

CAN CHRISTIAN TALK ABOUT GOD BE LITERAL?

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Introduction

It is no surprise that many Christian statements about God are metaphorical: metaphorical language can be very appealing, and is appropriate to express new experiences. Some modern theologians assume that metaphor is the best, or even the only way to speak about God. However, if all Christian statements about God were metaphorical, their meaning could hardly be understood and a theoretical explanation of their content would be very difficult. Therefore, in order to understand the Christian belief in God, to communicate it with others, and to reflect systematically upon its implications, literal language is also required. But is non-metaphorical talk about God possible? Classical theology has always maintained the possibility of non-metaphorical, literal talk about God, but it has construed literal talk about God in different ways. Aquinas, for instance, argued that we can talk about God both metaphorically and analogously, but not univocally. Scotus, by contrast, argued that analogical terms for God have a univocal core meaning, and that transcendental or transcategorical terms such as “to be,” “good,” and “true” can be used univocally of God and creatures. The controversy between a Thomist and Scotist approach to religious and theological language remains a matter of intense debate.¹ Aquinas’s account cannot be fully understood apart from its ontological presuppositions, such as, for example, the categories of Aristotle, a fixed hierarchical order of kinds, and ontic participation. In his view, terms for perfections of created beings can say something about God the Creator because all beings participate in being, the source of which is God, *Ipsum Esse Subsistens*.² Because the Creator does not belong to any kind,³ is simple,⁴ and is not a univocal cause

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of creation,⁵ we cannot talk about God in univocal terms. But we can talk about him analogously because he is the perfect cause of all being, who himself in an eminent way possesses and is all the perfections he causes in his creatures.⁶ Scotus grounds the possibility of univocal and analogical talk about God in the univocity of "being": although divine being and created being are different in that divine being is infinite and created being is finite, the concept of being can be applied univocally to both Creator and creatures.⁷ In addition, he argues that perfection terms that are applied to both God and creatures have a univocal core meaning.⁸ A modern doctrine of analogical talk about God is offered by Barth in the framework of his theological epistemology.⁹ His actualistic account raises serious problems. Although Barth is trying to determine the specific meaning of terms for God as precisely as possible in his theological reflections, his theory of analogy does not explain why some words can be applied to God and others cannot, nor how the words rightly applied to God acquire their specific meaning.¹⁰ As a result, according to Trevor Hart's discussion of Barth's treatment of God's love, we do not know what we are saying when we say that God is love and we cannot hand on to others what we "know."¹¹

It is not my aim in this article to examine Aquinas's, Scotus's and Barth's views on analogical talk about God and their ontological and epistemological presuppositions. Instead, I will investigate whether modern arguments for the claim that all Christian talk about God must be metaphorical are compelling by exploring whether it is possible to understand at least some Christian statements about God literally. Although, of course, the ontological and epistemological aspects of the problem, which have been discussed extensively by Aquinas, Scotus, and Barth and their commentators, cannot be completely ignored in the following discussion, I will not focus on them but on the linguistic question of how to make a clear distinction between metaphorical and literal language, and on the question of whether Christian talk about God can be literal. In addition, my primary concern here is with the religious language of the Christian faith, not with the language of theological analysis and argument.

The main arguments for the claim that we can only metaphorically talk about God can be roughly summarized as follows:

- (1) When we use the same words we normally use to refer to and describe entities in our world in order to talk about God, we transfer these words to another domain. Transferring words to another domain is using them metaphorically; so when we talk about God, we talk metaphorically.¹²
- (2) Because we cannot talk about the transcendent God in the way we talk about objects in the world, we can only speak indirectly about God by using models; to speak indirectly by means of models is to speak metaphorically.¹³

- (3) Because the words with which we refer to and describe God are normally used to refer to and describe created entities, and because God the Creator is different from created reality, it is impossible to determine the specific meaning of the words we apply to God. Therefore the words we apply to God cannot be used literally.¹⁴
- (4) Because we cannot know the essence of God at all, we cannot describe him, but only express our conjectures about him.¹⁵

The fourth argument is valid; if God's essence cannot be known at all, talk about God cannot be literal. So, if one accepts the premise of (4), the problem is resolved. If one thinks that God can somehow be known, one could still deny the possibility of literal talk about God on the basis of the first three arguments. In what follows I will examine these arguments, and discuss whether it is true that 1) the transfer of words to new domains makes their use metaphorical; 2) the transcendent God cannot be referred to and described without models; and 3) the specific meaning of words applied to the Creator cannot be determined.

My discussion will focus on the language about God of the Christian faith, which can be found in the Bible, the Christian tradition, and the practices of contemporary believers. I will follow the lead of Janice Thomas's suggestion that many statements about God are made in the same way as statements about human persons:

(. . .) if I write (about someone), say, "he is trustworthy" (. . .) I am making a judgment of his character as I think it has been revealed in his actions and those actions are both my evidence for the judgment of trustworthiness and the material I would use if asked what I meant in calling him trustworthy. (. . .) Some believers might insist that God intervened in their lives and that, from the sort of intervention they are aware of, they are able to make a judgment that God is trustworthy which is as well-confirmed as any judgment we might make about the trustworthiness of any man.¹⁶

I believe that something like this has happened in biblical talk about God, and is still happening in the Christian community today: experiences of God's revealing actions are narrated, and a concept of God emerges on this basis. For Christians, the story of Jesus Christ is the center of these stories. Christians believe what this central story tells them: that Jesus Christ was sent by God into this world, lived, was crucified, was raised from the dead, and is alive and present among us today by God's Spirit. Reading this story, they can be addressed by the living Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. With Dalferth, we can say that the subject of this address is what they call "God."¹⁷

When we investigate the possibility of non-metaphorical talk about God, much depends on how the terms "literal," "metaphorical," and "analogical"

are defined in relation to each other. If, for instance, someone were to accept that “literal” is equal to “univocal,” he would have to consider both metaphorical and analogical language as non-literal. Therefore, in order to assess the arguments for exclusively metaphorical Christian talk about God, I will first try to define precisely the difference between metaphorical and literal language. Of course, a full account of the nature of metaphorical language cannot be given here; important aspects of metaphorical language such as the creativity of the “living” metaphor will be left aside. Then, I will discuss whether the referent of Christian talk about God can be literally referred to and literally described. Finally, I will draw a conclusion.

The Difference Between Metaphorical and Literal Language

Let us begin with the observation that at least one word in a metaphorical statement is used without any of its standard meanings. Therefore, we have to reflect on the notion of the meaning of a word in order to understand the nature of metaphor. A word normally has a meaning in the context of a particular sentence, but its meaning(s) can also be considered in isolation. For the purposes of our discussion, it is crucial to understand how the meaning of a word is related to its reference, and how the meaning of a word is related to its use. Let us first briefly consider the relation between meaning and reference.

Meaning and reference of a term must be distinguished because terms with different meanings, such as “morning star” and “evening star,” can refer to the same thing. According to Frege, the reference of terms is determined by their meaning; it is by the meaning of “cat” that we can use this term to refer to cats. An exception to this is the use of proper names, words by which we directly refer to individual entities or states of affairs.¹⁸ Leaving aside its etymology, the term “Peter” has no specific meaning in a given language system. It is just a name for the person called “Peter.” Because many persons bear the proper name “Peter,” the reference of this proper name cannot be understood without further descriptions—for instance that Peter is my brother, who was born at a particular time and place, etc.¹⁹ But this does not mean that the word “Peter” as such is a descriptive term. As Saul Kripke has argued in his so-called causal theory of reference, a proper name is fixed to its particular referent if this referent has been “baptized” by that name, and if this name is used by a chain of successive speakers who know that this is the proper name for this particular entity.²⁰ A proper name can only refer to this particular entity; it is, to use Kripke’s language, a “rigid designator.” A “rigid designator” can refer to a particular entity without having any meaning. As we will see later, the reference of proper names is important for the definition of metaphor and the problem of literal talk about God.

