

Analytic Perspectives on Method and Authority in Theology

Ryan S. Peterson*

Theological Predication, Doctrinal Location, and Method in Analytic Theology

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Abstract: Theological method is situated properly in relation to a range of doctrinal commitments, especially commitments located in the doctrines of God, creation, and theological anthropology. In this article, I use Thomas Aquinas’s account of theological predication to illustrate this doctrinal and methodological interconnection. Then, I describe the methodological commitments of analytic theology as they have been articulated by its advocates and argue that analytic theology should embrace an explicitly theological methodology. This requires taking seriously the proper ends of theology and the varied means used by theologians in the Christian theological tradition. I argue that analytic theologians should nurture attentiveness to theology’s chief end (the *visio Dei* and the corresponding goals of faithful worship and personal formation), the doctrinal order in which specific doctrinal questions find their proper context and location (beginning from and ending with the doctrine of God), and the practices that facilitate good theological judgment-making (prayer and contemplation).

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Gregory of Nazianzus begins Oration 27, “An Introductory Sermon Against the Eunomians,” with the following words: “I shall address my words to those whose cleverness is in words. Let me begin from Scripture: ‘Lo, I am against you and your pride.’”¹ Gregory goes on to critique the way his opponents do theology: they claim to know more than they actually know, they take up discussions of theology in contexts that are not conducive to growing in theological knowledge and wisdom, and they give in to their passions rather than disciplining those passions through the exercise of reason.² From Gregory’s perspective, his opponents are ever-speaking of God but without the humility necessary to speak of God well. Rather than seeking God in the ways conducive to growing into theological truth, they rely on clever tricks and word games. They believe they walk “the road . . . of Reason and Study,” but, Gregory determines, their road is truly one “of Gossip and Sensationalism.”³

The humble theologian, for Gregory, pursues theological wisdom under the conditions that will make that pursuit successful. What are these conditions? Gregory summarizes them in Oration 28, namely, that the theologian’s

1 Gregory of Nazianzus, *On God and Christ*, 25.

2 Ibid., 25–31.

3 Ibid., 32.

*Corresponding author: Ryan S. Peterson, Biola University, United States of America; E-mail: ryan.peterson@biola.edu

character should be undimmed, making for a perception of light by light; that his audience should be serious-minded, to ensure that the word shall be no sterile sowing in sterile ground; that the right occasion is when we own an inner stillness away from the outward whirl, avoiding all fitful checks to the spirit; and that the range should be that of our God-given capacity.⁴

Gregory's is a useful summary of the contextual factors that affect a theologian's success. These include the theologian's character, the context in which the theologian is working, the intellectual disciplines to which the theologian is submitting, and the theologian's willingness to embrace humanity's creaturely capacities and their limitations.

All of Gregory's practical and methodological points have important implications for the practice of analytic theology (hereinafter, AT). They are intertwined with theological commitments that are embedded in the doctrine of God and the doctrine of creation, and they depend upon a theological anthropology which emphasizes the necessity of Christian virtue and the God-given capacities that both enable and limit the theologian in her understanding of God. The interrelation of theological method and Christian doctrinal commitments is one of the elements that makes theology a practice of faith seeking understanding. The pursuit of theological understanding takes place inside of certain relational and theological realities. God's existence *in se*, the particularities of God's relation to creation, and the creature's state of relation to God all affect the way theology is successfully practiced.

Here, I cannot focus on all of Gregory's injunctions, but I hope to describe one way that the success of theology relies on methodological commitments that are intertwined with Christian doctrinal commitments. I use Thomas Aquinas's discussion of theological predication to illustrate this doctrinal and methodological interconnection. Then, I describe the methodological commitments of AT as they have been articulated by its advocates and argue that AT's methodological commitments should be explicitly theological. The practice of AT should be conditioned by the proper ends and the varied means of Christian theology. One of these ends is movement into the *visio Dei*. Movement into this beatific vision is facilitated by biblical interpretation, prayer, and contemplation. These practices are aided by expansive doctrinal connections and sound theological judgments. Such doctrinal connections and judgments must be proportionate to theology's subject matter, which is itself shaped by the biblical canon. I argue that AT should be exercised in relation to this broader network of theological ends and means and the doctrinal commitments that motivate them.

1 Theological predication in its theological context

Thomas Aquinas's account of theological predication has received much attention. Often the relation of Thomas's doctrinal commitments to his account of theological predication is underplayed in favor of a narrow focus on analogy versus univocity. But the force of Thomas's judgments with respect to theological predication comes directly from the doctrinal commitments that undergird his methodological decisions. The doctrinal interconnections in Thomas's account will serve as a fruitful illustration as I make my methodological argument in the final section of this article.

