situations of actual uses of a term, including both proper and improper uses, pragmatic factors complicating this simple semantic picture also have to be taken into account. For different users may have different degrees of competence, different, occasionally conflicting authoritative paradigms to follow, different intentions on different occasions, etc. Furthermore, even when they are willing and able to use the term properly and competently, they are not logically omniscient, i.e., they may not be aware of all implications of the term in the sense they intend to use it, or they may be just ignorant or mistaken about whether some thing satisfies its conditions of applicability, and thus they may simply misapply it. All these pragmatic factors will then alter the

⁴ Cf. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 13, a. 9.

simple semantic picture according to which a given sense of a given term determines what the term stands for.

In fact, medieval logicians were very much aware both of the immense variability of sense (*significatio*) and of the context-dependence of reference (*suppositio*) in actual use, which they deliberately built into their *semantic* theory itself. So, it should not be surprising that medieval theologians, trained in this type of semantic theory, were also extremely sensitive to these issues.

Thus when Aquinas in q. 13, a. 10 of the first part of the *Summa Theologiae* addresses the issue of various uses of the term ‘God’, he contrasts the proper (*per naturam*) use of the term with its metaphorical (*per participationem*) and putative (*secundum opinionem*) uses.⁵ According to Aquinas’s determination of the question, these different uses express different, yet not unrelated senses of the same term. The primary, proper sense of the term is expressed when it is used to signify true divine nature and thus to refer to what has this divine nature. This is the way Christians use the term to talk about the Christian God. The metaphorical sense of the term is expressed when we improperly call something or someone “a god” or “divine” on account of some excellence, imitating divine perfection. Finally, the putative sense of the term is expressed when it is used to refer to what other people believe to be God, but what the speaker would not believe to be God. This is the way Christians talk about “the gods of the pagans”, intending the term to be used *not* in its proper sense, to signify divine nature, but improperly, to signify what other people (according to the Christian mistakenly) believe to be divine nature. This is how it happens, then, that believers of different religions, indeed, even believers of different *monotheistic* religions take believers of other religions to talk not about God, properly speaking, but about something else, describable in the putative sense as “*their* God” or “their gods” (as in the *Psalms*, quoted by Aquinas, “all the gods of the pagans are demons”).

However, this is also the way pagan Romans would use the term to talk about “that God of the Christians or Jews”, while they would talk about Jupiter or Mars as being the true Gods, in the proper sense of the word.⁶ This is precisely why the pagan and the Christian can genuinely contradict each other: they both intend the same proper sense of the term in which it signifies true divine nature when for instance they say “Jupiter is God” and “Jupiter is not God”. Indeed, the Christian may further express his denial by saying “that God of yours is not God”. In this sentence, the complex subject term (‘that God of yours’) carries the putative sense of the term ‘God’, referring to a Roman god, say Jupiter, whereas in the predicate it expresses the proper sense of the term, intending to signify true divine nature. But the Roman might also retort by the exact same sentence, although this time the subject in the putative sense of the term would refer to the

⁵ The English phrases in this sentence are not, strictly speaking, translations of the Latin phrases that follow them in parentheses. But I hope the subsequent discussion will justify the use of these “smoother” English expressions, as properly conveying the intended sense of Aquinas’ distinctions. The strict translations would be “according to nature”, “according to participation” and “according to opinion” respectively.

⁶ In this paper, the capitalized word is meant to express the proper sense; the same in quotes, in lower case, or in the possessive construction, is meant to express the putative sense. The word in single quotes is just referring to itself. This I believe squares quite well with the general usage of these forms of expression.

Christian's God, whereas in the predicate it would intend to signify again true divine nature as it did when the Christian uttered it.

So the pagan and the Christian can (and in the predicate of this sentence do) use the same term in the same sense, for otherwise they could not contradict each other. Still, they obviously do not have the same conception of divinity, indeed, that is *precisely* the reason why they contradict each other.

4. Metaphysical theories vs. semantical rules

Accordingly, it seems that it is possible for different users to use the same term in the same sense, yet to have rather different conceptions about what is signified by the term in that sense. Despite possible intuitions to the contrary, this happens regularly. Consider for instance the term 'gold'. This term was imposed to signify the true nature of gold, whatever it is. Therefore, when something merely looks like gold, but revealed not to have the true nature of gold, such as Fools' Gold (iron-sulfide), then it is immediately declared not to be gold. This is something all competent users of the term know, regardless of what conceptions they have of exactly what it is that is signified by the term. Thus, the ordinary gold-digger, the alchemist, as well as the modern chemist mean the same by the term 'gold' properly speaking, namely, the true nature of gold, even if the first may have only some vague and obscure idea about what the true nature of gold is, the second may have a totally mistaken idea about it, and the third perhaps possesses an articulate conception that adequately represents that nature. Still, it is the same nature – no matter what they may vaguely comprehend, mistakenly believe or strictly know about it – that they all signify when they use the term properly, as opposed to using it to indicate what they take to be the other's inarticulate or mistaken conception.

So, if we assume that the modern chemist is right about the nature of gold when he thinks of it as the element of atomic number 79, and the alchemist is wrong when he thinks of it as a mixed body composed of the four Aristotelian elements in a certain way, then it would be a mistake to describe the situation by saying that it is only the modern chemist who is capable of talking about genuine gold, whereas the alchemist is only able to talk about something else, given his mistaken conception about the true nature of gold. For they can obviously contradict each other when they both use the term 'gold' in the proper sense, in order to signify the true nature of gold, say, in the sentences "What the gold-digger found is gold" and "What the gold-digger found is not gold", provided they disagree over the gold-digger's recent find. But, of course, this disagreement can be genuine only if the predicates of these sentences signify the same, namely, the true nature of gold. However, besides this disagreement over the factual issue whether the gold-digger's find actually possesses this true nature or not, they have a further *metaphysical* or *scientific* disagreement over what constitutes this true nature. Indeed, they can properly express their metaphysical disagreement only if they use the term 'gold' in the same sense, to refer to the same kind of thing, when they say "Gold is a mixed body composed of water, earth, fire and air" and "No, gold is not composed of those things, gold is an element", respectively, for otherwise, if they were to use the term in different senses, to refer to different things, then they would not contradict each other.

So, their metaphysical disagreement is possible only on the basis of a previous semantic agreement: they both have to have the same, simple, “pre-theoretic” concept of gold, indeed, a concept that they share with the gold-digger, on the basis of which they are all able to conceive of and hence signify the same nature, and thereby to refer to the same kind of thing that has the same nature. But the chemist and the alchemist also have their own articulate, theoretical concepts of the same nature, which they employ in their substantive metaphysical and physical theories to characterize in a more articulate fashion the kind of thing having that nature, allowing them to theorize about it in a scientific context.