Hilary Putnam has extended the causal theory of reference to terms for natural kinds like “water.” He argues that such words have an indexical

component: "water" is stuff that is similar to a standard instance of water, a paradigm we can point to, such as the liquid in Lake Michigan. When the physical microstructure of water (H_2O) was discovered, the meaning of "water" in the language community as a whole changed.²¹ Leaving Putnam's concerns aside, I conclude from this example that there are cases in which the meaning of a word is determined by paradigmatic referents and can change by the discovery of properties of these paradigms. This change of meaning of "water" by the discovery of its physical structure (H_2O) can be explained by the theory that the meaning of a term is constituted by components of meaning, or semantic features.²² Before the discovery of H_2O , the meaning of "water" in the language community included "fluid," "colorless," "tasteless," and "transparent"; after this discovery it also includes " H_2O ." The semantic features "fluid," "colorless," "tasteless," and "transparent" are not removed when the new semantic feature " H_2O " is added to the meaning of "water." Therefore, the new meaning of "water" is more precise, more complete than the old one, but it is not totally different. The meaning of "water" has been further determined by the discovery that water is H_2O . Not only the meaning of natural kind terms, but also the meaning of adjectives or property terms can change by the discovery of a new property. Richard Swinburne gives as an example the discovery of a new kind of blueness, a property similar to the blueness known until then. When the entities which have this newly discovered property begin to serve as paradigmatic instances of blueness, the meaning of "blue" will change, and a new meaning of "blue" will emerge.²³

Let us now consider the relation between the meaning and the use of a word. Meaning and use should be carefully distinguished.²⁴ The meaning of a word is the standard conceptual content attached to it in a language community, which can be described in general or specialized lexicons; use is the application of the word in particular contexts and situations. Meanings belong to a given language-system; use of words is a matter of actual speech or writing. The standard meaning of a word can be analyzed in terms of its semantic features. Semantic features of "bachelor," for instance, are "man" and "unmarried." By application of a word in a particular context and situation, the word acquires a special interpretation. Thus, the interpretation of a word in a given context and situation is determined both by its meaning and by its use. When someone tells me "I hit my leg against the corner of the table," I understand that this particular table is not round. "Not being round" is part of my interpretation of "table" in the context of the sentence in which it is used, but it is not a semantic feature of the standard meaning of "table." Of course, not all words have a standard meaning. Deictic terms such as "this," "that," "here," and "then", which point to the actual situation of the speaker, for instance, are used to refer to particular things without having a standard meaning. But descriptive terms do have one or more standard meanings, which can be distinguished from their use. If, with Wittgenstein,

the meaning of a word were reduced to its use, a word would no longer have a standard meaning in the given language of a language community, and literal and metaphorical language could no longer be categorically distinguished. However, Wittgenstein's famous analysis of the various uses of "game"²⁵ does not show that "game" has no standard meanings at all; it only shows that it is impossible to define one complete standard meaning of this word in all its usages. According to the Dutch linguist Anton Reichling, the word "game" has several related standard meanings which can be ordered in a sequence in such a way that successive meanings have central semantic features in common; not all the meanings in the series need to have central semantic features in common in order to be related meanings.²⁶ David Burrell, who is very sympathetic to Wittgenstein's approach, also acknowledges that the interpretation of "game" is not completely determined by its use in a particular context and situation, and that metaphorical uses of "game" must be distinguished from normal uses of "game" as a generic term.²⁷

A word can have more than one meaning, and the relation between these meanings can be different. In the case of homonymy, these meanings are totally different. "Bank" can mean the slope alongside a river or a money-shop; the word "bank" as such, out of its context, is equivocal. When a word has the same meaning in every context in which it is used, its meaning is univocal. A word can also have meanings that are not completely different but are related to each other (polysemy). If this relation between meanings is a relation of similarity, these meanings can be called analogical meanings. The analogy between meanings can be explained in terms of their semantic features.²⁸ "Sharp" can be used in "this knife is sharp," and in "she has a sharp mind." A "sharp" knife and a "sharp" mind are both "penetrating" and "acute," but only a "sharp" knife includes the semantic feature "suitable to cut some stuff," and only a "sharp" mind includes "quick." The meaning of "sharp" in "a sharp knife" is analogical to the meaning of "sharp" in "a sharp mind." An objection to this distinction between equivocal and analogical meanings might be that the equivocal meanings of the "bank" of the river and the "bank" (building) where I can get money have the semantic feature "material" in common, and could therefore be considered as analogical as well. However, although it may be difficult to draw the line between equivocal and analogical meanings in particular cases, there is still a difference: the common semantic feature "material" is not central to, or distinctive for the meanings of "bank," but peripheral.²⁹ By contrast, the common semantic feature "penetrating" is central to and distinctive for both meanings of "sharp," and that is why these meanings are analogical. Thus, univocal meanings have all their central semantic features in common; analogous meanings do have some central semantic features in common; equivocal meanings have no or only peripheral semantic features in common. All these meanings are standard meanings in a given language.

Two points in this account of the meaning of words in a given language are important for our discussion of the possibility of literal talk about God. First, this account does not presuppose or imply that meanings of words immediately and fully represent the essence of the entities and properties they refer to. Moreover, meanings are not considered as complete and fixed. As the example of "water" has shown, the meaning of a word can change by the discovery of new characteristics of the thing(s) to which it refers. The meaning of a word can also change by extension of its application. If there was a time when "sharp" was only being applied to things like knives, "sharp" acquired a new analogical meaning when it was applied to a mind for the first time. When the application of "sharp" to minds became quite common, this new meaning of "sharp" became a standard meaning. So by change of meaning a new standard meaning of a word, a more determinate meaning or an analogical meaning, can be established. Second, all kinds of words can have standard analogical meanings or can acquire new standard analogical meanings, and the analogical meanings of a word can be explained in terms of semantic features. The establishment of a new standard analogical meaning of a word by the extension of its domain of application is quite common in the development of a language. Therefore, there is no need to restrict analogical language to special classes of terms with a natural affinity for extended use, "intrinsically analogous terms" such as "transcendental terms" and "appraisal terms,"³⁰ for example.

Now that we have explored what it is for a word to have a meaning, we can discuss the difference between metaphorical and literal language. First of all, in a synchronic perspective on language as a system of syntax and vocabulary at a given time, literal use of words should be distinguished from figurative use of words. The distinction between literal and figurative applies only to the use of words, not to the meaning of words; strictly speaking, words as such, as elements of the system of language, do not have a literal or a figurative meaning.³¹ A descriptive word is used literally when it is used in one of its standard meanings, and a proper name is used literally when it is used to refer to its bearer. Because analogical meanings are standard meanings, words with analogical meanings can be used literally. So the word "sharp" is used literally both in "a sharp knife" and in "a sharp mind." A descriptive word is used figuratively when it is not used in any of its standard meanings, and a proper name is used figuratively when it is used to refer to something else than its normal bearer. Metaphorical language is a form of figurative use of words among others like metonymy and synecdoche; it is that figurative use of words in which the standard meaning of a descriptive word or the normal referent of a proper name is used to provide a model for something else.³² In "the chairman plowed through the discussion," "plowing" provides a model for leading the discussion with difficulty. The literal understanding of a metaphorical statement is necessarily false. Interestingly, not only descriptive words, but also proper names can be used

metaphorically. When it is said of Jones in a particular situation "here comes Ronald Reagan,"³³ the proper name "Ronald Reagan" is used to describe Jones on the model of the person to which this proper name refers or on the model of the commonplaces associated with that person. Although descriptive words as such cannot have a metaphorical meaning and proper names have no meaning at all, the metaphorical use of descriptive words and proper names can result in a metaphorical statement, which does have a meaning.³⁴ So, in contrast with words, statements can have a metaphorical meaning.

We should consider a metaphorical statement primarily as a linguistic phenomenon.³⁵ The understanding of "Bill is a wolf" requires knowledge of the associations and implications which are connected with the term "wolf" in a given language community. These associations and implications, a system of commonplaces, constitute the model on which Bill is indirectly described.³⁶ Besides the linguistic set of associated meanings, which I will call a linguistic model, other kinds of models can be effective in a metaphorical statement such as physical events, visual images, and mental images. It is not always necessary to consider physical, visual, or mental models in order to understand the meaning of a metaphorical statement. Only the linguistic model is a necessary condition for a metaphorical statement to be successful. Mostly, the linguistic model of the metaphorical statement remains implicit:³⁷ one can understand "Bill is a wolf" without reflecting upon the associations of the term "wolf." A model is in some respects similar, or analogous to the reality it models. If the model exists extra-linguistically and extra-mentally, this analogy might be called ontological analogy.