1.1 Initial linguistic distinctions: literal/metaphorical, literal/univocal

Before describing the theological commitments that motivate Thomas's methodological judgments, though, it is helpful to make two important linguistic distinctions. These should ward off potential confusions about the subsequent argument. The first distinction is between analogical language and metaphorical language. Janet Martin Soskice, in her widely lauded *Metaphor and Religious Language*, defines metaphor as a "figure of speech whereby we speak about one thing in terms which are seen to be suggestive of another;" "so when we speak of God as a farmer, and say of him that he plants his seeds, nurtures the young shoots, separates

⁴ Ibid., 37.

the wheat and the tares, we are speaking metaphorically.”⁵ When we use analogical language in Thomas’s sense, on the other hand, we are speaking literally. An analogical claim is a literal claim about God. It is not a figure of speech.

Because of the way the term “analogy” is used in modern discourse, however, interpreters have often taken Thomas to be advocating for a form of theological predication based on comparisons rooted in similarities. An analogy, taken in this comparative sense, could be a figure of speech similar to a metaphor, or analogy could be a broader category of speech that includes metaphor, simile, etc. Thomas, however, does not use “analogical” in either of these ways. Rather, analogical predication is literal speech. As William Alston explains with respect to literal speech, “when I make a *literal* use of a predicate term (in one of its meanings) in a subject-predicate statement, I utter the sentence with the claim that the property signified by the predicate term is possessed by the subject (i.e., the referent of the subject-term), or holds between the subjects, if the predicate is a relational one.”⁶ And for Thomas, when one says that God is wise, for example, the speaker is characterizing God as wise literally. Her characterization is based on the judgment that God is wise in fact.⁷ So, in response to the question of whether names can be applied to God properly (*proprie*), or literally rather than metaphorically, Thomas answers affirmatively: “As regards what is signified by these names [goodness, life, and the like], they belong properly to God, and more properly than they belong to creatures, and are applied primarily to Him.”⁸ As we shall see below, theological predication continues to be a complex matter for Thomas. But it is important to recognize that he is interested in theological language that makes literal claims about God.

Missing this point has often led interpreters astray. For example, Alston, in *Divine Nature and Human Language*, sets forth the following options for construing the way one may speak of God:

1. Straight univocity. Ordinary terms are used in the same ordinary senses of God and human beings.
2. Modified univocity. Meanings can be defined or otherwise established such that terms can be used with those meanings of both God and human beings.
3. Special literal meanings. Terms can be given, or otherwise take on, special technical senses in which they apply to God.
4. Analogy. Terms for creatures can be given analogical extensions so as to be applicable to God.
5. Metaphor. Terms that apply literally to creatures can be metaphorically applied to God.
6. Symbol. Ditto for “symbol”, in one or another meaning of that term.⁹

Summarizing the state of the discussion, Alston asserts that “[t]he most radical partisans of otherness, from Dionysius through Aquinas to Tillich, plump for something in the (4) to (6) range and explicitly reject (1). The possibility of (3) has been almost wholly ignored, and (2) has not fared much better.” I think this is wrong. Thomas forges a space for something like (3), as I will explain below.

Thomas does reject (2) for theological reasons. Thomas believes that there are specific theological truths that keep one from being able to properly describe God in univocal terms.¹⁰ The second important distinction, therefore, is the one that must be drawn between literal speech and univocal predication. Literal speech is used to make a direct rather than a comparative claim about a subject. Univocal predication, on the other hand, occurs when what is predicated of two different subjects is predicated in both cases according to the same form and the same mode of being.¹¹ As Thomas argues in *Summa contra gentiles* (hereinafter, *SCG*) 1.32.2,

⁵ Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 15; 54.

⁶ Alston, *Divine Nature and Human Language*, 43.

⁷ For further discussion on the nature of theological judgments and their place in the doctrine of analogy, see Burrell, *Analogy and Philosophical Language*, 119-170; James, *Analogous Uses of Language*, 65-109.

⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a.13.3, answer. Quotations of the *Summa Theologiae* are taken from the translation of the Fathers of the English Dominican Province.

⁹ Alston, *Divine Nature and Human Language*, 65.

¹⁰ For a detailed discussion, see Rocca, *Speaking the Incomprehensible God*, esp. 255-288.

¹¹ See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 1.32.2-3.