On the other hand, it may also happen that, say, a die-hard alchemist takes the claim that gold is a mixed body to be established by Aristotle’s authority in such a way that it is *regulative* of the proper sense of term ‘gold’. Thus, for him, the claim that gold is a mixed body is *not* a (possibly falsifiable) *metaphysical* or *scientific theory* about the nature of gold, but the expression of a *semantical rule* governing the strict, proper usage of the term. In fact, we might say that nowadays the claim that gold is the element of atomic number 79 has pretty much the same status: any sample of gold that a jeweler would regard as genuine gold, the chemist would rather describe as an alloy containing a certain percentage of pure gold. And anything that is not made up from atoms having 79 protons, no matter how much it would otherwise be like gold (say, “Twin-earth gold”), would not be called ‘gold’ by the chemist. So, in the chemist’s usage, this claim now has the status of a *semantic rule* regulating strict scientific usage, and no longer the status of a possibly refutable scientific theory. In *this* case, if these theorists both take their respective theories as *regulative* of the proper sense of the term ‘gold’, then even if they predicate the same term of the same subject, they no longer properly contradict each other, since each of them will take the term in what each regards as its proper sense to express radically different concepts, with radically different implications, embedded in a radically different web of interrelated concepts. Thus, instead of being two theorists in genuine disagreement, risking different hypotheses about the nature of a thing commonly grasped by them by means of a vague common concept that is expressed by them in a common language, they should rather be described as two people speaking different languages constituted by their different semantical rules.⁷

To be sure, even this situation does not have to lead to a complete communication breakdown, but it will certainly render communication more complicated, especially given the fact that it is occurring only implicitly, not in obviously different languages. But this is precisely the kind of situation facing anyone trying to communicate about God or about the gods of different religious traditions or even in conversations with atheists.

⁷ Perhaps, I should note here just for the record that this does not mean that both these theorists are or can be right about the nature of gold, or that there is no way they can contradict each other, for of course understanding is possible across different languages and different conceptual frameworks. It is just not as straightforward as it is in the case of two people holding contradictory opinions expressed in the same language within the same conceptual framework, using the same term in the same sense.

5. Proper sense and constitutive reference vs. putative sense and parasitic reference

A typical feature of conversations in this situation is what I characterized elsewhere as “parasitic reference”.⁸ In this type of conversations, the interlocutors do not share their fundamental beliefs about the objects they refer to, although they take many of these beliefs to be fundamental in the sense that sharing those beliefs is *semantically regulative* of the *proper* sense of the names they use to refer to those objects. Accordingly, they believe that whoever does not share these fundamental, regulative beliefs, cannot properly refer to the same intended referent. This, however, does not have to mean that those who do not share their beliefs absolutely cannot refer to their intended referent at all. To be sure, it is only the believers who are willing to refer to their intended referent *constitutively*, i.e., using the term in what they take to be its proper sense *constituted* by their regulative beliefs. Thus, the believers’ referring to their intended referent constitutively implies the belief that the referent satisfies the term’s conditions of applicability specified by its proper sense, regulated by their fundamental, semantically regulative beliefs. Therefore, their constitutive reference commits believers to all the implications of their regulative beliefs concerning their intended referent. Still, the non-believers, or believers of other faiths, can also refer to the believers’ intended referent *parasitically*, i.e., without holding those beliefs, but at the same time understanding that the believers are targeting their intended referent as something they believe is properly picked out by the term in what they take to be its proper sense constituted by those beliefs. So, the non-believer in this case is exploiting the believers’ beliefs to refer to their intended referent, but without sharing those beliefs, and thus, *without any commitment to the implications of these semantically regulative beliefs* concerning the intended referent. This is possible because the non-believer of the given faith may use the same term in what he takes to be its *putative sense*, which he may even explicitly mark, e.g., by quotation marks, or by the use of some other construction indicating the ascription of the regulative beliefs to the believers, but at the same time distancing himself from these beliefs. Examples of this sort would be phrases like “Augustine’s God” uttered by an atheist, “the Roman gods” uttered by a Christian, or “the Aristotelian elements” uttered by a modern chemist, etc.

This is how it can come about that Anselm’s “ontological argument” may have no impact on the thinking of an atheist, who merely *parasitically* refers to “the God of the faithful”, without himself believing that the specification of the sense of the term provided by Anselm actually applies to anything whether in the mind or in reality. For even if Anselm’s description may validly imply that what is referred to in the mind as that than

⁸ Klima, G. “Saint Anselm’s Proof: A Problem of Reference, Intentional Identity and Mutual Understanding”, in: G. Hintikka (ed.): *Medieval Philosophy and Modern Times*, Proceedings of “Medieval and Modern Philosophy of Religion”, Boston University, August 25-27, 1992; Kluwer Academic Publishers: The Netherlands, 2000, pp. 69-88; Klima, G. “On whether *id quo nihil maius cogitari potest* is in the understanding”, *Proceedings of the Society for Medieval Logic and Metaphysics*, <<http://www.fordham.edu/gsas/phil/klima/SMLM/PSMLM1.pdf>>, 1(2001), pp. 70-80; Klima, G. “Conceptual Closure in Anselm’s Proof: Reply to Tony Roark”, *History and Philosophy of Logic*, 24 (2003), pp. 131–134.

which nothing greater can be thought also has to exist in reality, and that it has to be one, omnipotent, omniscient, etc., the atheist, not making constitutive reference to this object of thought in the first place, is not committed to any of these implications, and thus he may consistently describe that intended referent as “that God of the faithful, that figment of their mind, which they mistakenly believe to be that than which nothing greater can be thought, whereas there is no such thing at all, since for any given object, whether in the mind or in reality, a greater than it can be thought”.⁹

Indeed, this type of reference is ubiquitous not only in communication across different belief-systems, but also in the more mundane, and thus perhaps better understood, conversations about make-believe characters. So, for instance, when the question is raised whether Othello killed Desdemona, it is certainly not on a par with the question whether O.J. killed Nicole Simpson. For the latter question concerns a matter of fact. But the former question only concerns facts about how Shakespeare shaped the plot of his play, of course, without himself believing that he was reporting any facts. Thus, whoever refers to the Moor of Venice, intending thereby to refer to Shakespeare’s make-believe character, will certainly understand that the Bard’s description of the character has such and such implications, say, that he was a man, and therefore he had to be extended in space, and he could not have been in two places at the same time, etc., (which Shakespeare never explicitly detailed), still, no-one in their right mind would take these implications to prove any facts (say, that Othello was in fact in historical Venice, etc.) besides facts about what Shakespeare invented. So, all descriptions and their implications concerning the make-believe characters of the play are understood with the usually tacit prefix “in the play”.

But then, in a similar vein, whoever does not share, e.g., the Greek poets’ beliefs about their gods can refer without further ado to what the Greek poets believed to be gods, and even re-tell their stories, say, about how and how many times Zeus cheated on Hera, etc., with the perhaps tacit understanding that all this is prefixed with “according to the Greek poets” or “in Greek mythology” or something to the same effect. Thus, the person not believing in the Greek gods is not committed to any of the implications of the Greek poets’ beliefs about their gods. After all, he is just reporting the Greek poets’ beliefs. But at the same time he may notice what those implications of the Greek poets’ beliefs are, and he may also legitimately confront those implications with the implications of his own conception of God.