From a diachronic perspective on the development of a language, an important objection to this account of metaphor can be made. Repeated metaphorical use of a descriptive term can lead to a change of its meaning.³⁸ When someone called the last part of a river near the sea its "mouth" for the first time, the word "mouth" was used metaphorically: the mouth of a living being was taken as a model of the last part of the river near the sea. But in the course of time this surprising, new use of the word became familiar, and "mouth of the river" acquired a new standard meaning. Now, "mouth (of the river)" is one of the analogical meanings of "mouth" in the lexicon, a meaning in which such semantic features as "bodily organ" and "can be closed and opened" are no longer included. Thus, repeated metaphorical use resulted in a new analogical meaning. This change of meaning in the development of a language suggests that there is no stable standard meaning of a word that can be separated from its use, and that, as a consequence, literal use of descriptive words cannot be defined as use of words in their standard meaning and cannot be distinguished from metaphorical use.

Nevertheless, I think the distinction between literal and metaphorical use of descriptive words should be maintained for three reasons. Firstly, the instability between meaning and use during the process of change of meaning is only temporary. When the metaphor has died, the metaphori-

cally used word has acquired a new standard meaning, which can be used literally. Secondly, not every repeated metaphorical use of a word results in a change of meaning. We employ many conventional metaphors such as "the evening of my life" and "Emily is the sun of our family"; the metaphorical use of "evening" and "sun" in these statements does not change their standard meaning. Thirdly, and most importantly, as Janet Soskice has argued, metaphorical use of words is a phenomenon that should be distinguished from analogical extension of a word's domain of application.³⁹ Analogical extension occurs by application of a word to newly discovered or created entities which are in most important respects similar to the entities or phenomena the word referred to before.⁴⁰ If we discovered intelligent life on Mars which communicated with us without uttering words, and we said that "they told us something," most people would not consider this as metaphorical use of "to tell," but as a justified extension of what "to tell" really means.⁴¹ By this transfer to a new domain, "to tell" acquires a new analogical meaning in which the semantic feature "to utter words" is no longer included. It is even possible that a word is extended to a new domain without acquiring a new analogical meaning. Consider "to ride." Once, going on a bicycle was called "to ride a bicycle" for the first time. Is "to ride (a bike)" an analogical or a univocal meaning of "to ride"? If it were an analogical meaning, it should have common and different central semantic features. Common semantic features are "to sit on" and "to control movements"; a different semantic feature of "to ride (a bike)" could be "to control the movements of a non-living instrument." Is this semantic feature central or peripheral to the meaning of "to ride (a bike)"? I think most speakers would consider it peripheral. Construed this way, "to ride (a bike)" is used with the univocal standard meaning of "to ride." So we can apply a word to a new domain with a new analogical meaning or with its standard univocal meaning. In both cases, the word is transferred to a new domain without metaphorical use.

Soskice's distinction between analogical extension and metaphorical use is criticized by Garrett Green. According to Green, no categorical distinction between metaphor and analogical extension can be made because both are based on ontological analogy, and the understanding of both requires imagination.⁴² However, the ontological analogy on which analogical extension of application is based is different from the ontological analogy between the model and the subject matter of a metaphorical statement. In metaphorical use, there is a striking difference between the model of the metaphor and the reality it refers to. A creative metaphorical statement is characterized by "tension" and discloses an analogy not discovered before:⁴³ surprisingly, a mouth is in some specific respects similar to the last part of a river. This is why a metaphorical statement cannot be understood literally. The literal understanding of "this river has a big mouth" was a category-mistake when it was heard for the first time, and in this literal understanding the statement

would be necessarily false: a river has no bodily organ. Even when the metaphor has died, its model can be made explicit again as a tool for fruitful reflection, as Soskice rightly points out.⁴⁴ Our understanding of the function of the last part of the river may be stimulated by thinking about it on the model of a mouth, for example to consider whether it is useful to shut it by a barrage or dam from time to time. By contrast, in cases of analogical extension, the described realities are very similar. The literal understanding of "the Martians told us something" was no category-mistake when it was heard for the first time, and the statement is not necessarily false in this literal understanding. Therefore, the distinction between analogical extension and metaphorical use should be maintained.

The result of this discussion of metaphorical language can be summarized by the following definition. A statement is metaphorical, if and only if 1) at least one descriptive term is used without any of its standard meanings, or at least one proper name is used to refer to something else than its normal bearer; and 2) the metaphorically used word provides a model.

In this definition of metaphorical language the notion of "transfer" plays no essential role. Transfer is a very general notion. It already occurs when a verb, common noun, or adjective is univocally applied to a newly discovered entity, for instance "to ride" to riding a bike, "fluid" to a newly discovered fluid, or "red" to a newly discovered red entity. Analogical extension, such as the "telling" of Martians, is another case of transfer. So it is not the transfer to another domain that makes the use of a word metaphorical; it is the use of a word to provide a model in order to describe something indirectly in terms of something else. By contrast, literal language describes by words in their standard meaning, i.e. directly.

The Proper Name of God

Now that we have seen the difference between metaphorical and literal language, we are able to ask in a precise manner whether Christian talk about God can be literal. A statement about God is typically expressed in a sentence with a subject and a predicate. The predicate of the sentence describes the entity which is named by the subject. Let us first consider the subject of sentences about God. The subject of such sentences may contain nouns such as "(our) Father" and "(the) Lord" or adjectives such as "(the) Almighty" and "(the) Most High." Although these expressions might be considered as proper names of God, the words "father," "lord," "mighty," and "high" as such are general terms that can also be used in order to name or to describe something else. I will not discuss here whether these descriptive words are used in any of their standard meanings when they are used to name God. Instead, I will only ask whether in Christian talk about God proper names of God can be found, names, that is, that cannot be literally applied to other

entities. If this turns out to be the case, these words are literally used when they are applied to God because God is their normal bearer.

Could the term "God" itself be construed as a proper name of the Christian God? Richard Miller and William Alston have argued that "God" is a proper name because it originates from real experience(s) of and contact(s) with the one God of all religious traditions.⁴⁵ This would mean that all its users would apply this term to one and the same divine entity in any context in which it is used. However, as Katherin Rogers points out, the characteristics of the Father of Jesus Christ and of Odin may be so different that we have no reason to assume that these two are one and the same God.⁴⁶ Therefore, the term "God" as such is no proper name of God in Christian talk about God. However, the term "God" can be *used* as a proper name in specific practices and contexts of Christian talk about God. For instance, when Christians use the term "God" in prayer and praise, they address the One whom Jesus Christ named his Father. In this particular use, the term "God" is causally linked to the one Jesus called his Father. When Christians use the term "God" in this way to address the Father of Jesus Christ, they use the term "God" as a proper name. Thus, although "God" is not a proper name in general, it can *function* as a proper name in a specific context and situation in which it is causally linked with Jesus' naming of God.

An objection to this might be that "Father" is not a proper name, but a descriptive term used metaphorically to describe God. This is true, but when the term "Father" is used to address God, the word loses its descriptive character, and acquires the character of a proper name. This use is initiated by Jesus. "On the lips of Jesus, 'Father' became a proper name for God."⁴⁷ Jesus invited his disciples to call his Father together with him their Father.⁴⁸ Therefore, "Father" can sometimes be construed as a proper name in Christian talk about God. This is not because "Father" as such is a proper name of God. As such it is a descriptive term, which can only be used metaphorically to describe God. But in specific contexts and practices of Christian talk about God, it can *function* as a proper name.

The God Jesus named his and our Father is the God of Israel. In the Old Testament, "YHWH" is the proper name with which this particular God is addressed and identified; it is not a descriptive term or a concept.⁴⁹ "YHWH" is the "ultimate referent of the biblical texts."⁵⁰ According to Exodus 3,13f., the God of Israel wants to be addressed with this name by Moses and by all who come after him. Thus, in this text, "YHWH" is introduced as a rigid designator. The name "YHWH" is not pronounced by Jews because of its holiness. Terms that are used as equivalents for the proper name "YHWH" such as "LORD," "Eternal One," and "Being" may all have certain standard meanings in their normal use, but when they are used as a rendering of "YHWH," they function as proper names for this God. In Christian talk about God, the proper name "YHWH" directly refers to the God of Israel, the Father of Jesus Christ. Thus, "YHWH" can be literally used of God.