An effect that does not receive a form specifically the same as that through which the agent acts cannot receive according to a univocal predication the name arising from that form. . . . Now, the forms of the things God has made do not measure up to a specific likeness of the divine power; for the things that God has made receive in a divided and particular way that which in Him is found in a simple and universal way. It is evident, then, that nothing can be said univocally of God and other things.¹²

Since God and a creature do not and cannot possess a perfection in the same way or in the same sense, then nothing can be predicated univocally of God and creatures. The distinction between literal attribution and univocal predication should now be clear. For example, one can say literally that “God is wise,” and one can say literally that “Solomon is wise,” without drawing the conclusion that God and Solomon possess wisdom in the same way or in the same sense. As this example shows, one can speak literally of God without predicating things of God and creatures univocally.¹³

1.2 Divine perfections, creaturely participation, and theological predication

Note that the reasons Thomas gives for denying univocal predication are located in the doctrines of God and creation. Specifically, the two guiding commitments have to do with God’s transcendent perfection and the modes of creaturely participation in divine perfections. So, in *SCG* 1.32.6, Thomas argues that:

Everything . . . that is predicated univocally of many things belongs through participation to each of the things of which it is predicated But nothing is said of God by participation, since whatever is participated is determined to the mode of that which is participated and is thus possessed in a partial way and not according to every mode of perfection. Nothing, therefore, can be predicated univocally of God and other things.¹⁴

Creaturely participation must be considered in relation to God’s perfection and simplicity. For Thomas, famously, God’s essence does not differ from God’s existence. God’s essence just is God’s existence.¹⁵ And God’s existence is simple rather than complex: God is not made up of a complexity of attributes each of which contributes discreetly to the whole; rather, God is one in the strongest sense. The best reason Thomas provides in support of this claim, in my view, is that “every composite is posterior to its component parts, and dependent upon them.”¹⁶ But God is not posterior to or dependent upon anything. God’s simplicity, therefore, explains God’s priority to all creaturely things, both in that God exists perfectly, completely, and independently (without need of creaturely things) and in that all complex things exist in dependence on God.

Moreover, God’s essence/existence is perfect. For “a thing is perfect in proportion to its state of actuality, because we call that perfect which lacks nothing of the mode of its perfection.”¹⁷ God is modeless, possessing genuine perfection rather than a version of perfection set in a divine mode.¹⁸ If one wishes to say that God has a mode, it is the mode of infinite and universal perfection.

God’s divine existence—God’s oneness and perfection—is the source of the diversity of creaturely perfections. Creaturely perfections are “participated” in that their source is God’s one perfect essence and existence. But doesn’t the separability of perfections in creatures imply that God’s own perfections are separable? No. Creaturely perfections are distinguished according to the creaturely modes of being in which they are participated in creation. But since God’s “mode of being,” if you will, is pure, simple actuality, then

¹² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 1.32.2. Quotations of the *Summa Contra Gentiles* are taken from the translation by Anton C. Pegis.

¹³ Alston and others have wondered if an abstracted univocal concept can be used to describe God and humans univocally. I will return to this question below.

¹⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 1.32.6.

¹⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a.3.4, answer: “*non sit aliud in eo essentia quam suum esse. Sua igitur essentia est suum esse.*”

¹⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a.3.7, answer.

¹⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a.4.1, answer.

¹⁸ Rocca, “The Distinction between *Res Significata* and *Modus Significandi* in Aquinas’s Theological Epistemology,” 182–185.

all perfections reside in God without limitation or separation. Creaturely perfections are limited by creaturely modes of being and by creaturely imperfections. God has neither.

In God, perfections are essential and unified. In creatures, perfections are participated, and thereby, creatures are “determined to the mode of that which is participated.” Consider wisdom once again. Divine wisdom is essential. God is not fitted to wisdom as though wisdom stands apart from God or as though wisdom can be otherwise separated from God’s being so that God can be compared to it. Rather, God’s essence and existence is wise. Human wisdom, on the other hand, is participated wisdom. Humans receive participated wisdom from outside of ourselves and insofar as we receive it we are conformed to God’s wisdom in human ways. So, wisdom itself exists independently of humans since God exists independently of humans, and to speak of wisdom itself is to speak of God. But human wisdom exists only in humans who have received participated wisdom, and so its existence is intertwined with human existence. There are, therefore, two considerations that give shape to this account of human wisdom: (1) humans who possess participated wisdom have received a mode of a perfection, a perfection that exists essentially in God, and (2) human wisdom is possessed only and specifically according to humanity’s particular mode of being. In summary, then: God’s wisdom is essential, transcending any creaturely wisdom; God’s wisdom is the fount of creaturely wisdom and so is connected to participated wisdom as cause is to effect; human wisdom is creaturely wisdom, with its own characteristics that mark it off from divine wisdom; yet, human wisdom is connected intrinsically to God’s wisdom by being participated.