This is precisely what Xenophanes did when he expressed his disagreement with the poets’ descriptions of their gods.

⁹ Cf. “... nihil inconueniens accidit ponentibus Deum non esse: non enim inconueniens est quolibet dato vel in re vel in intellectu aliquid maius cogitari posse, nisi ei qui concedit esse aliquid quo maius cogitari non possit in rerum natura.” – “... no inconsistency arises for those who claim that God does not exist, since it is not inconsistent for anyone to be able to think, for any given thing, whether in reality or in the understanding, something greater than it, except for someone who concedes that there is something in reality than which a greater cannot be thought.” Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, lib. 1 cap. 11 n. 2. For further discussion, see the references of the previous note.

7. Homer and Hesiod attributed to the gods all things which are disreputable and worthy of blame when done by men; and they told of them many lawless deeds, stealing, adultery, and deception of each other.¹⁰

In contrast to this, Xenophanes provides what he takes to be a proper description of God, in the following way:

1. God is one, supreme among gods and men, and not like mortals in body or in mind. 2. The whole [of god] sees, the whole perceives, the whole hears. 3. But without effort he sets in motion all things by mind and thought.¹¹

Obviously, the God Xenophanes is talking about is, according to him, the only God properly so-called, in contrast to the imperfect gods of the poets. Xenophanes thus apparently uses the same word in the same sentence once in the proper and once in the putative sense, precisely in order to make the contrast between what he takes to be divine nature properly signified by this word and what the same word can merely putatively signify, in accordance with the false beliefs of the poets about this nature. The important point of the disagreement here is that it shows why, despite all their linguistic authority, the poets' claims concerning their gods cannot be taken as *regulative* of the *proper* usage of the term. For in its *proper* usage the term must signify true divine nature, but the poets' descriptions, Xenophanes would argue, are incompatible with what that sublime nature would have to be like.

Thus, although linguistic authority establishes proper usage, it is not just any usage that can be established as proper by a mere *fiat* of linguistic authority. For as long as the proper usage of the term requires that it should signify the true nature of a certain sort of thing, discoveries about the nature of the thing may go against linguistic authority, no matter how well established. Thus, the die-hard alchemist would insist in vain that gold has to be a mixture of the Aristotelian elements by virtue of the *meaning* of the term 'gold', given what has been discovered about the true nature of this element we properly call 'gold'. In the same way, the Greeks could not insist that a morally flawed "god" is truly and properly God, as long as the word 'God' is to be used with the intention to refer to something that has truly divine nature, which as such has to be flawless. So, the proper usage of a term is not *only* a matter of recognized linguistic authority. For such linguistic authority has to be *earned*, as it were, by being able to provide *true* characterizations of the true natures of things intended to be signified by our terms. For only such authoritative claims can *solidify* as semantic rules for proper usage that "pass the test of time", and even then their status may change, and their scope may become restricted to some specific usage. Take for instance the phrase "straight line" as used in geometry. For centuries, the proper usage of this phrase (and of its equivalents in other languages) was regulated by the Euclidean postulates. However, the discovery of consistent systems denying Euclid's postulate of parallels resulted in a modified usage, restricting Euclid's authoritative usage only to what we now would have to designate properly as "Euclidean straight lines".

¹⁰ Xenophanes, *Fragments and Commentary*, Arthur Fairbanks, (ed. and trans.), *The First Philosophers of Greece*, (London: K. Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1898), pp. 65-85, p. 69. Cf. Zeller, *Vorsokrastische Philosophie*, 525, n. 3. Diog Laer. ix. 18; Sext. Emp. *Pyrrh.* i. 224.

¹¹ Ibid. p. 67. Cf. Zeller, *Vorsokrastische Philosophie*, p. 530, n. 3.

Therefore, authoritative usage, especially authoritative usage in sophisticated theoretical systems can only be semantically regulative to the extent that it is embedded in a consistent, true, substantive theory that “passes the test of time”. It is only when regulated by this type of theory that the strict technical usage of a term will be (or should be) regarded as properly capturing the original, intuitive sense of the term, imposed to signify the true nature of the thing to which it is properly taken to refer. Indeed, it is only in this case that the technical usage regulated by the authoritative claims of the theory can serve as the proper explication of the originally intended, simple pre-theoretical notion of the nature of the thing. Thus, Augustine’s explication of the notion intending to reach up to the true nature of the God of gods can only be properly understood within the theoretical context in which his authoritative claims concerning the proper usage of the term gain their technical sense. Indeed, since Augustine’s technical usage is only a part of a vast tradition he partly inherited, partly originated, we can have a proper grasp on and thus a proper evaluation of the ever more refined notion intended by the technical usage of the term in this tradition only if we properly engage the relevant substantive theories of this tradition. For we can have a proper understanding of Augustine’s explication of the term ‘God’ as an integral part of this tradition only if we realize how it was further articulated, e.g., by Anselm’s formula in his *Proslogion*, which in turn is properly understood only if it is seen as consistently explicated, say, by Aquinas’s notion of *esse purum* or *ipsum esse subsistens*.¹² In brief, we can have a proper understanding of the intended sense of the term as it functions in this tradition only if we understand its proper theoretical context: the pre-modern metaphysics of being and perfection.

6. The pre-modern metaphysics of being and perfection

In this context it is important to emphasize why we have to add the qualification “pre-modern” in dealing with the notions of being and perfection. The reason is provided by the radical conceptual differences between pre-modern and contemporary thinking on these issues that evolved with the disintegration of scholasticism and the emergence of modern philosophy (roughly, around the time of Descartes). In this paper it is impossible to trace even in outline the history of these conceptual developments. So, the best I can do here is simply point to some of the most important differences that usually hinder contemporary philosophers in properly engaging the pre-modern tradition.

Being as a predicate, and the predication of being in all predications

The first difficulty concerns the interpretation of the notion of being or existence. The analytic philosophers’ *mantra*, according to which existence is not a predicate, even if recently it lost its grip on many minds, is still capable of influencing the judgment even of such eminent interpreters of Aquinas’s thought as Anthony Kenny. As in a critical review of his recent book on Aquinas on being I pointed out, Kenny’s insistence on trying to understand (or sometimes just to judge) Aquinas’s claims concerning existence

¹² And this, Aquinas would insist, is not to be confused with *esse commune*, or being as such, being *qua* being, in general (despite his modern commentators’ tendency to do so). Cf. Aquinas, *Scriptum super Sententiis*, lib. 1 d. 8 q. 4 a. 1 ad 1;

in terms of the modern quantifier analysis dooms his arguments to committing *ignoratio elenchi* in almost all his criticisms of Aquinas's position.¹³

Since words are used by convention, the claim that existence is not a predicate is either absolutely futile with regard to other people's usage who have every right to use it as a predicate, or it is meant to express a substantial claim regarding the logical impossibility of coherently using the words 'is' and 'exist' or their equivalents as predicates of individuals. But it can easily be shown that the only serious argument to this effect one usually finds in the literature is simply *unsound* in the framework of medieval logic. The argument tries to show that treating existence as a predicate would entail the obviously false conclusion that all negative existentials have to be false. The argument assumes that in a subject-predicate sentence the subject has to refer to something if it is to be true. But then, if the negative existential claim 'Santa Claus does not exist' is true, then its subject has to refer to something. However, this is precisely what the sentence denies, for saying that Santa does not exist is precisely the claim that the name 'Santa' does not refer to anything. So, the truth of the sentence entails its falsity, whence it cannot be true, whereas anybody over six should know it is true.