Can God be Literally Described?

Let us now consider whether general terms can be used literally in the predicate of a sentence about God in order to describe him. This would be the case if there were descriptive terms which could be directly applied to him in one of their standard meanings, and if the resulting statement could be understood without a model. Are there such words? And if so, how and why would they differ from words that cannot be literally applied to God? And what kind of words could not be literally applied to God? It is most convenient to start with the last question. Most people will agree that usual statements like "God is our king" and "God is carrying me" are metaphorical. The unusual statement "God is green" should also be understood as metaphorical; it is necessarily false if understood literally because God has no color. "King," "to carry," and "green" cannot be understood in one of their standard meanings when applied to God. A king is a concrete human person, who can be seen on his throne or in his palace; to carry involves bodily movements; green is a visible property. These concrete terms directly describe perceivable entities, actions and properties in our world. Because God is not visible as an object in our world, they cannot describe God directly, but only indirectly, on the basis of a model. However, not all descriptive terms for God are such concrete terms. "Creator" is an example of a term which has been invented in religious language precisely to describe God as an entity which is different from all the objects in our world and from our world as a whole. Terms like "infinite," "perfect," "simple," "independent," and "unconditional" have been given theological meaning in order to describe God as different from created reality. These are abstract, technical terms which try to describe God apart from his relation to and his active involvement in creation. They are not experiential, but theoretical because their meaning can only be understood in the framework of an ontological and/or epistemological theory. Although terms like these are indispensable to characterize God's transcendence, I will not discuss them here. I will concentrate instead on the question of how we should construe descriptive terms in Christian talk about God which are more abstract than concrete terms like "king," "to carry," and "green," and which are not theoretical like "infinite" and "simple"; I have in mind predicates used in statements like "God is good," "God is just," "God is love," "God liberated his people," "God has spoken to us." Can such predicates be applied to God in one of their standard meanings and can the resulting statement be understood without a model?

It is useful for our discussion to divide these terms into two classes: verbs, or action terms, and adjectives, or property terms. I will discuss verbs first, because my discussion of property terms for God will depend upon my account of action terms. I will take as an example "to liberate," an action term which is central in Christian talk about God. This is a different kind of term

than “to carry” because the semantic feature “movement of arms (parts of the human body)” is not included in its meaning. Of course, the interpretation of “to liberate” in a specific context and situation may include “movement of arms,” for instance in:

1. The British and Canadian soldiers liberated the Dutch from the oppression of the Germans by shooting the German soldiers.

The interpretation of “to liberate” as including “movement of arms” should be distinguished from the meaning of “to liberate” because “to liberate” can be used with the same meaning without this interpretation, for instance in:

2. Eisenhower and Montgomery liberated the Dutch from the German oppression by sending troops.

However, to say that the meaning of “to liberate” is more abstract than the meaning of “to carry” because it does not include the semantic feature “movement of arms” is somewhat misleading because it is impossible to perform the act *to liberate* without any bodily movement at all; if someone liberates by sending troops, this sending will always involve some movements of the body. A better way to explain the difference between the meanings of “to carry” and “to liberate” is to make a distinction between two different kinds of acts: basic, direct acts, and non-basic, or indirect acts.⁵¹ A non-basic act is performed in or by one or more other acts. For instance, I can perform the non-basic act *to write* by holding my pen and by moving my arm. *To move* is a basic act because it is not performed by one or more other acts. A non-basic act can be performed in different ways: I can write by using my pen and by using my typewriter. Whether I use my pen or my typewriter, in both cases I perform the act of writing. Construed in these terms, “to carry” refers to a direct act, “to liberate” to an indirect act which can be performed in a variety of ways. Because the basic act *to move (arms)* is just one way among others to perform the non-basic act *to liberate*, “movement of arms” is not a semantic feature of “to liberate.” Direct and indirect acts are often performed by the same actor, but it is also possible for someone to perform indirect acts by the direct acts of someone else:

3. Eisenhower and Montgomery liberated the Dutch.

In (3) “to liberate” can be interpreted as referring to an indirect act, which is performed, among other things, by means of the direct acts of shooting by the allied soldiers. But this does not mean that “to shoot” is a semantic feature of “to liberate” in (3). The indirect act of liberating can even be ascribed to a more abstract subject:

4. The USA, Canada, and the UK have liberated the Dutch from the Germans.

Two things about the meaning of "to liberate" can be concluded from these examples. First, although "to liberate" must be interpreted differently in the different contexts of (1), (2), (3), and (4), this does not change its meaning. Second, the fact that "to liberate" is predicated of different subjects in (1), and in (2) and (3), and of a different kind of subject in (4), does not change its meaning either.

Now the question is whether "to liberate" can be literally predicated of God; in other words, whether the meaning of "to liberate" in (1)–(4) can also be the meaning of "to liberate" in:

5. God liberated the Dutch from the Germans.

Of course, the question here is not whether (5) is true if understood literally, but only whether it could possibly be true. If it is necessarily false if understood literally, it is a metaphorical statement. I can only see one reason why it would be necessarily false, namely that God is an entity which cannot perform indirect acts by means of human acts which involve bodily movements.⁵² If one understands God as an entity which cannot possibly act indirectly by means of human acts in the human world or as an entity which cannot act in the human world at all—for instance because he is absolutely transcendent, absolutely simple, or absolutely timeless—then (5) cannot be understood literally. This means that the possibility to understand (5) literally ultimately depends on one's concept of God. It is not that there are different meanings of "to liberate" in (1)–(5) which would preclude a literal understanding of (5); it is the meaning of "God."⁵³ If one understands God as an entity which can act in created reality by means of human acts, there is no reason to understand (5) metaphorically. In biblical stories, some events within the created order are described as indirect acts of God: "YHWH has liberated his people Israel from the slavery in Egypt." Christian talk about God shares this biblical understanding of God as an entity which can act in history by means of events and human actions. Therefore, in the context of Christian talk about God, (5) can be understood as a literal description of an act of God. This is not to say that only Christians can understand (5) literally. The meanings of "God" and of "to liberate" in (5) can also be understood by people who do not believe that there actually is a God who acts in history.

The second class of descriptive terms for God is the set of adjectives, or property terms. Can property terms like "good," "just," and "loving," that are neither concrete nor theoretical terms, be literally applied to God? The use of property terms in general raises intricate ontological questions about the relation between properties and their bearers. Two points are especially relevant for our discussion. First, properties are no concrete entities in our world. I can point to a table, and say "this is a good table," but I cannot point to something in this world and say "this is goodness." Second, many different entities and different kinds of entities can have the same property or

similar properties. Both blue and green tables can be good tables. Not only tables can be good, cars can be good too, although the goodness of a car is different from the goodness of a table in that it implies that, among other things, the car is easy to drive.⁵⁴ Human beings, human acts, human lives can be good as well. Entities not known or not existing before can have well-known properties: "this newly discovered fluid is green"; "this new computer is good." The fact that properties are no concrete entities and can be possessed by different kinds of entities raises an epistemological question and a linguistic question. The epistemological question is whether we can have a concept of a property apart from its bearer so that it can be applied to other entities and other kinds of entities. The linguistic question is how we have to understand the meaning of a word like "good" when this word is applied to different kinds of entities. Let us first consider the epistemological question.

Duns Scotus thinks it is possible to have a concept of a property apart from its bearer so that it can be applied to other entities and other kinds of entities. He follows the Aristotelian theory that concepts are abstracted from sensory experience of concrete entities. However, in Scotus's view, this does not imply that we can apply concepts only to the entities from which they have been abstracted. Scotus argues that our active intellect can form univocal concepts that can be applied to different entities.⁵⁵ He also thinks that our mind can consider the properties of entities separated from the entities in which they exist, and that we can form universal concepts of these properties.⁵⁶ Scotus's account does not require that properties also *exist* as abstract entities independently from the entities in which they exist.⁵⁷ What it does require is that entities, events, and actions have properties and that these properties are somehow real. I think Scotus's account is helpful in order to understand why it is possible to apply the same general concept to different entities and different kinds of entities. Of course, I cannot learn the meaning of the term "good" apart from the experience of concrete good entities. In order to learn the meaning of "good," someone has to point to a good table, to explain why this table is "good" and not bad, and I have to experience myself that this table is good indeed. But once I have learned the meaning of "good," I can directly apply this term to a car, to a human being, a human act, or a human life without thinking about a good table as a model for a good car or a good human act.