The nature of creaturely participation in divine perfections conditions the nature of theological predication. Thomas draws the connection as follows:

our knowledge of God is derived from the perfections which flow from Him to creatures, which perfections are in God in a more eminent way than in creatures. Now our intellect apprehends them as they are in creatures, and as it apprehends them it signifies them by names. . . . As regards what is signified by these names, they belong properly to God, and more properly than they belong to creatures, and are applied primarily to Him. But as regards their mode of signification, they do not properly and strictly apply to God; for their mode of signification applies to creatures.¹⁹

To stick with the example of wisdom, it is most proper to say that God is wise since the perfection of wisdom inheres in God’s essence. The thing signified (*res significata*) is essential to God. The mode of signification (*modus significandi*), on the other hand, is essentially human. The names used in human language (such as “wise”) are derived from apprehension of the perfections received in and through creation. The mode of signification, therefore, falls short of the thing signified, since the mode of signification is creaturely while the thing signified is divine. The imperfect mode of signification does not compromise the security of the reference, however, because creaturely wisdom is participated wisdom.

Participation, therefore, has a positive, connective, implication. And it has a limiting implication. The positive implication is that our language of perfections truly connects to realities in God because it is derived from apprehending perfections as they are given by God to creatures. Kevin Hector summarizes this move as follows: “In an analogy of attribution, then, a single term is predicated of two different objects, but the predicate is proper to one of the objects and is said of the other only derivatively, such that it is predicated of the latter in a way which is related to, but not identical with, its predication of the former.”²⁰ The limiting implication is that our language of perfections is creaturely language that references complex creaturely experiences of the perfections, and this means that we speak of perfections imperfectly—without full understanding of their wholeness or their unity with other perfections. The perfections exist in God in their perfect form. But our language can only refer to the perfections in limited form and in uneven ways so that the unified nature of true perfection is not conveyed through our language. As W. Norris Clarke notes:

¹⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a.13.3, answer.

²⁰ Hector, *Theology Without Metaphysics*, 140.

When a higher cause, especially a universal and transcendent one like God, shares his goodness and perfections in various finite modes of participation with lower beings caused by it, this generates a shared bond of intrinsic though limited similitude between all the effects and their source, which can only be described in analogous language (ScG I, c. 32; De Pot., q. 7, a. 7, ad 2; STh I, q. 13, a. 5; etc.).²¹

Attribution of the perfections to creatures, then, is derivative of God's possession of those perfections and limited by humanity's mode of existence. Note the links between perfections, participation, and analogous language here. Participation depends upon God's perfection, and analogous language depends upon participation.

1.3 Methodological observations regarding Thomas's account

Two aspects of Thomas's method can be discerned here. First, note that Thomas does not go into great detail to explain the mechanism of participation. Participation is a way of marking out the creaturely mode of existence with respect to God. But exactly how God shares the perfections and to what degree they are shared are questions that must be addressed from below, from the creaturely perspective, since our understanding of the perfections and their fittedness to creaturely existence are gained only from the point of view of the creature. Second, participation may lead to the thought that everything is partly divine. But the doctrine of creation rules out such an implication. Thomas protects against this move by emphasizing that the divine possession of perfection is essential rather than participated. Since (1) God possesses perfection essentially, (2) creatures possess perfections through participation, (3) God is the source of creaturely participated perfections, and (4) such creaturely perfections are limited by the creature's mode of being, then there should be no confusion of the creaturely with the divine.

Having looked at the mechanism by which Thomas Aquinas affirms analogical predication—namely, that God's perfections are identical with God's essence and existence and that these perfections are shared with creation through participation—the question of univocity arises once again. If there is an "intrinsic though limited similitude between all the effects and their source," then can we not extract a precise definition of each of the perfections that applies both in the case of God and in the case of creatures? Could we not treat the perfections as a genus and God's version of the perfection and creaturely versions of the perfection as species? Thomas answers with an unequivocal "No." Here is Thomas's explanation:

For by means of a name we express things in the way in which the intellect conceives them. For our intellect, taking the origin of its knowledge from the senses, does not transcend the mode which is found in sensible things, in which the form and the subject of the form are not identical owing to the composition of form and matter. Now, a simple form is indeed found among such things, but one that is imperfect because it is not subsisting; on the other hand, though a subsisting subject of a form is found among sensible things, it is not simple but rather concentered. Whatever our intellect signifies as subsisting, therefore, it signifies in concretion; but what it signifies as simple, it signifies, not as that which is, but as that by which something is. As a result, with reference to the mode of signification there is in every name that we use an imperfection, which does not befit God, even though the thing signified in some eminent way does befit God.²²

The key point here is that we cannot transcend human conceptual limitations in order to indicate what is ultimately true of God essentially. We can come up with an abstract definition of participated perfections that incorporates the different forms of the perfection encountered in creation. And we can describe concrete instances of the perfection as it is encountered in creation. But we cannot conceive of, let alone name uniquely, perfection as God possesses it. God's mode of possession transcends our modes of conception and signification, and it is the radical difference between the way God possesses an attribute and the way a creature possesses an attribute that ultimately necessitates analogical predication.

Returning to the mode of signification, we may, and often do, mistakenly make reference to God's perfections with univocal intent. But to the extent that we understand the perfections of God and creatures

²¹ Clarke, "Review of 'Speaking the Incomprehensible God,'" 634.

²² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 1.30.1.

univocally, our understanding fails.²³ The reason for this failure is in the distinction, made earlier, between literal speech and univocal predication. We mean to literally attribute to God a certain perfection, such as wisdom. Thomas is concerned that we make this attribution truthfully, and to the extent that we attribute a perfection to God univocally, we fail to recognize the proper implications of God's transcendence and the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*. So, to continue with the example, insofar as we think of God's possession of wisdom in the same sense and in the same way that we think of a creaturely possession of wisdom, we fail to understand the truth of the matter, namely that God's manner of possession is essentially different from creaturely possession. Insofar as we use univocal predication we equivocate in truth. Analogical predication, on the other hand, allows for truthful, literal claims about God to be made without debilitating equivocation.

So, according to Thomas, analogical predication is more truthful than univocal or equivocal predication. A further difficulty arises, however, since in a specific instance of human speech the mode of signification cannot avoid suggesting that the mode of perfection between God and creatures is the same. As Gregory Rocca observes, "But even though we know these different modes of being exist, the mode of signification of 'God is good' and 'that woman is good' is the same in both cases; in fact, it is only because he realizes that God's mode of existence is not the same as the mode implied and connoted when we say 'God is good' that Thomas tells us we must deny the [*modus significandi*] when we predicate goodness of God."²⁴ We use the same word of two different ways of possessing a perfection (essentially and participatedly) and of two different senses of possession (perfectly and modally). The word, however, cannot transcend entirely its creaturely connotations. So, we must rely on human words, caught up as they are with both enabling and misleading connotations, to grow in knowledge of God. Our understanding of these words can be purified through a discriminating use of negative theology. But even then the purified concepts fall short of naming divine realities perfectly.

Thomas uses a third term, *ratio nominis*, to address this conceptual point. *Ratio nominis* refers to the concept that is named by a given *modus significandi*. As noted above, our conceptions of perfections always originate within creation. By rightly signifying that these perfections belong to God essentially and that God's essential perfection is the source of creaturely perfections, the concepts are extended to our theological predication. But the concepts themselves are never conceived in divine terms. The meaning is extended analogically but not possessed univocally. So, Gregory Rocca asserts that "whatever we do know about such a name is always a consequence of the judgments we have already made about God."²⁵ In other words, theological judgements must be made in order to make the right predications about God in the right contexts. This requires wisdom. Of course, these judgements must be logical. But they are not derived from logic alone but from the movement of God's revelation and the wisdom provided by the Holy Spirit.²⁶ This latter reality, the need for wisdom from the Spirit, requires a doctrine of sanctification that includes the vivification of the intellect for its success.

On Thomas's account of theological predication, therefore, speaking of God literally requires that we do not predicate univocally. If we attempt to predicate perfections of God and creatures univocally, then in reality we equivocate on our terms. If we predicate perfections of God analogically, however, then we can make proper, literal, claims about God that have a real connection to the perfections known in creation. Thomas comes to this conclusion because of a network of doctrinal convictions, convictions located in the doctrines of God, creation, theological anthropology, and as I noted briefly, salvation and sanctification. These doctrinal convictions are not unique to Thomas. He has received them from the classical Christian tradition. His explanation of that tradition is unique. But the core convictions are shared.