This argument is flawed in more than one ways, but here I just want to point out why it would be regarded as flawed by medieval logicians. In the first place, medievals attributed existential import to (non-"ampliative", i.e., non-intensional)¹⁴ affirmative propositions. Accordingly, they treated the contradictory negations of these propositions as *not* involving existential import. The primary reason for this decision is their unrestricted adherence to the principle of bivalence, and their theory of predication. In accordance with the principle of bivalence, if a proposition is true, its contradictory negation must be false, and *vice versa*. But then, if on account of their theory of predication they attribute existential import to affirmatives, medieval logicians have to say that such a proposition is false if its subject refers to nothing, whence its contradictory negation must be true. But this is precisely the case with the affirmative 'Santa exists' and its contradictory negation 'Santa does not exist'. *Ergo*, the modern argument assumes something false when it claims that the truth of a predication, whether affirmative or negative, requires that its subject should refer to something. For the contradictory negation of an affirmative having existential import has to be true if its subject refers to nothing, precisely *because* its subject refers to nothing.

The theory of predication on account of which Aquinas and his contemporaries attributed existential import to affirmatives is what historians of medieval logic dubbed "the inherence theory of predication".¹⁵ The theory can be summarized in a simple formula:

¹³ G. Klima, "On Kenny on Aquinas on Being: A critical review of *Aquinas on Being* by Anthony Kenny", *International Philosophical Quarterly*, 44(2004), pp. 568-580.

¹⁴ The point of this parenthetical qualification is to account for cases when the truth of an affirmative predication does not require the actual existence of the reference of its subject, as in 'Santa is believed to be nice'. Cases like this, which in modern logic would be treated in some system of intensional logic, were treated by medieval logicians in the framework of their theory of *ampliation*. Cf. Klima, G. "Existence and Reference in Medieval Logic", in: A. Hieke – E. Morscher (eds.): *New Essays in Free Logic*, Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2001, pp. 197-226.

¹⁵ For more discussion see the paper referred to in the previous note.

(ITP) the predication ‘x is F’ is true iff x is actual with respect to its F-ness, i.e., the F-ness of x actually exists

This simple formula, however, has far-reaching metaphysical consequences. For on this basis just *any* simple predication expresses an existence-predication: claiming that x is F amounts to the assertion of the existence of the F-ness of x.¹⁶ But a further, metaphysically even more important feature of this theory, especially from the point of view of Aquinas’s metaphysics of being, can be detected if we notice in this formulation that the absolute predication of existence of the F-ness of x is the same as the predication of existence-with-qualification of x, stating that x *is-with-respect-to-its-F-ness*.

Predication simpliciter vs. secundum quid

Medieval logicians primarily considered the logical connections between the absolute (*simpliciter*) and qualified (*secundum quid*) predication of common terms in connection with the fallacy of *simpliciter et secundum quid*. A typical case of the fallacy would be, e.g., “This shield is round with respect to its bottom; therefore, this shield is round”, or the not so trivial, theologically relevant case of “Christ is created with respect to his human nature; therefore, Christ is created”, leading to a heretical claim.¹⁷

In connection with this type of paralogisms, medieval logicians observed that it is not always fallacious to move from a qualified predication to an absolute one. Take for instance, “Socrates is blond with respect to his hair; therefore, Socrates is blond”. What makes the difference, according to these logicians, is that in this case the qualification added to the predicate is not “diminishing” (*determinatio non diminuens*) whereas in the fallacious cases it is. The reason they call the qualification “diminishing” in the fallacious cases is that in those cases the diminishing qualification weakens or diminishes the strict conditions of applicability of the absolute predicate: the predicate ‘round’ stated absolutely of a shield would imply that the shield is round all around, so strictly speaking it would only apply to circular shields, but the qualification “with respect to its bottom”, weakens this condition, so with the qualification added it can also apply to shields, say, with straight edges on the sides and on the top, but with a rounded bottom. A diminishing qualification, therefore, is some determination added to a predicate that is intensionally diminishing, but, precisely for this reason, extensionally enhancing. Thus, a diminishing qualification allows a predicate to be extended to things that without this qualification, in its strict, primary, absolute sense could not be applied, but in the weakened, secondary sense resulting from the addition of the qualification now it can.

¹⁶ This *did not* have to yield the unjustifiable proliferation of unruly entities of which Ockham and his followers started to complain. Cf. Klima, G. “Ockham’s Semantics and Ontology of the Categories”, Spade, P. V. (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Ockham*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 118-142.

¹⁷ I deal with Aquinas’ and others’ treatment of this fallacy in my “Libellus pro Sapiente: A Criticism of Allan Bäck’s Argument against St. Thomas Aquinas’ Theory of the Incarnation, *The New Scholasticism*, 58 (1984), pp. 207-219.

But viewing the formula (ITP) above from this angle should immediately allow us to see the connection between this theory of predication and Aquinas's conception of the *analogy of being*.

The inherence theory of predication and the analogy of being

If we look at all predications as variously qualified predications of being, then it will at once make sense to claim, as Aquinas does, that the different ways of predication distinguished by Aristotle that mark out the different Aristotelian categories determine different modes of being:

... being cannot be narrowed down to something definite in the way in which a genus is narrowed down to a species by means of differences. Since a difference does not participate in a genus, it lies outside the essence of a genus. But there could be nothing outside the essence of being which could constitute a particular species of being by adding to being; for what is outside of being is nothing and cannot be a difference. Hence in book III of this work (see n. 433) the Philosopher proved that being cannot be a genus. Being must therefore be narrowed down to diverse genera on the basis of a different mode of predication, which derives from a different mode of being; for 'being [esse] is signified,' i.e., something is signified to be, 'in just as many ways as something is said to be a being [*ens dicitur*]', that is, in as many ways as something is predicated. And for this reason the first divisions of being are called predicaments [i.e., categories], because they are distinguished on the basis of different ways of predicating. Therefore, since some predicates signify *what something is*, i.e., substance; others *what something is like*, [i.e., quality]; and yet others *how much something is*, [i.e., quantity]; and so on; it is necessary that for each mode of predication, being should signify the same [mode of being]. For example, when it is said that a man is an animal, 'is' signifies [the being of] substance; and when it is said that a man is white, 'is' signifies [the being of] quality; and so on.¹⁸

So, for Aquinas, the Aristotelian division of being into the ten categories is not the division of a genus into its species. It is rather the division of an analogical term into its analogates, of which it applies only to one, the *primary analogate*, without qualification, while it applies to the *secondary analogates* only in a secondary, extended sense, with qualification:

