

## 5. Can We Know God?

So what can we know about God? According to Thomas Aquinas, we can come to know the general attributes of God. We can know what he is like, but we cannot know him directly because he is beyond us. This means by reason we can know God in two ways. First, we can know him by negation. Second, we can know him by analogy. These two ways are not new. In fact, these two ways are found in the Jewish literature of the Old Testament.

**Apophysis: Knowing God through Denial:** By using denial or negation, we can accurately say what God is not. For example, God is not a cat God is not a dog. God is not a tree. God is not a star. God is not a planet. As you can see, this could go on for quite some time! However, it eventually leads to the most general negations. For example, God is not in time or space. We take the Latin word *finis* which means "boundary" and we negate it by adding the negative prefix *in-* and we get "infinite." This form of theology by denial is called apophysis, the Greek word for denial.

We can also ask, would the Unmoved Mover who is God ever change? This cannot be the case if He changed then he would have been moved or caused, and this conflicts with what has already been established. So God is «»changing. To be fancy, we take the Latin word *mutabilis* meaning "changeable" and again the negative prefix *in-* and we get "immutable" meaning "unchanging."

**I am Not a Log Cabin:** We can continue to do this type of thing and describe God. However, we are not truly saying anything positive about God. We are simply saying what he is not Perhaps you might do the same thing to me. I am not a woman. I am not a child. I am not a dog. I am not an ant. I am not a star. I am not a log cabin. However, even if you came up with a million versions of (fill in the blank), you would never really know who I am. Your knowledge of me would be imperfect and unsatisfactory. This, by the way, is exactly the point of Saint Thomas Aquinas, especially in his Commentary on the *De Trinitate* of Boethius. In this work, Thomas distinguishes knowing "that" there is a God and knowing "what" God is. With philosophy and unaided reason, we only know "that" there is a God and have only a knowledge of what God is not.

**The "God" of Plato:** This is a pretty hopeless situation for those who want to have a personal relationship with God. The Greek pre-Christian philosopher Plato spoke of "Form of the Good" as the highest principle. However, the Form of the Good was utterly transcendent and Plato certainly did not believe that a lowly human might have a personal relationship with or knowledge of the Form of the

Good. Neither would anyone pray to the Form of the Good. If one ascended from the cave of shadows and perceived the Form of the Good, then he would be enlightened, but such a person would never talk to the Form of the Good or pray to it. He also would not be able to explain "what" it was.

**The "God" of Aristotle:** Likewise, Plato's disciple Aristotle simply assumed that it was absolutely impossible to have a knowledgeable relationship with the Unmoved Mover of the universe. It was ancient Israel that preserved a belief in a single highest principle that is both all-powerful and personal. Here we intersect with theology, not philosophy. Thomas Aquinas acknowledges the limited scope of philosophy, but he also claims we can speak of the general attributes of God even though it is impossible for us to know what God truly is. How can Thomas hold this seemingly contradicting position? The answer is found in his doctrine of analogy.

**Analogy or "God Is Like This"** The "analogy of being" is the centerpiece of Thomistic philosophy. If one does not understand the analogy of being, one does not understand Thomas Aquinas. It is impossible to penetrate his thought without fully appreciating his doctrine of analogy. In fact, this section of the book in your hands is the most important few pages of the entire book so read carefully and make sure that you understand this before moving on.

We must first understand three fancy philosophical terms: univocal, equivocal, and analogical. Here is another table for simplicity's sake: Univocal=same  
Equivocal=different Analogical similar

All rational human beings already understand these three concepts, but it is important for us to fully appreciate the terminology. In order to do so, let us imagine three different philosophers. The first philosopher is named "Ulric the Univocal." The second philosopher is named "Ezekiel the Equivocal." The third philosopher is named "Aquinas the Analogical."

**Ulric the Univocal:** Let's begin with Ulric the Univocal. Pretend that Ulric the Univocal says, "The pasta is perfect." Here we have "pasta" joined to the word "perfect" To understand this in a univocal way would be to assume always and everywhere that "pasta" and "perfect" are absolutely the same. Hence, when Ulric says "pasta" he means "perfect" and when he says "perfect" he means "pasta." If Ulric's statement were entirely univocal then he would also say things like "Your test was pasta!" or "His golf swing is absolutely pasta." Ulric the Univocal might also say things like "May I please have some more marinara sauce on my perfect?"

or "Farfalli is my favorite kind of perfect." Small children between the ages of two and three often make these mistakes. Small children do not always pick up the subtlety of language. For example, if you say, "The shirt is big," they might say, "I want to wear the big." This is an example of univocity.