However, from a Thomistic perspective, a serious objection against Scotus's account can be made: properties of different kinds of material entities cannot be the same because they cannot be separated from the concrete bearers in which they inhere: the goodness of a table is another goodness than the goodness of a car, and the goodness of a car is another goodness than the goodness of a human being.⁵⁸ According to Aquinas, for a created entity to possess a perfection is to share or participate in that perfection, and what is participated is determined by the mode of being of the participant.⁵⁹

Therefore, "good" cannot have a univocal meaning when it is applied to different kinds of entities. I will not discuss in this context the intricate ontological issues that are at stake here because I have chosen to focus on the linguistic possibility of non-metaphorical talk about God. But Aquinas's objection does point to an important question which must be addressed: is Scotus right in claiming that the meaning of "good" is univocal when it is predicated of different kinds of entities?

This brings us to the second, linguistic question about property terms, which I will discuss in terms of my account of univocal and analogical meaning. Are the meanings of "good" in "a good table," "a good car," and "a good man" univocal meanings or analogical meanings? In all these cases, "good" has the central semantic features "satisfactory" and "suitable" in common.⁶⁰ Univocal meanings have all their central semantic features in common. If "good" would have univocal meanings in all these cases, "satisfactory" and "suitable" would be all the central semantic features of "good," that is, the meaning of "good" would be very general. As a consequence, the specific goodness of a car, that it drives well, or the specific goodness of a man, that he behaves in favor of others, could not be accounted for by the general meaning of "good." The fact that a good car drives well and the fact that a good man behaves in favor of others could only be accounted for by the interpretation of the word "good" in the particular context and situation in which it is used, in the same way in which the roundness of a particular table is a matter of interpretation, not of meaning. But this would mean that the ease of driving of a car is as extrinsic or accidental to the goodness of a car as roundness to a table. Obviously, this consequence is false: a square table can be described as a table, but a car that does not drive well cannot be described as a good car. Therefore, it is better to consider the meanings of "good" in "a good table," "a good car," and "a good man" as analogical meanings, as meanings, that is, which do not have all but only some central semantic features in common. "Good" has analogical meanings in "a good table" and "a good man" in the same way as "sharp" in "a sharp knife" and "a sharp mind."

Now that we have discussed property terms in general, we are able to ask whether property terms can be used literally in order to describe God. Can property terms such as "good," "just," and "loving" be directly applied to God? This is only possible if 1) the goodness, justice, and love of God are the same as or similar to the goodness, justice, and love of entities, events, and actions in our created world;⁶¹ 2) the goodness, the justice, and the love of God can be known; and 3) this knowledge of God's goodness, justice and love can be expressed by one of the standard meanings of the terms for these properties. (1) is the ontological, (2) the epistemological, and (3) the linguistic condition for the possibility of literal description of God's properties. Let us see whether these conditions can be met in Christian talk about God.

Whether the ontological condition for literal description of God can be met depends on the construal of God's transcendence. The transcendence of God is central to the Christian belief in the Creator. The difference between Creator and creatures implies that human beings simply are not capable of immediately and completely grasping the essence of God. But God's transcendence does not prevent the Creator from being present in his creation and to his creatures. Moreover, the Creator can indirectly and partially reveal himself by acting in his creation and by interacting with his creatures. This is crucial to the Christian understanding of God's transcendence: his transcendence does not exclude his immanence. If God's transcendence is understood to be implying that God as the absolute One has no properties at all, property terms cannot describe God. However, according to the Christian faith God is not absolutely transcendent. He is *both* transcendent *and* immanent, and his transcendence does not exclude that he really has properties. Similarly, if God's transcendence is construed as absolute simplicity (by which all God's properties are ultimately identical with God's essence and with each other), it is difficult to see how different property terms can really apply to God himself. However, biblical and Christian talk about God does not imply this strong version of absolute simplicity. If divine simplicity is understood as the coherence of God's essential properties,⁶² different property terms can be really applied to God himself. Furthermore, if God's transcendence is understood to be implying that God and creation can have no identical or similar properties, our property terms cannot literally apply to God's own properties and every description of God in terms of properties is necessarily metaphorical. Talk about God's interaction and relation with us could only be a matter of religious imagination, a way to express a view on an absolutely transcendent and unknowable God. However, why would it be impossible for a transcendent God to be good, just, and loving in his own divine way and in a human way at the same time?⁶³ Moreover, from a Christian perspective, God and creation must have at least some identical or similar properties for two reasons. First, the biblical and Christian God is not transcendent in a way which precludes any interactions and relations with creation, human beings in particular. In the biblical stories, God is understood and proclaimed as really addressing his people, as really establishing and sustaining a covenantal relationship with them, as really loving them. When people, in response, address and love God, they enter in a personal relationship with him. If divine love and human love were completely different, the relationship between God and his people would not be really mutual. Therefore, in a real relationship between God and people, divine and human love must be identical or similar.⁶⁴ Second, the Christian tradition understands the Creator not as the neutral cause of good things, but as the *fons omnium bonorum* who himself is good in an eminent way, indeed, goodness itself.⁶⁵ This unique goodness of God can be conceptualized and

explained in different ways. But however construed, it implies that the goodness of the Creator must at least be similar to the goodness of all the good things God has created. Therefore, in the context of Christian talk about God, there is no ontological reason to understand "this table is good," "this car is good," "this human being is good," and "this action is good" literally, and "God is good" metaphorically.

If we accept that the referents of "God" and "created reality" have some identical or similar properties, the next question is whether we can know them. Properties of God cannot be known by sensory perception because God is not an object in our world. But not only visible objects can be known; invisible entities such as other human minds can be known as well. However, there remains a difference between the invisibility of a human mind and the invisibility of God. Human minds are entities in and part of our created world. By contrast, the Creator is different from and no part of our world. How could the properties of an entity which is not part of our world be known?

According to many biblical stories, God reveals how he is in specific acts, which can be discerned in the context of the biblical story as a whole. Although this is not the only way in which God reveals himself, it is an important one for Christian talk about God. I will not analyze in detail the connection between divine agency, revelation, and properties here,⁶⁶ but I assume that the notion of a self-revealing action is coherent. Specific actions of a person, understood in the context of stories about that person, can reveal essential properties of that person if she is completely herself and manifests herself clearly in these actions. The notion of a self-revealing action does not imply that every action of a person is revealing; a person can perform actions which do not reveal anything about her. Nor does the notion imply that self-revealing actions are necessary. Actions as such are contingent. The ontological distinction between an essential property and a contingent action does not preclude an actor from freely expressing some of her essential properties in specific actions in such a way that others may discover these properties from these actions. Such contingent actions are characterized by an epistemic correspondence with one or more essential properties of the actor.

In biblical stories, specific events in human history are related as revealing actions of God, and these actions do have specific properties. By liberating his people Israel, for example, God exercises his justice among the nations. The coming, the life, the cross, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ are central in the story of the Christian Bible as a whole. The key events of his death and resurrection are proclaimed as actions of God: God has given up his son for all (Rom 8,31) and has declared Jesus to be his son by the resurrection (Rom 1,4). Thus, in the apostolic gospel, cross and resurrection are proclaimed as special, ultimate and revealing divine actions. These actions of God do have specific properties. The cross is ultimately a divine

act of love. The resurrection can be understood as a divine act of justice.⁶⁷ If the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ are the ultimate, self-revealing acts of God, we are entitled to believe that the love and justice which qualify these acts, also qualify their subject. God himself can therefore be taken to possess essentially the properties that his self-revealing acts display. In this way, some of God's essential properties can be indirectly known from his self-revealing acts.