... there are two ways in which something common can be divided into those that are under it, just as there are two ways in which something is common. There is the division of a univocal [term] into its species by differences on account of which the nature of the genus is equally participated in the species, as animal is divided into man and horse, and the like. Another division is that of something common by analogy, which is predicated

¹⁸ "... ens non potest hoc modo contrahi ad aliquid determinatum, sicut genus contrahitur ad species per differentias. Nam differentia, cum non participet genus, est extra essentiam generis. Nihil autem posset esse extra essentiam entis, quod per additionem ad ens aliquam speciem entis constituat: nam quod est extra ens, nihil est, et differentia esse non potest. Unde in tertio huius probavit philosophus, quod ens, genus esse non potest. Unde oportet, quod ens contrahatur ad diversa genera secundum diversum modum praedicandi, qui consequitur diversum modum essendi; quia quoties ens dicitur, idest quot modis aliquid praedicatur, toties esse significatur, idest tot modis significatur aliquid esse. Et propter hoc ea in quae dividitur ens primo, dicuntur esse praedicamenta, quia distinguuntur secundum diversum modum praedicandi. Quia igitur eorum quae praedicantur, quaedam significant quid, idest substantiam, quaedam quale, quaedam quantum, et sic de aliis; oportet quod unicuique modo praedicandi, esse significet idem; ut cum dicitur homo est animal, esse significat substantiam. Cum autem dicitur, homo est albus, significat qualitatem, et sic de aliis." Aquinas, *In Metaphysicam* 5.9, n. 5

according to its perfect concept [*ratio*] of one of those that divide it, and of the other[s] imperfectly and with qualification [*secundum quid*], as being is divided into substance and accident, and into being in actuality and in potentiality, and this sort of division is as it were midway between [the division of something] equivocal and [something] univocal.¹⁹

Thus it is no wonder that Aquinas characterizes the primary ontological distinction between substance and accident precisely in terms of these different ways of predicating being, grounded by the different modes of being, namely, being absolutely speaking [*simpliciter*], which is the characteristic mode of being of substance, and being with qualification [*secundum quid*], which is characteristic of accidents:

Again, since accidents do not seem to be beings insofar as they are signified in themselves, but only insofar as they are signified as inhering in a substance, it is clearly on account of substance that each of the other beings is a being. And from this it also appears that substance is 'the first kind of being and being in an unqualified sense and not just a being of some sort [*ens secundum aliquid*],' i.e., [a being] with some qualification [*secundum quid*], as is the case with accidents; for to be white is not to be without qualification [*simpliciter*], but with some qualification. This is clear from the fact that when a thing begins to be white we do not say that it begins *to be* without qualification [*simpliciter*], but that it begins *to be white*. For when Socrates begins to be a man, he is said to begin *to be*, absolutely speaking [*simpliciter*]. Hence it is obvious that being a man signifies being without qualification, but that being white signifies being with some qualification.²⁰

However, even if being a substance of some sort is being *simpliciter*, we should notice here that in accordance with our general formula for the inherence theory of predication (ITP), even in the case of predicating being of a substance of some sort, the sort of the substance in question, i.e., its nature or essence does impose a certain determination on the sense in which the thing can be. Since for a man to be a man is for a man to be *simpliciter* (as opposed to for him to be wise or walking, which are cases of being *secundum quid*), the reverse also has to be true, namely, that for a man to be *simpliciter* is for a man to be a man. Therefore, for a man *to be simpliciter* is nothing but for him *to be-with-respect-to-his-humanity*, i.e., to be in the way a human being has to be, living a human life, as opposed to the way in which, say, dogs are, living their canine lives. That

¹⁹ "... est duplex modus dividendi commune in ea quae sub ipso sunt, sicut est duplex communitatis modus. Est enim quaedam divisio univoci in species per differentias quibus aequaliter natura generis in speciebus participatur, sicut animal dividitur in hominem et equum, et huiusmodi; alia vero divisio est ejus quod est commune per analogiam, quod quidem secundum perfectam rationem praedicatur de uno dividendum, et de altero imperfecte et secundum quid, sicut ens dividitur in substantiam et accidens, et in ens actu et in ens potentia: et haec divisio est quasi media inter aequivocum et univocum." *In Secundum Sententiarum* 42.1.3, in corp. Cf.: "Unum enim eodem modo dicitur aliquid sicut et ens; unde sicut ipsum non ens, non quidem simpliciter, sed secundum quid, idest secundum rationem, ut patet in 4o Metaphysicae, ita etiam negatio est unum secundum quid, scilicet secundum rationem." Aquinas, *In Perihermeneias* 2.2, n. 3.

²⁰ "Et quia accidentia non videntur entia prout secundum se significantur, sed solum prout significantur in concrezione ad substantiam, palam est quod singula aliorum entium sunt entia propter substantiam. Et ex hoc ulterius apparet, quod substantia est *primum ens, et ens simpliciter, et non ens secundum aliquid*, idest secundum quid, sicut est in accidentibus. Esse enim album non est simpliciter esse, sed secundum quid. Quod ex hoc patet, quia cum incipit esse albus, non dicimus quod incipiat esse simpliciter, sed quia incipiat esse albus. Cum enim Socrates incipit esse homo, dicitur simpliciter quod incipit esse. Unde patet quod esse hominem significat esse simpliciter. Esse autem album significat esse secundum quid." Aquinas, *In Metaphysicam*, VII, 1, n. 1256.

these ways of being determined by these different natures have to be radically different is shown by the fact that it is not fitting for a human to live *like* a dog (i.e., living a life *resembling* a dog's life), and that in fact it would be metaphysically impossible for a human to live *as* a dog (i.e., living a life that literally *is* the life of a dog), which would have to involve, e.g., the ability to pass down canine genes to canine progeny, etc.

So, even if substances are said to be beings without qualification as opposed to accidents, still, the being of substances also involves a certain determination or delimitation imposed upon it by their nature, at least, provided that this nature is distinct from their being. For consider the following formula (called PB, because I believe it is the fundamental formula underlying Aquinas's conception of the *participation of being*):²¹

(PB) An x of nature Y *is* iff x *is-with-respect-to-its-nature-Y*

As can be seen, the absolute predicate 'is' predicated of x, just by virtue of x being of nature Y, has to signify the same in x as the same predicate with a qualification referring to this nature. So the absolute predicate signifies being in some qualified sense, qualified by the nature of x. This is precisely why human life and canine life are radically different and necessarily determined by these different natures, even if they both are the *substantial* acts of being of humans and dogs, and thus make them *to be*, absolutely speaking, as opposed to making them *to be tall* or *to be heavy*, i.e., actual in respect of some *accidental* being. Does this mean, then, that since anything that exists at all has to have some nature, *all* predications of being are predications with qualification? Is there nothing that just IS without any qualification or determination imposed upon its act of being by its nature? Indeed, can it be the case that anything can be said to be only *with* qualification and nothing *without* qualification?