By using language univocally, we run into problems, and this is especially true when we are engaging in philosophy. If Ulric the Univocal heard someone say, "God is my Father," he assumes the term "God" and "my father" are one and the same. If Ulric the Univocal understood you univocally, then when he met your father, he would address him as "God." That's a big problem.

**Ezekiel the Equivocal:** Let us now turn to Ezekiel the Equivocal. Ezekiel styles himself as a sharp philosopher, and he is aware of all the problems that Ulric the Univocal experiences. Ezekiel the Equivocal takes it upon himself to disprove what everybody says. If his mother says, "This pasta is perfect!" then Ezekiel the Equivocal interrupts her and says, "Perfect is defined as having all the required and desirable elements, qualities, and characteristics, that is, perfect is as good as it is possible to be." Then Ezekiel the Equivocal squints his eyes and wrinkles his nose as he asks, "Do you really think this pasta meets that criteria?" His mother is now a little annoyed. "Well no. I just meant I really like this pasta." Ezekiel smiles with satisfaction. He has once again clarified a situation.

Another time, he hears his mother say, "God is my rock." Ezekiel throws his hands in the air. "What? How could God, an infinite being, become your rock? Mom, you're crazy." This is why nobody likes Ezekiel the Equivocal. He always points out the fact that our truth claims are equivocal. If someone says, "Look up into the night sky. There's the Big Dipper!" Ezekiel says, "That's not a big dipper. It's just a cluster of stars!" If someone says, "Ezekiel, you're such a pain in the neck!" he simply responds by saying, "How can I be in your neck. That's impossible."

**Aquinas the Analogical:** So far, we have found that both Ulric the Univocal's philosophic method and the method of Ezekiel the Equivocal are unsatisfying. Ulric is confused about pasta and perfection and Ezekiel is right, but just downright annoying. Fortunately, we have Aquinas the Analogical to solve our problem. Aquinas walks over to Ezekiel the Equivocal and says: "You know, Ezekiel the Equivocal, you're on the right track, but you have forgotten the principle of analogy. When your mom says, 'God is my rock' she means it by way of analogy. She means God is like a rock. God is strong. When someone says, 'You're a pain in the neck,' what he means is you are like a pain in the neck. Literally speaking, it is false. You are not in his neck. But analogically, it is true.

You are really annoying, just like a pain in the neck.

You see, Thomas Aquinas insists on the principle of analogy. This is true whenever we speak about existence (metaphysics) and when we speak about knowing the truth (epistemology). The best way is to speak in terms of analogy. This is especially the case when it comes to God. It is true anything we say about God is not fully accurate. If I say, "God is perfect," then Ezekiel the Equivocal is going to interrupt and say my finite and human notion of "perfection" is insufficient in describing God's perfection. Ezekiel would be correct, by the way.

When I say ice cream, pasta, or a golf swing is perfect, this is a far cry from the absolute perfection of God. Since I know my human notion of "perfect" is insufficient, I simply respond analogically: "Well God's perfection is similar (analogical) to an earthly example in perfection, but in a much greater way." In summary, then, Ezekiel the Equivocal is technically correct, but he is dismissed since he does not fully appreciate how we speak of things being similar or analogical to each other.

**"I Am Who I am" – God:** Now that we understand analogy, it is time to use it in understanding the concept of being. In order to avoid all confusion, we need to revert to the Latin terms that Thomas Aquinas uses. The reason for this is that English terms carry baggage for most readers, and it is easier if we use these two old terms. So take a deep breath. We're going to use Latin terms. But it's easy. You won't have any trouble with it all: esse = Latin for "to be" It is usually translated as 'being' or existence." Essentia = Latin for "what a thing is." It is usually translated as "essence."