On this account, God's properties can only really be experienced by people who enter in a personal relationship with God. That God's love is revealed in Jesus' death and God's justice in his resurrection cannot be established as a fact by neutral observers. It can only be experienced indirectly in the events of cross and resurrection by people who, moved by God's Spirit, participate in the relationship of love and justice which God has established in Jesus Christ. In this sense, the knowledge of God's properties is relational: the Christian God can only be known in a personal, mutual relationship. But this does not imply that the meaning of the "love (of God)" can only be understood by Christians. Someone who has never been liberated from the armies of an enemy, can understand the meaning of "to liberate" in this context on the basis of his or her own experiences of being liberated in different situations. Thus it is possible to understand the meaning of a descriptive term without having experienced the event that is described by that term. In the same way, people who have no personal relationship with God or who believe that Christian claims about God are false, can perfectly well learn to understand the meaning of the term "love" as it is used in Christian talk about God.

The last, linguistic condition for literal description of God's properties concerns the possibility of using words for God's properties in one of their standard meanings. I will take as an example perhaps the most central word to Christian talk about God: "love." I will understand the noun "love" in "God is love" as referring to the relational property *to be loving*. In Christian talk about God, this statement is grounded in the experience that God has loved us by sending his Son (1 Jn 4,8–12); a love which has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit (Rom 5,4). In its New Testament context, "God is love" means: in his loving action towards us in Jesus Christ and in the relation established with us by the Holy Spirit, we experience that God loves, and that this loving is essential for who he is. Now, the question is whether the term "love" is used literally or metaphorically in "God is love." If it were used metaphorically, a literal understanding would be necessarily false and the statement could only be understood on the basis of a model. Why would this be the case? I see no reason why what Christians experience of God when they are moved by the Spirit and encounter Jesus Christ would be completely different from what they and other people experience, know, and describe as love in other events and relationships.

When we talk about the love of God, we could take the term "love" in a general meaning as in "to like," "to care about," or "to be attracted to." Thus, the meaning of "love" in application to God and to other entities could be understood as univocal, just as "to ride" in "to ride a horse" and "to ride a bike." However, the term "love" has many specific meanings, such as "erotic love," "platonic love," "love of parents," "love of children." Therefore, we should first carefully consider which of these analogous meanings of "love" are the most appropriate ones to describe both God's loving agency and relationship with us and the essential divine property of love that is revealed to us in this agency and relationship. Secondly, we should be aware that by application of one or more of the analogical meanings of "love" to God, the meaning of "(God's) love" will change. To construe the change of meaning of "love" by application to God as an analogical extension in which semantic features of "love" are omitted would make the meaning of "love (of God)" more general. However, in Christian talk about God, the love of God is understood as something very special. Christians believe that by experiencing the love of God in Christ by the Spirit a new kind of love is discovered.⁶⁸ Therefore we must construe the change of meaning of "love" by application to God in a different way. If the experience of the love of God in Christ by the Spirit is accepted in a language community as a paradigm, the meaning of "love (of God)" changes and a new meaning of "love (of God)" emerges.⁶⁹ The next question is whether we can understand the change of meaning of "love" by application to God as a further determination, similar to the further determination of the meaning of "water" by the discovery of H₂O. In the case of "water," a new central semantic feature, "H₂O," was added to its meaning without removing the semantic features "fluid," "colorless," "tasteless," and "transparent." By the discovery of God's love, new semantic features must be added to the meaning of "love (of God)," such as "making attractive what was not attractive before," and "not changing by the lack of response of the loved one."⁷⁰ The central semantic features "to like," "to care about," and "to be attracted to" are not removed from the meaning of "love"; therefore the meaning of "love (of God)" and other meanings of "love" are not equivocal. But the meaning of "love (of God)" cannot include the semantic features "to like what is attractive" and "changing by lack of response"; they are excluded by the semantic features "making attractive what was not attractive before," and "not changing by the lack of response of the loved one." So if "to like what is attractive" and "changing by lack of response" are central semantic features of a standard meaning of "love" in a given language of a language community, these features are removed when "love" is applied to God. Then the meaning of "love (of God)" cannot be considered as a further determination of a standard meaning which included these features, but must be a new specific analogical meaning. But whether the new meaning of "love (of God)" is a more determinate or a specific analogical meaning of "love" is not decisive for our discussion. Once "love (of God)" has acquired a new

meaning which is generally known in a language community, whether this is a more determinate or a specific analogical meaning, this meaning of "love" has become one of the standard meanings of the term in that language community. The new meaning of "love (of God)" is not so completely different from any of the standard meanings of this word that it could only be understood on the basis of a model. When Christians in this way describe God as loving, they know what they mean by this, and non-believers can learn this meaning of "love" as well. Therefore, "love" is used literally, not metaphorically in "God is love."⁷¹

This is not to deny that the meaning of "love (of God)" is provisional and incomplete. It is provisional because new experiences of God's love can lead to a better (i.e., fuller, deeper, richer) understanding of it, which can change the meaning of "love (of God)." It is incomplete because God's love as creative source and origin of all other kinds of love remains a mystery that we cannot fully comprehend. But an incomplete meaning is not an indeterminate meaning. Even if we cannot know all the semantic features of "love (of God)," the meaning of "love (of God)" we do know can still be determinate and applicable to God.⁷²

In the light of this discussion, I conclude that the ontological, epistemological and linguistic conditions for literal description of God can be met in the context of Christian talk about God.

Conclusion

Our discussion of the difference between metaphorical and literal language, and our inquiry into the possibility of literally referring to and literally describing the referent of Christian talk about God, has shown that the first three arguments for exclusively metaphorical talk about God mentioned in the introduction of this article are not convincing.

1. As to metaphorical language, a distinction should be made between meaning, reference, and use of words, and between literal and metaphorical use of words. Moreover, the change of meaning of a word by analogical extension differs from change of meaning by repeated metaphorical use. Because metaphorical use is not the only way to transfer a word to another domain, the application of words to God does not imply that they are used metaphorically.
2. The fact that God cannot be talked about in the way we talk about objects in the world does not imply that we can only talk about him metaphorically. In response to God's address to us in Jesus Christ, we can literally refer to the referent of Christian talk about God with the proper name of the God of Israel, "YHWH." We can also literally describe some of God's actions and some of his properties, which can be indirectly known from his revealing actions.

3. According to the Christian understanding of God, the Creator cannot be totally different from his creation because God creates and sustains a real, mutual relationship with his creatures and is the *fons omnium bonorum*, who himself is good in an eminent way and goodness itself.⁷³