Divine essence, *esse purum*, and the attributes of God

It is at this point that we have to notice that *if* the act of being signified by the predicate 'is' in x is the same as x's nature Y, *then* the qualification referring to the nature of x has to be *non-diminishing*, for, in general, if the qualification of a predicate refers to the significate of the predicate itself, then the qualification is non-diminishing. For example, if I say that x is white-with-respect-to-its-whiteness, then the qualification added to the predicate may be dropped without further ado, for whatever is white is of course white-with-respect-to-its-whiteness and *vice versa*. But then, in the same way, if x's nature Y is the same as x's being, then saying that x *is-with-respect-to-its-nature-Y* is the same as saying that x *is-with-respect-to-its-being*, which does not impose a limitation on the way x is, for nothing delimits itself. But in all other cases, the qualification referring to the nature of the thing, being distinct from the act of being of the thing, imposes a certain limitation or determination on the way the thing is, indeed, on the way the thing *can* be.

Accordingly, *if* there is a Being in which *esse* and *essence* are the same, *then* that Being, and *only* that Being, can be said to BE without any limitation whatsoever. But then that

²¹ Cf. Klima, G. (2002) "Thomas Sutton and Henry of Ghent on the Analogy of Being", *Proceedings of the Society for Medieval Logic and Metaphysics*, 2(2002), pp. 34-44.
<<http://www.fordham.edu/gsas/phil/klima/SMLM/PSMLM2/PSMLM2.pdf>>

Being, which alone has unlimited, that is, non-participated existence will have to be God, and all other beings will have to be His creatures, which can only exist by participation, *secundum quid*, relative to the absolutely unlimited act of being of God. So, just as the being of accidents is being *secundum quid* relative to the absolute sense in which substances can be said to be, so also, proportionately, the being of created substances is just some limited form of being (limited in time, space, power, perfection, etc.) relative to the absolutely unlimited being of God (who, by reason of the meaning of His name has to be superior to all, and so cannot be limited):

It is obvious that the first being, which is God, is infinite act, namely, having in Himself the whole plenitude of being not contracted to the nature of some genus or species. Therefore it is necessary that His being itself should not be an act of being that is, as it were, packed into a nature which is not its own being, for in that way it would be confined to that nature. Hence we say that God is His own being. But this cannot be said about anything else; just as it is impossible to think that there should be several separate whitenesses, but if a whiteness were separate from any subject and recipient, then it would be only one, so it is impossible that there should be a subsistent act of being, except only one. Therefore, everything else after the first being, since it is not its own being, has being received in something, by which its being is contracted; and thus in any created being the nature of the thing that participates being is other than the act of being itself that is participated²²

Thus, as far as the significate of the verb ‘is’ and of the corresponding participle ‘being’ is concerned, namely, the act of being of the thing of which they are truly predicated, their *only* pure, non-diminished significate is the divine being, namely, divine life. So, these terms in their pure, absolute, unlimited sense can only apply to God, just as the term ‘gold’ in the modern chemist’s technical sense can only apply to a body that is a 100% pure element consisting only of atoms of atomic number 79. It is only this subsistent *esse purum* that can properly be said to BE, in which there cannot be a distinction between the act of being and what receives it, for then the recipient would necessarily delimit the received act.

Therefore, it should be no surprise that in the medieval tradition we can repeatedly find the claim that, compared to God, nothing really exists²³ (just as compared to pure gold,

²² Aquinas, *De spiritualibus creaturis*, q. un., a.1: “Oportet enim in substantia spirituali creata esse duo, quorum unum comparatur ad alterum ut potentia ad actum. Quod sic patet. Manifestum est enim quod primum ens, quod Deus est, est actus infinitus, utpote habens in se totam essendi plenitudinem non contractam ad aliquam naturam generis vel speciei. Unde oportet quod ipsum esse eius non sit esse quasi inditum alicui naturae quae non sit suum esse; quia sic finiretur ad illam naturam. Unde dicimus, quod Deus est ipsum suum esse. Hoc autem non potest dici de aliquo alio: sicut impossibile est intelligere quod sint plures albedines separatae; sed si esset albedo separata ab omni subiecto et recipiente, esset una tantum; ita impossibile est quod sit ipsum esse subsistens nisi unum tantum. Omne igitur quod est post primum ens, cum non sit suum esse, habet esse in aliquo receptum, per quod ipsum esse contrahitur; et sic in quolibet creato aliud est natura rei quae participat esse, et aliud ipsum esse participatum.”

²³ Thus, for example, Anselm writes: “Quod vero sic simpliciter et omnimoda ratione solum est perfectum, simplex et absolutum, id nimium quodammodo jure dici potest solum esse: et e contra, quicquid per superiorem rationem, nec simpliciter, nec perfecte, nec absolute esse; sed vix esse, aut fere non esse cognoscitur; id utique aliquo modo recte, non esse dicitur. Secundum hanc igitur rationem ille solus creator Spiritus est, et omnia creata, non sunt; nec tamen omnino non sunt, quia per illum qui solus absolute est, de nihilo aliquid facta sunt.” – “What is so absolutely and in every way is perfect, simple and absolute, that can in a sense rightly be said to be the only thing that exists. By contrast, whatever we recognize (as we did

no gold alloy is *really* gold).²⁴ So the *only* BEING, in the true, proper, absolutely unlimited sense is God, just as *only* pure gold is absolutely gold. And just as any gold alloy is “gold” only in an attenuated, qualified sense, as in “18 karat gold” or “14 karat gold”, so any being other than God is only a being in an attenuated sense, namely, a being of this sort or that sort.

But then, with this conception of the relationship between the notions of being and divine nature in place, it is easy to see how the traditional divine attributes of simplicity, perfection, immutability, unity, etc. should follow. For anything not absolutely simple has to be composed of distinct parts; but if the parts are distinct, then in respect of one part the thing has to be something that in respect of the other part it *is not*; but not-being in some respect is incompatible with being fully, in an absolutely unlimited sense; *ergo*, God has to be absolutely simple. Furthermore, anything that is not absolutely perfect in respect of all possible perfections²⁵ lacks perfection in some respect; but lacking perfection in some respect is not being actual in that respect, which is incompatible with being fully actual; so God has to be absolutely perfect. But given God’s simplicity, his perfections cannot be distinct from Him or from one another. So God *is* all His perfections. Again, this excludes God’s mutability. For changing is coming to be or ceasing to be actual in some respect. But God always has to be actual in respect of all possible perfections He is, so he can never come to be or cease to be in any of those respects, i.e., can never change. Indeed, since coming to be or ceasing to be in respect of some perfection is becoming better or worse in some respect, change in God would entail that God could become better or worse, which goes against His absolute perfection. Finally, let me quote an argument from Aquinas for divine unity arguing from the same premise, namely, the identity of God’s being and essence, because this will directly take us back to the original questions of “Whose God?” in “Which tradition?” we are talking about.