I have only touched on a few of the theological elements of these doctrines and their interconnection. Fully developing these points would require much further attention. But I hope that this account illustrates

²³ Of course, understandings of God's perfections may fail for other reasons too, such as in the case of an overly apophatic rendering of the perfections.

²⁴ Rocca, "The Distinction between *Res Significata* and *Modus Significandi* in Aquinas's Theological Epistemology," 189-190.

²⁵ Ibid., 194.

²⁶ For one account of the way the Spirit works with respect to theological language, see Hector, *Theology without Metaphysics*.

how intertwined the question of theological predication is with these others. One cannot answer the question of theological predication well without engaging thoroughly a range of other doctrinal *loci*. And, ultimately, the doctrine of God must condition all theological analysis.

I take Thomas Aquinas's view to be both helpful and explanatorily powerful. But I could have used Karl Barth's doctrine of analogy as my example. Consider the way Kevin Hector describes Barth's discussion of analogy. For Barth,

One's concepts can indeed apply to God, but this application depends wholly upon God's gracious initiative, from which it follows that one's application of these concepts must be a matter of faith in, and obedience to, God's prior act. Barth thus argues that, "because the human person is and remains human, if his or her intuitions, concepts, and words, in their oh-so-humanness, are sufficient in virtue of their awakening and conscription to grasp and thus express and establish truthful knowledge of God's being (the one, whole, undivided being of God!), they are insofar as in faith in God's revelation, they are formed and expressed in obedience to the direction there given."²⁷

The relation of analogy to justification by faith is brought to the fore. Or, I could have used Kevin Hector's own recent account of God-talk, in which he argues that the "properly theological meaning of a concept is the product of a normative trajectory carried on by a series of precedents which are themselves normed by God's being-with-us, and this normativity is carried on by Christ's normative Spirit."²⁸ In Hector's account a pneumatological emphasis conditions successful theological predication.

Personally, I think the network of theological commitments held by Thomas Aquinas best situates the question of theological predication, and that Barth's and Hector's insights can be seen as helpful ways of widening the scope of the Thomistic approach. But regardless of whether that is right, the question of successful theological predication illustrates something important for AT. Studies in philosophy of language have relevance for contemporary theological accounts of predication (see Hector's use of the philosophy of language, for example). But more important than the philosophical analyses are the theological commitments that situate and advance a theology of language inside the contours of Christian systematic theology. These theological commitments can be analyzed helpfully through the practices of AT for the sake of determining the logical connections between doctrines. But the theological commitments do not themselves arise from the practice of analysis. God's communication in Scripture, Christian tradition, and the ongoing illumination of the Holy Spirit move the church to faithful contemplation of God. Theology is ultimately motivated by the *visio Dei* and the contemplative work necessary for movement into this beatific vision. A faithful account of theological predication arises in this broader theological context.

2 Theological method in Analytic Theology

In analytic philosophy and theology much work has been done on the nature of theological predication. And there are different views among analytic theologians. So, Thomas McCall, in his *An Invitation to Analytic Christian Theology*, argues (1) "that the case *against* univocity should not be merely assumed," and (2) "analytic theology as such requires no commitment to univocity whatsoever."²⁹ McCall is right on both of these fronts. There are sophisticated defenses of univocity that should evoke counter-argument rather than outright dismissal from those who remain convinced that analogical language is theologically necessary. And one can practice analytic theology if one holds the view that language about God can only be analogical. One practice of analytic theologians that may create difficulties for providing a robust theological answer to questions about theological predication, however, is described by Oliver Crisp as follows: AT will "where appropriate, seek to deal with complex doctrinal concerns by dividing them into more manageable units. . . ."³⁰ This can be, and often is, a helpful approach. See the case studies in McCall's *Invitation to Analytic Theology* for examples of the way that narrowing the field of doctrinal reflection has

²⁷ Hector, *Theology Without Metaphysics*, 141, including Hector's own translation of Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik* II/1, 265-266.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 145.

²⁹ McCall, *An Invitation to Analytic Christian Theology*, 25.

³⁰ Crisp, "On Analytic Theology," 38.

clarified the relevant issues involved in specific doctrinal questions. But the converse can also be the case. Often, the important work is not “dividing doctrinal concerns into more manageable units” for the sake of analysis but expanding the range of doctrinal concerns so that one’s question can be answered in its appropriate doctrinal context.