NOTES

- 1 Cf. Catherine Pickstock, "Duns Scotus: His Historical and Contemporary Significance", *Modern Theology*, Vol. 21 no. 4 (October, 2005), pp. 543–574; Thomas Williams, "The Doctrine of Univocity is True and Salutary", *Modern Theology*, Vol. 21 no. 4 (October, 2005), pp. 575–585; Mary Beth Ingham, "Re-situating Scotist Thought", *Modern Theology* Vol. 21 no. 4 (October, 2005), pp. 609–618; David B. Burrell, "Creator/Creatures Relation: 'The Distinction' vs. 'Onto-theology'", *Faith and Philosophy*, Vol. 25 (2008), pp. 177–189; Richard Cross, "Idolatry and Religious Language", *Faith and Philosophy*, Vol. 25 (2008), pp. 190–196.
- 2 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles* (SCG) I.22.9; *Summa theologiae* (ST) Ia.3.4; Ia.4.3 ad 3. For Aquinas's notion of participation see: W. Norris Clarke, "The Meaning of Participation in St. Thomas", in *Explorations in Metaphysics. Being–God–Person* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), pp. 89–101; "What is Most and Least Relevant in the Metaphysics of St. Thomas Today", in *Explorations*, pp. 7, 12–14, 24; "What Cannot Be Said in Saint Thomas's Essence-Existence Doctrine", in *The Creative Retrieval of Saint Thomas Aquinas. Essays in Thomistic Philosophy, New and Old* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2009), pp. 117–131. See also: Wolfhart Pannenberg *Analogie und Offenbarung: Eine kritische Untersuchung zur Geschichte des Analogiebegriffs in der Lehre von der Gotteserkenntnis* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007), pp. 92–122; L.M. de Rijk, *Middeleeuwse Wijsbegeerte: Traditie en vernieuwing*, (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1981), pp. 211–234; Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language*, Robert Czerny with Kathleen McLaughlin and John Costello SJ (trans.), (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), pp. 274–277; Philip A. Rolnick, *Analogical Possibilities: How Words Refer to God* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press 1993), pp. 46–73. Burrell further develops Aquinas's approach of analogous language without presupposing Aquinas's ontology; David Burrell, *Analogy and Philosophical Language* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1973), pp. 124, 125, 254. He treats Aquinas's account of analogical talk about God as a matter of "grammar"; David B. Burrell, *Aquinas: God and Action* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), pp. 1–67. Burrell's neglect of participation metaphysics is criticized by Philip A. Rolnick, *Analogical Possibilities*, pp. 184–185. How exactly the notion of ontic participation shapes Aquinas's account of analogical talk about God is controversial; cf. Paul DeHart, "On Being Heard but not Seen: Milbank and Lash on Aquinas, Analogy and Agnosticism", *Modern Theology*, Vol. 26 no. 2 (April, 2010), pp. 243–277.
- 3 SCG I.24–25; I.32.4; ST Ia.3.5; Ia.13.5 s.c.
- 4 SCG I.32.5; ST Ia.13.2.
- 5 SCG I.32.1; ST Ia.13.2; Ia.13.5 ad 1. For Aquinas's notion of analogical causation see: Eleonore Stump, *Aquinas* (London-New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 14–15.
- 6 SCG I.29–30; ST Ia.13.2. Clarke speaks of "causal participation"; W. Norris Clarke, "Analogy and the Meaningfulness of Language about God", in *Explorations*, pp. 140–142. Cf. Burrell, *Analogy*, p. 132, and Kevin Hector's criticism of a one-sided apophatic reading of Thomas: "Apophaticism in Thomas Aquinas: A Re-formulation and Recommendation", *Scottish Journal of Theology*, Vol. 60 (2007), pp. 377–393.
- 7 Duns Scotus, *Ordinatio* I.3.1.3, nn. 131–166. Cf. Peter King, "Scotus on Metaphysics", in T. Williams (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to Duns Scotus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 18–21; James F. Ross, Todd Bates, "Duns Scotus on Natural Theology", in *Cambridge Companion to Duns Scotus*, pp. 196–198. According to Boulnois, Scotus's ontology rejects the notion of ontic participation; Olivier Boulnois *Jean Duns Scot, Sur la connaissance de Dieu et l'univocité de l'étant. Ordinatio I—Distinction 3–1re partie, Ordinatio I—Distinction 8—1re partie* (Paris: PUF, 1988), p. 33. For a critical analysis of Scotus's notion of univocal being see Burrell, *Analogy*, pp. 95–118, 171–185, 199; Burrell, "Creator/Creatures Relation", pp. 183, 184.

- 8 Scotus, *Ordinatio* I.3.1.1–2. Cf. Richard Cross, *Duns Scotus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 31–39.
- 9 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1, §27.
- 10 D. Evans, "Barth on Talk about God", *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 16 (1970), pp. 185, 188; Dirk-Martin Grube, "Analogia fidei. Zum 'Analogiegeschehen' bei Karl Barth", in *Wie lässt sich über Gott sprechen? Von der negativen Theologie Plotins bis zum religiösen Sprachspiel Wittgensteins* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft 2008), p. 131.
- 11 Trevor Hart, "How Do We Define the Nature of God's Love", in Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Nothing Greater, Nothing Better: Theological Essays on the Love of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), pp. 110, 111.
- 12 E.g. Wilfried Härle, *Dogmatik*, 3. Auflage (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2007), pp. 220, 224; Anthony Kenny, *The Unknown God: Agnostic Essays* (London-New York: Continuum, 2004), pp. 16, 17, 39, 40; Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1987), p. 34; Dietrich Ritschl and Martin Hailer, *Grundkurs Christliche Theologie. Diesseits und jenseits der Worte*, 2. Auflage (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 2008), pp. 34–35.
- 13 E.g. Christian Link, *Die Spur des Namens. Wege zur Erkenntnis Gottes und zur Erfahrung der Schöpfung* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1997), pp. 82–86; Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1982), pp. 96, 97. Cf. Vincent Brümmer, *The Model of Love: A Study in Philosophical Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 13–19.
- 14 Kenny, *Unknown God*, pp. 11–16, 37, 38.
- 15 McFague, *Models*, pp. 33, 35, 39, 194–195. Janet M. Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), pp. 140–141, 148, 154. At the same time, Soskice maintains the possibility of "metaphorical description" and argues that metaphorical talk about God can be cognitive; Soskice, *Metaphor*, pp. 48, 94, 142–161. For criticism of Soskice's fallibilist account of knowledge of God see Michael Durrant, "Reference and Critical Realism", *Modern Theology* Vol. 5 no. 2 (January, 1989), pp. 137, 140, 141; Jan Muis, "The Truth of Metaphorical God-talk", *Scottish Journal of Theology*, Vol. 63 (2010), pp. 158–159.
- 16 Janice Thomas, "Univocity and Understanding God's Nature", in Gerard J. Hughes (ed), *The Philosophical Assessment of Theology: Essays in Honour of Frederick C. Copleston* (Tunbridge Wells: Search Press, 1987), p. 99.
- 17 Ingolf U. Dalferth, *Religiöse Rede von Gott* (München: Kaiser, 1981), p. 598.
- 18 Using definite descriptions such as "the brother of John Smith" and "the Father of Jesus Christ" is a way to indirectly refer to individual entities.
- 19 J.F. Harris, "The Causal Theory of Reference and Religious Language", *Journal for the Philosophy of Religion*, Vol. 29 (1991), pp. 75–86; Durrant, "Reference and Critical Realism", pp. 134–137.
- 20 Saul A. Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996 [1972]), pp. 91–97.
- 21 Hilary Putnam, "The Meaning of 'Meaning'", in *Mind, Language and Reality. Philosophical Papers, Volume 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), pp. 229–235, 245, 246.
- 22 See Geoffrey N. Leech, *Semantics: The Study of Meaning*, second edition (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1981 [1974]), pp. 89–91. Putnam's account of meaning is more complex: it includes syntactic markers (for "water": mass noun, concrete); semantic markers (natural kind, liquid); features of the stereotype (colourless, tasteless, transparent); and extension (H₂O); Putnam, "Meaning", p. 269.
- 23 Richard G. Swinburne, "Analogy, Metaphor, and Religious Language", in Lieven Boeve and Kurt Feysaerts (eds), *Metaphor and God-talk* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1999), p. 67.
- 24 William P. Alston, *Divine Nature and Human Language: Essays in Philosophical Theology* (Ithaca-London: Cornell University Press, 1980), pp. 19–22, 41–44.
- 25 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §§ 66–71.
- 26 Anton Reichling, *Het Woord: Een studie omtrent de grondslagen van taal en taalgebruik* (Zwolle: Tjeenk Willink, 1967 [1935]), pp. 338–341.
- 27 David B. Burrell, *Analogy*, pp. 254–255.
- 28 Swinburne defines analogical meaning of words in terms of syntactic rules for the use of words and in terms of the paradigmatic examples to which the words refer; Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*, revised edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), pp.