If there are two Gods, then the name ‘God’ is predicated of each either univocally or equivocally. If equivocally, then this is not of our present concern, for nothing prevents

in our foregoing reasoning) to be neither fully, nor perfectly, nor absolutely, but rather scarcely to be or indeed almost not to be, that is in a sense correctly said *not* to be. On the basis of this reasoning, therefore, only the Creating Spirit *is*, and all those that are created *are not*. But they are not entirely non-existent, for they were, by that which alone absolutely exists, made into something out of nothing.” Anselm, *Monologion*, c. 28. Aquinas’s early follower, Thomas Sutton, made the same point equally forcefully, backing his claim with the authority of Augustine: “Respectu enim Dei alia sunt magis non-entia quam entia. Unde Augustinus dicit VII *De trinitate* c. 32: fortasse solum deum oportet dici essentiam. Est enim vere solus, quia incommutabilis est.” – “Compared to God, others are rather non-beings than beings. This is why Augustine says in his ‘On the Trinity’ that perhaps only God should be called an essence. For He alone truly *is*, as He is unchangeable.” Thomas of Sutton, *Quaestiones ordinariae*, ed. Johannes Schneider, München: Verlag der Bayerische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1977. q. 32, esp. pp. 882-883.

²⁴ The jeweler’s 18 karat “gold” actually contains only 75% pure gold, the rest is silver and copper or other metals, such as nickel, palladium or zinc. (24 karat gold, however, is pure gold, given that ‘karat’, as applied to gold, simply means 1/24.) Incidentally, I think I should mention here that I would find this logical-metaphysical framework the best interpretational framework for Parmenides’ poem. His Being of *aletheia*, as opposed to the world of *doxa*, seems to exhibit exactly the same contrast. But exploring this suggestion would require a separate study.

²⁵ For the relevant notion of perfection see n. 27.

anything from being named equivocally by any name, if the speakers [of the language] accept this usage. But if it is predicated of them univocally, then it has to be predicated of both in the same sense. And thus they would have to have the same nature in the same sense. But then this nature exists either by one act of being in both, or by one in each. If by one act of being [in both], then they will not be two things, but only one thing, for two things do not have one act of being if they are substantially distinct. [That is, if they are two distinct substances.] But if there is one act of being in each [distinct from the act of being of the other], then neither of them will have its essence the same as its being [for then their individual essences will have to distinguish their distinct acts of being by receiving and thus delimiting them]. But, as we have proved, this has to be the case with God. Therefore, neither of the two is what we understand by the name 'God'. Hence, it is impossible to posit two Gods.²⁶

7. Different metaphysics, different languages

Given that the name 'God' as intended by Aquinas, Anselm, Augustine and other authorities of this tradition can only refer to the one true God as they conceive of Him, the God of Aquinas, the God of Anselm and the God of Augustine has to be one and the same God, despite the variations in the individual conceptions of these authorities. Accordingly, anybody whose conception allows the multiplication of "Gods" is not speaking properly according to this tradition. Therefore, he is either using the name equivocally, in which case he is just talking past this tradition, or he is talking parasitically about the same God, but without sharing the regulative beliefs of this tradition. But then, if he attributes to this God the implications of his own, clearly radically different "technical" conception of what he takes to be God, then he is simply in error.

Now, for the sake of simple contrast, let us compare a hypothetical contemporary philosopher of religion, CPR, and a pre-modern, or contemporary "pre-modernist" philosopher, PMP, with respect to some of their characteristic metaphysical positions.

Let us assume that CPR would subscribe to the following principles:

1. Predicates denote properties, abstract universal entities, instantiated by several particulars in different possible worlds.
2. The existence of a certain kind of thing, accordingly, is just the instantiation of such a property by an individual in some possible world, namely, in the distinguished possible world called the actual world.

²⁶ "Adhuc. Si sunt duo dii, aut hoc nomen Deus de utroque praedicatur univoce, aut aequivoce. Si aequivoce, hoc est praeter intentionem praesentem: nam nihil prohibet rem quamlibet quolibet nomine aequivoce nominari, si usus loquentium admittat. Si autem dicatur univoce, oportet quod de utroque praedicetur secundum unam rationem. Et sic oportet quod in utroque sit una natura secundum rationem. Aut igitur haec natura est in utroque secundum unum esse, aut secundum aliud et aliud. Si secundum unum, ergo non erunt duo sed unum tantum: duorum enim non est unum esse si substantialiter distinguantur. Si autem est aliud et aliud esse in utroque, ergo neutri erit sua quidditas suum esse. Sed hoc oportet in Deo ponere, ut probatum est. Ergo neutrum illorum duorum est hoc quod intelligimus nomine Dei. Sic igitur impossibile est ponere duos deos." Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, lib. 1 cap. 42 n. 10.

3. The existence of a particular, on the other hand, if this kind of talk is allowed at all (but nowadays increasingly it is), is simply the presence of that individual in the domain of a possible world, namely, in the domain of the actual world.
4. Necessary existence is just existence in all possible worlds.
5. Perfections are properties that make the thing instantiating them better.

By contrast, PMP would hold the following, roughly corresponding principles:

- (1) Predicates signify individualized forms or natures of individuals.
- (2) The existence of a certain kind of thing is the significate of the predicate ‘is’ or ‘exists’ or ‘being’ in that thing, which is also the actuality of the form or nature signified by the predicate naming this kind of thing.
- (3) The existence of a particular is again just the significate of ‘is’, ‘exists’ or ‘being’ in this thing.
- (4) Necessary existence is either the existence of naturally incorruptible substances, which nevertheless could be annihilated by God’s ceasing to sustain them in His continuous creation, or the absolutely necessary existence of God, which can in no way be annihilated, for it is just Being itself.
- (5) Perfections, i.e., absolute perfections, are the *significata* of such names that it is absolutely better to be named by than not.²⁷

Even this very rough outline, which may not faithfully reflect the thought of any single actual thinker in either tradition, allows some important points of contrast concerning the respective conceptions of divine nature of these philosophers.

As we could see, pre-modern thinkers regarded the unity, simplicity and immutability of God as necessary conclusions, inevitably following from these principles along with what we are supposed to understand by the name ‘God’, no matter how we articulate this proper understanding, as long as it squares with the general intention of conceiving of a supreme being of utmost perfection. So, for PMP the classical divine attributes have to apply to God so conceived, and so he would claim that whoever denies these attributes of God is either mistaken, or he is talking about something else, using the name equivocally.

CPR’s framework, however, does not seem to entail this as an inevitable conclusion. For even if he explicates the meaning of the name ‘God’ as the name of a necessary being that possesses all possible perfections, this would not entail the uniqueness of this being in CPR’s framework. This is so because if we reject the logically not necessary principle

²⁷ “all those names which are imposed to signify some perfection absolutely are properly said of God, and they apply to Him primarily as far as the thing signified is concerned, although not as far as the mode of signifying is concerned, such as ‘wisdom’, ‘goodness’, ‘essence’ and the like; and these are the ones of which Anselm says that [for any such name N] it is absolutely and entirely better to be [N] than not to be [N].” – “... omnia illa nomina quae imponuntur ad significandum perfectionem aliquam absolute, proprie dicuntur de Deo, et per prius sunt in ipso quantum ad rem significatam, licet non quantum ad modum significandi, ut sapientia, bonitas, essentia et omnia hujusmodi; et haec sunt de quibus dicit Anselmus, quod simpliciter et omnino melius est esse quam non esse.” Aquinas, *Scriptum super Sententiis*, lb. 1, d. 22, q. 1, a. 2 co.

of the identity of indiscernibles (the reverse of the logically necessary indiscernibility of identicals), then we have to say that no collection of properties uniquely determines a single individual. But then any number of individuals can have the collection of all properties that are regarded as perfections, and they can all be present in all possible worlds. Thus, for CPR it would not entail a contradiction to assume the existence of several supreme beings, that is, several “Gods”. Also, for him it would not take away anything from the perfection of any of these “Gods”, if they turned out to be changeable. For they would still be present in all possible worlds and would still have all properties classified as perfections, if they also had some other (accidental) properties in some worlds that they would not have in others or if they had some such properties in some world at some time and would not have it at other times.