2.1 Doctrinal location

The question of theological predication provides an example of the ways one might proceed theologically. One could narrow the focus of the question and build a theology of language from an analysis of language itself. This would allow for a modest, but narrow proposal to be offered. Or, one could expand the question, extending the relevant material to the doctrines of God, creation, theological anthropology, and redemption. This expansive move can then be used to relativize the question of theological predication in Christian theology, demonstrate which theological resources contribute to an answer to the question, and explain the ways these resources bear on the question. The overall method, on this more expansive model, is less modest because of its overall size and scope. However, the expansive model encourages work on the doctrinal location of a question, which in turn encourages answers that are substantiated by connections made to the larger theological context. This work on doctrinal location is necessary for offering a robust theological proposal. Moreover, the networking of theological commitments enables arguments from “fittingness,” arguments that have been used throughout the Christian tradition. These arguments do not follow from analysis per se, and they will be difficult to assess if the method of assessment is overly narrow. Fittingness is a judgement rather than a deduction. But fittingness has often been the crucial judgment made in theological contributions that have stood the test of time.

Analytic theologians can do this expansive work, of course. As Crisp notes, AT will only divide complex doctrinal concerns “where appropriate.” However, the methodological and linguistic *habitus* of AT favors the separation of difficult doctrinal questions rather than the expansive networking of difficult doctrinal questions. The emphasis upon modest arguments and conclusions in analytic philosophy and theology often keeps practitioners of AT from advocating for more expansive conceptual connections that may properly situate the relevant theological arguments and affect the conclusions to those arguments. And it seems to me that such division is rarely the right theological move. Expanding the doctrinal connections as a way of addressing difficult doctrinal questions is most often superior to dividing difficult questions from one another for the sake of distinct and separate analyses.

2.2 Theology’s primary end

This first point about the need for expansive doctrinal reflection is related to a second point related to the primary end of theology. One reason that theological questions need to be situated in an expansive theological context is that this approach emphasizes the way that all theological questions ultimately terminate in the doctrine of God. When doctrinal questions are located with respect to the doctrine of God and other related doctrines, there is a better chance that answering the question will move the theologian toward theology’s true end. Theology is intended to draw the theologian deeper into the knowledge and love of God, and all theology, properly speaking, flows from God and must be continually related back to God. But consider the way AT is described in the seminal *Analytic Theology: New Essays in the Philosophy of Theology*. Michael Rea asserts that AT will follow five prescriptions. Here are the first two: “P1. Write as if philosophical positions and conclusions can be adequately formulated in sentences that can be formalized and logically manipulated. P2. Prioritize precision, clarity, and logical coherence.”³¹ William Abraham’s straightforward explanation, that “[analytic theology] is systematic theology attuned to the deployment of

³¹ Rea, “Introduction,” 5.

the skills, resources, and virtues of analytic philosophy,”³² adds the notions of resources and virtues to the definition of AT. What are these resources and virtues specifically? Abraham’s primary suggestion is that analytic theology will prize, and offer, conceptual clarity.³³ Crisp argues that analytic theology is analytic in that it is characterized by “logical rigour, clarity, and parsimony of expression” and a procedural use of reason.³⁴ The practice of these analytic virtues has yielded conceptual fruit. Note, however, that there is no explanation of how these virtues serve the end of knowing and loving God, contemplation of God, or the *visio Dei*. It is most charitable to take the methodological emphases described in *Analytic Theology* to be descriptive of those aspects of AT’s methodology which mark it out as a unique methodological approach.³⁵ On this reading, Rea, Abraham, and Crisp are not denying that theology’s proper end is the knowledge and love of God, contemplation of God, or the *visio Dei*. They are articulating a theological method which may or may not be used to move toward this end. However, my point here is that the material content of theology, namely that humanity is made to know and love God, does not explicitly condition AT’s methodological commitments. One could be an analytic theologian by exercising the analytic virtues even if she is not committed to theology’s primary end. Because they are virtues, they may facilitate Christian formation to a degree, but these virtues on their own cannot do everything the church needs from its theologians.

Theological method must be more fully dependent upon the material content of Christian doctrine if it will do its proper work. Consider again the analytic work of Thomas, and we could add Anselm and many others who offer doctrinal analysis while working receptively within the classical Christian tradition. They offer careful analyses of complex doctrinal questions. But this is done as a formative pursuit of truth in relation to their monastic practices of prayer and biblical interpretation. In this context, clarity is a virtue. But clarity is not an end in itself. Neither is brevity or conceptual precision. They are tools of understanding and communication in service of a greater theological end, namely knowing and loving God.