- 59–61; Richard Swinburne, *Revelation: From Metaphor to Analogy*, second edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 38–43. In his discussion of analogical predicates for God, Swinburne, too, speaks about “parts,” or “elements” of meaning (*Revelation*, p. 229).
- 29 Cf. Swinburne, *Revelation*, p. 41. I borrow the distinction between “central” and “peripheral” semantic features from Gustav Stern cited in Reichling, *Woord*, p. 342.
- 30 Burrell focuses on “transcendental terms” and “appraisal terms.” His analysis of their use clearly demonstrates that non-univocal language is not necessarily metaphorical; Burrell, *Analogy*, pp. 32, 222–230, 253–263; Aquinas, p. 63. For Aquinas’s account of analogical terms see also: Clarke, *Analogy*, pp. 127–132; Rolnick, *Analogical Possibilities*, pp. 75–78.
- 31 Alston, *Nature*, pp. 19–22, 41–43; Soskice, *Metaphor*, p. 69; Kenny, *Unknown God*, pp. 38, 39.
- 32 Cf. Soskice, *Metaphor*, pp. 15, 49, 50.
- 33 Swinburne, *Revelation*, pp. 46, 47.
- 34 Soskice, *Metaphor*, pp. 68–69.
- 35 *Ibid.*, p. 49.
- 36 Max Black, *Models and Metaphors* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1962), pp. 39–41.
- 37 Soskice, *Metaphor*, p. 50.
- 38 William P. Alston, *Philosophy of Language* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1964), p. 99; A. Goatly, *The Language of Metaphors* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 30–31.
- 39 Soskice, *Metaphor*, pp. 64–66, 74.
- 40 Swinburne, “Analogy”, p. 67.
- 41 I borrow this example from Soskice, *Metaphor*, p. 64.
- 42 Garrett Green, *Imagining God: Theology and the Religious Imagination* (Grand Rapids MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998 [1989]), pp. 130–133. Cf. William P. Alston, “Book Review of Janet M Soskice *Metaphor and Religious Language*”, *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 97 (1988), p. 595.
- 43 Ricoeur’s seminal study extensively discusses this phenomenon from various perspectives. In order to explain it, Ricoeur develops what he calls a “tension theory” of metaphorical predication; Ricoeur, *Rule*, *passim*.
- 44 Soskice, *Metaphor*, p. 74. This point is also made by C.S. Lewis; See C.S. Lewis, “Bluspels and Flalansferes”, in Max Black (ed), *The Importance of Language* (Ithaca-London: Cornell University Press, 1962), pp. 46, 47.
- 45 Richard B. Miller, “The Reference of ‘God’”, *Faith and Philosophy*, Vol. 3 (1986), pp. 1–15; Alston, *Nature*, pp. 111, 115.
- 46 Katherin A. Rogers, *Perfect Being Theology* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), p. 5.
- 47 Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology I*, G.W. Bromiley (trans.), (Grand Rapids MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991 [1988]), p. 262. Cf. Janet Martin Soskice, *The Kindness of God: Metaphor, Gender, and Religious Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 80.
- 48 Cf. Christopher R. Seitz, *Figured Out: Typology and Providence in Christian Scripture* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), pp. 160, 172.
- 49 Kornelis H. Miskotte, *When the Gods are Silent* (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1967), pp. 122–127.
- 50 Paul Ricoeur, “Nommer Dieu”, in J.P. van Noppen (ed), *Theolinguistics* (Brussel: Vrije Universiteit Brussel, 1981), pp. 363, 384.
- 51 For the notion of a basic act and the understanding of divine agency as agency by means of human acts, see: Alston, *Nature*, pp. 55–62, 72; Thomas F. Tracy, *God, Action, and Embodiment* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1984), pp. 89–92, 123; Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 119. Wolterstorff shows that “to speak” in the meaning “to perform a speech-act” can be understood literally in “God speaks” precisely because a speech-act is an indirect act: an act that is performed by means of the basic act of saying or writing words; Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse*, pp. 10, 37–39.
- 52 I am not suggesting here that this is the only way God could possibly act. My argument does not depend upon an answer to the question whether God could also act indirectly by means of non-bodily (mental) human acts, or directly.
- 53 Cf. for this point Swinburne, *Revelation*, p. 226.
- 54 Cf. Swinburne, *Coherence*, pp. 54, 55.

- 55 Scotus, *Ord.* I.3.1.1–2, n. 63; Cross, *Duns Scotus*, pp. 33–39; Mary Beth Ingham, M. Dreyer, *The Philosophical Vision of John Duns Scotus: An Introduction* (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2004), pp. 22–51; Pannenberg, *Analogue*, pp. 155–157.
- 56 Cf. Dominik Perler, “Duns Scotus’ Philosophy of Language”, in *Cambridge Companion to Duns Scotus*, pp. 172–174.
- 57 Cf. Scotus, *Ord.* I.3.1.1–2, n. 25; Ingham, “Re-situating Scotist Thought”, p. 616. For Scotus’s non-Platonic account of universals see Antonie Vos, *The Philosophy of John Duns Scotus* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), pp. 282–285.
- 58 Explicating Aquinas’s view, Clarke speaks about similar properties that are realized and modified in different ways in different cases across a range of different kinds; Clarke, “Analogy”, pp. 127–128.
- 59 Cf. Clarke, “Participation”, pp. 92–95.
- 60 It should be noted that all meanings of “good” can only be described by appraisal terms like “suitable” and “satisfactory”, which can only be defined in terms of “good for something.” Therefore, as both Burrell and Clarke rightly point out, it is impossible to define the analogical meanings of “good” in a non-circular way; Burrell, *Analogy*, pp. 226, 227; Clarke, “Analogy”, p. 129. According to Burrell, this is the key characteristic of intrinsically analogous terms: their meanings cannot be defined univocally; Burrell, “Creator/Creatures Relation”, pp. 180, 182.
- 61 Scotus’s claim that perfection terms that are applied to both God and creatures have a univocal core meaning seems to imply that God and creatures can have the same properties. However, according to Cross, Scotus does not claim that there are common real properties really shared by God and creatures; Cross, “Idolatry”, p. 191. According to Aquinas, God and created entities can have no properties that are the same because in the created order a property has different realizations in different kinds of entities, and, more importantly, because the Creator is so different from creation that he does not belong to any kind, and not only *has* properties but also *is* his properties; Aquinas, SCG I.23.2; I.32.3; I.32.7; ST Ia.13.5 s.c. Cf. Burrell, *Analogy*, pp. 179, 180; Aquinas, p. 25. Surprisingly, Wolterstorff claims that Aquinas thinks that God and created entities do have the same perfections; Nicholas Wolterstorff, “Alston on Aquinas on Theological Predication”, in Nicholas Wolterstorff and Terence Cuneo (eds), *Inquiring about God: Selected Essays, Volume I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 112–132. I will address the question of whether property terms that can be applied to both God and created entities have univocal or analogical meanings in my discussion of the linguistic condition for literal description of God.
- 62 F. Gerrit Immink, *Divine Simplicity* (Kampen: Kok, 1987), p. 121; Luco J. van den Brom, *Divine Presence in the World: A Critical Analysis of the Notion of Divine Omnipresence* (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1993), pp. 226–229, 253, 254.
- 63 Thomas, “Univocity”, p. 98.
- 64 Colin E. Gunton, *Act and Being: Towards a Theology of the Divine Attributes* (London: SCM Press, 2002), p. 70.
- 65 That God is good because He is his own goodness (Aquinas, SCG 37–38; ST Ia.6) is central to Aquinas’s account of literal analogous talk about God. Aquinas understands the perfect and good Creator as the analogous cause of all created being and its perfections, who himself has and is all perfections in an infinite and simple way. Because of this we can ascribe analogous terms such as transcendental terms and perfection terms to God; ST Ia.13.2–5. Cf. Burrell, *Analogy*, pp. 125–141, 257, 266–267; Aquinas, pp. 63–67; Clarke, “Analogy”, pp. 137–147.
- 66 See for this connection: Tracy, *God*; Christoph Schwöbel, *God: Action and Revelation* (Kampen: Kok-Pharos, 1992), pp. 31–36, 51, 86–103; Gunton, *Act and Being*, pp. 109–133.
- 67 The New Testament depicts the resurrection of Jesus as God’s vindication of his mission in his life and death against those who crucified him. See Acts 2,24; 2,36; 3,13–15; Rom. 1,4; 4,25. Cf. 1Tim. 3,16. In addition, the resurrection of Christ is understood in the framework of apocalyptic Judaism in which the eschatological resurrection of the dead is closely linked with the last judgment.
- 68 Alan J. Torrance, “Is Love the Essence of God?”, in Kevin J. Vanhoozer (ed), *Nothing Greater, Nothing Better*, p. 136.
- 69 Swinburne rejects the introduction of new paradigm examples in order to explain the new meaning of terms in application to God; Swinburne, *Coherence*, pp. 58, 59.

- 70 Eberhard Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World: On the Foundation of the Theology of the Crucified One in the Dispute between Theism and Atheism*, D.L. Gruder (trans.), (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983), pp. 329, 330; Alan J. Torrance, "Love", pp. 130, 132.
- 71 This is also concluded by Tracy, *God*, p. 152.
- 72 Thomas, "Univocity", pp. 96–98.
- 73 I am grateful to those who offered helpful comments on previous drafts of this essay.

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