But then in this framework, an articulation of the meaning of the name ‘God’ that may be verbally similar to pre-modern articulations will obviously carry radically different implications. For CPR’s changeable “Gods” residing in all possible worlds would be nothing like the God of PMP. However, if it is PMP’s articulation of the original intuitive idea of the God of gods that genuinely captures what all people understand by the name ‘God’ in the sense in which this term signifies true divine nature, then, CPR’s “God” or “Gods” must be something else. This would have to be case, at least, *if* CPR were to insist on using the term ‘God’ according to his definition as a necessary, perfect being, *as interpreted in the framework of his metaphysical principles*.

However, in that case CPR’s principles would serve *not* as *metaphysical principles*, but as *regulative semantic principles* to define a new sense of the term ‘God’. But then his “God” or “Gods” will have nothing to do with the God of monotheistic religions, so he might as well just start a new religion, worshipping these “lesser” gods, like the pagan Greeks and Romans did (except, maybe, with the difference that his gods will be more “well-behaved” in all possible worlds).

On the other hand, CPR may choose to engage the pre-modern tradition, which, however, he finds in error in at least some of its claims concerning the one true God. He will, therefore, parasitically refer to the targeted referent of this tradition, without sharing the regulative beliefs of this tradition. In this case, however, if he genuinely contradicts this tradition in some of his claims concerning God, such as the mutability vs. immutability of God, and the traditional arguments are sound, then CPR is simply wrong, as a consequence of his own misconception of divine perfection. But more likely, if he is proceeding by denying or just ignoring the pre-modern tradition’s *regulative* principles, then he will again just talk past this tradition, for even if he now may refer to the same God, he may not properly understand the claims made about Him, and thus would still not properly be able to contradict this tradition.

For example, he might understand the traditional claim that God is all His perfections in terms of *his own* concept of perfections. So, the traditional claim *on his reading* will translate into the obviously absurd claim that God is identical with a number of distinct abstract entities. But this “translation” of the traditional thesis into CPR’s own conceptual idiom yields absurdity only because it is in fact a *mistranslation*. So, while talking parasitically about the same God as the tradition, he still cannot properly engage this tradition, and thus his criticisms amount to *ignoratio elenchi*. To be sure, *some* such

misunderstandings can relatively easily be dispelled by clarifying that ‘perfection’ in this tradition did not and could not refer to CPR’s abstract entities. But for the proper understanding of what this tradition *did* mean by ‘perfection’ it is not enough just to give a formulaic definition of the term, for that definition can properly be grasped only if it is understood as it functioned in the entire conceptual system of this tradition. (Of course, it is useless to provide the mathematical definition of, say, the derivative of a function to someone who is unfamiliar with the theory of functions and set theory in the first place.)

So, finally, CPR can genuinely succeed in the task of properly engaging this tradition *only if* he clarifies not only the senses of this or that term or thesis in an *ad hoc* manner for the sake of some particular argument, but rather if he is willing to re-learn at least the basics of the entire conceptual framework without which the understanding of any particular term or thesis can only be partial. For picking up the meanings of some terms and phrases without an understanding of the conceptual system in which these properly function is pretty much like knowing some Latin words and proverbs, but without having at least the basics of Latin grammar and a decent vocabulary. But that would certainly not amount to competence in Latin.

8. Talking about the one true God

So, if CPR wants to talk competently about the God of Christianity, he has to be able to genuinely engage that tradition which is arguably the most reliable depository of the *authentic tradition* of Western Christianity, namely, the medieval theological tradition (although *that* argument is beyond the scope of the present discussion).²⁸ Therefore, if CPR’s troubles with engaging the pre-modern theological tradition are like the troubles that speakers of different languages face in their communication, then the remedy should be obvious: he should *learn the language*. But learning a language does not consist in *translation*, for translation is a secondary activity *presupposing* mastery of both languages. And it does not consist in picking up single phrases like proverbs or the set phrases of travel guides either. What learning a language genuinely requires, as any bilingual person can tell, is the acquisition of *the ability to think in that language*. It is then, and *only then*, when a person has acquired this ability that he will be able to contrast, compare, and argue about any thoughts formulated in either language. This can only be achieved, however, by *living* with that language for a considerable length of time.

But what does it mean to live with a different language? Well, what does it take to settle in a different country? It takes primarily openness, a willingness to learn and appreciate the customs and habits of its people before judging them, a willingness to learn the ways they think and talk. But the characteristic ways of thinking and talking are constituted precisely by those *regulative* beliefs the denial of which yields not simple disagreement,

²⁸ I think it is also worth noting here that this tradition, precisely in its logical, semantical and metaphysical principles, was actually closer to the other great monotheistic traditions, namely, medieval Judaism and Islam, than it is to the Christianity of certain contemporary philosophers of religion. Aquinas never had any doubts that the God of Avicenna or Averroes, or the God of Rabbi Moyses, or for that matter the Prime Mover of Aristotle was the same God he worshipped. So, whoever wants to engage discourse not only about the Christian God, but also about the God of these great monotheistic religions in general, will have to have recourse to this tradition.

but a failure of understanding. It was in fact in this spirit that in a review of Anthony Kenny's book *Aquinas on Mind* I noted that the best parts of Kenny's discussion are those in which he notes that some of Aquinas's claims are to be taken as "truisms".²⁹ For recognizing such claims *as truisms* is precisely the recognition of their role as expressions of *regulative principles* that cannot be denied without failing to understand them properly, just as it is not possible to deny the English claim that bachelors are unmarried without failing to understand its terms properly.

Of course, accepting the regulative principles or grammatical rules of a language need not amount to accepting that whatever is said in that language is true. For not every claim of the language should be taken as an expression of a semantic rule. But understanding a language involves precisely the ability to tell apart those claims that express such rules from those claims that do not. And finding out about the truth of the latter can only follow upon the proper recognition of the former.³⁰

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²⁹ Klima, G. (1998) Review of A. Kenny: *Aquinas on Mind*, New York: Routledge, 1995, in *Faith and Philosophy*, 15(1998), pp. 113-117.

³⁰ Cf. Klima, G. "The Semantic Principles Underlying Saint Thomas Aquinas's Metaphysics of Being", *Medieval Philosophy and Theology*, 5(1996), pp. 87-141.

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