Now then, if we recall the five ways for demonstrating the existence of God, the Fourth Way revealed there must be a "greatest" when it comes to "being" or "existence." The greatest way of existing would be existence itself and this we call "God." So then, God is being himself. God is not caused or created, He just is. God is existence. Thomas Aquinas holds that God's identity as being itself is a philosophical truth that is further confirmed by theology where in the Bible it relates the following about God: "God said to Moses: I AM WHO AM. He said: Thus shalt thou say to the children of Israel: HE WHO IS, hath sent me to you."7

**God is His Existence:** I am who I am. So then, God is existence. He is who He is. Even without the Bible, a rational human can discern, using the Fourth Way, God is pure existence. Nothing created God. Nothing brought God about. God simply is.

According to Thomas Aquinas, God is existence and everything else exists in God. A rock exists because it shares in God's existence. An ocean exists because it shares God's existence. This, then, raises the question: Is God also everything that exists?

Thomas answers that God cannot be everything that exists because things in the universe come in and out of existence. They change. They move. Yet God does not change. God does not move. So then, the difference between God and everything else is that God's esse and essentia (his existence and essence) are one and the same, whereas this is not true for everything else. What does this mean?

**God vs. a Tyrannosaurus Rex:** Let's look at the Latin again. Take another deep breath. You can do this. You can understand this. Esse means "existence" and essentia means "essence." Esse refers to whether something exists or not. Essentia refers to what something is. For example, the essentia of a Tyrannosaurus Rex is a non-avian, bipedal, carnivorous dinosaur with a massive head, small forelimbs, and large powerful hindlimbs. The essentia is "what" a Tyrannosaurus Rex is.

Now let's talk about its esse or existence. The Tyrannosaurus Rex no longer exists. It is extinct. We have its bones. We know what it is. We can explain its essence. But the species no longer exists. Here we see that the esse and the essentia of the Tyrannosaurus Rex are not one and the same. This is also true for every created thing. "What it is" (essentia or essence) does not depend on "whether it exists" (esse or existence). All created things could cease to exist just like the Tyrannosaurus Rex. The only exception is God because God is uncreated.

God is the only exception because he is the fountainhead of all being. What is the essentia of God? It is his esse. What is God? God is to be. The definition of God is being itself. This is the key to the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas: God's essentia - God's esse. This is not true of a Tyrannosaurus Rex. It is not true of a star because the star came to be and will one day burn out. It is not true of an angel because angels came to be. It is not true of humans. It is only true of God. Only in God is essentia and esse one and the same. To be existence is to be God. "I am who I am" is thus the name of God for both philosophy and theology. How does this apply to the concept of analogy? It has everything to do with it. Let's now put it all together.

**God, Creation, and the Analogy of Being:** Since God is existence in itself and we humans only participate in God's existence, there is an infinite chasm between God and humanity. For Thomas Aquinas, we can only come to know things through our senses - sight, smell, hearing, taste, and touch. Yet God is invisible and

intangible so God cannot be known naturally. Here is how Thomas explains it:

“Hence from the knowledge of sensible things the whole power of God cannot be known; nor therefore can His essence be seen. But because they are His effects and depend on their cause, we can be led from them so far as to know of God "whether He exists," and to know of Him what must necessarily belong to Him, as the first cause of all things, exceeding all things caused by Him.”

To be strict, then, we can know absolutely nothing about God because God is beyond the senses. To make matters worse, God is an infinite being and being itself, whereas we are finite, earthly, and only participate in his being. Here is where our annoying friend Ezekiel the Equivocal comes along and rightly claims that absolutely anything that we say about God is equivocal. That is, nothing we say about God can be 100% true on the philosophical level. If we say, "God is best," then it can be shown that our finite human notion of "best" fails to adequately describe God. If we say, "God is love," then it can be shown that our finite human notion of "love" fails to adequately describe God. There is a great chasm between God and us, and we cannot ever bridge the chasm.

So what do we do? Does Ezekiel the Equivocal get the last word? According to Thomas, he does not. This is because Thomas Aquinas brings in the principle of the analogy of being. God's essence is his existence. We share in his existence. We exist because he called us into existence. So then, since we participate in Him, we can have an analogous knowledge of God. So when I say, "God is love," that should be understood as "God is like our human love but in an infinitely higher way." When I say, "God is perfect," that should be understood analogously, as in "God is like our notion of perfection but infinitely more so." By insisting on analogy and "similarity," we can avoid the annoying Ezekiel the Equivocal. We can speak meaningfully about God without getting bogged down in literalism.