McCall has noted rightly that AT can be spiritually nourishing.³⁶ I agree. My point here is that the practice of analytic virtues needs to be aimed at theology’s primary end and embedded in a wider range of virtues and spiritual disciplines. Again, when one thinks of the great theologians who have most deeply marked the church, clarity and concision are not the foremost virtues that come to mind. They make regular use of focused analysis. But this analysis is situated alongside a range of other methods, all of which are set in relation to prayer and contemplation. This methodological flexibility may have to do with the fact that prayer and Scriptural interpretation heighten one’s awareness of the long, often winding road that contemplation of God takes. Intentionally cultivating such practices would strengthen not only the integrative nature of AT but would also put practitioners of AT in a better position to retrieve the contemplative insights offered throughout the Christian tradition.

2.3 Theology’s language(s)

Two lessons from the theological interpretation of Scripture (TIS) movement are helpful for reflection on AT’s methodology. As Michael Allen has argued, theological commentary expands on the biblical text in a way that “allows the contours of the Scriptural text to guide its own texture. . . . [T]he emphases of commentary are patterned after the canonical focus. In this way, the very architecture of theology can be reshaped by canonical practice.”³⁷ Theological commentary is work toward theological and practical explanation; it is receptive interpretation. Consider also Paul Griffiths’s observation that “religious reading is connected very closely with composition. . . . It is done . . . for the purpose of altering the course of the readers’ cognitive, affective, and active lives by the ingestion, digestion, rumination, and restatement of what has been read.”³⁸

³² Abraham, “Systematic Theology as Analytic Theology,” 54.

³³ Ibid., 59–60.

³⁴ Crisp, “On Analytic Theology,” 35; 41–42.

³⁵ I offer thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.

³⁶ McCall, *An Invitation to Analytic Christian Theology*, 32–35.

³⁷ Allen, “Theological Commentary,” 1.

³⁸ Griffiths, *Religious Reading*, 54.

Griffiths then explains that “most often religious reading-as-composition” produces “commentaries and anthologies.”³⁹ This reality further challenges the intrinsic value of concision. Yet, Allen does argue that a kind of brevity is virtuous. Clear, brief explanation can be expansive without being disproportionate to its subject matter. So also in the development of AT: in the process of using analytic tools to address doctrinal questions, it is important to keep the doctrinal emphases of the arguments proportionate to the material emphases of divine revelation.

In a similar vein, Kevin Vanhoozer has encouraged readers to cultivate different reading genres that match the messages delivered in different writing genres: “theological interpretation of the Bible is characterized by a governing interest in God, the word and works of God, and by a governing intention to engage in what we might call ‘theological criticism.’”⁴⁰ In his exposition of theological criticism he argues that:

The strongest claim to be made for theological interpretation is that only such reading ultimately does justice to the subject matter of the text itself. Because biblical texts are ultimately concerned with the reality of God, readers must have a similar theological interest (Jeanrond). Theological *text* genres (e.g., Gospels, prophecies, apocalyptic, etc.) call for theological *reading genres*, for styles of reading that proceed from faith and yet seek theological understanding. To read the biblical texts theologically is to read the texts as they wish to be read, and as they should be read in order to do them justice.⁴¹

This point is helpful for theologians who wish their methodology to be shaped by divine revelation. It is not only the material content but the method that needs to be fitted to Scripture. The method a theologian uses needs to accommodate the different ways God is spoken of and spoken to. Developing diverse reading genres moves in this direction.

These points from Allen and Vanhoozer apply to all Christian theology. All Christian theology should derive its language from Scripture, and its emphases should be proportionate to the material emphases in Scripture. This discussion is relevant here because these realities have received little attention from analytic theologians in their methodological discussions. Analytic theologians can benefit from attending to these formal and material commitments regarding the proper linguistic and material shape of Christian theology.

The practice of TIS can offer help to analytic theologians since the Christian theological tradition is always dependent upon and engaging with the language of Scripture, and because TIS is intent on retrieving the riches of the Christian tradition’s biblical interpretation. There are different forms of TIS, of course, and TIS has its own methodological conundrums. But TIS, understood as a method that attempts to be explicitly conditioned by the doctrine of God and by Scripture’s ontology, provides a helpful methodological orientation for AT. On the other hand, the tools of AT offer the biblical interpreter means of assessing the logical implications of a biblical teaching as well as a way of grappling with the material content of the teaching itself. These are valuable inter-methodological gifts.

Regarding a different but related point, William Wood has challenged practitioners of AT to be theologically multilingual. Wood’s worry is that an analytic theologian may be “more deeply grounded in the analytic philosophical tradition than in any tradition of theology.”⁴² Many analytic theologians are trained in philosophy of religion but have not become “suitably grounded in the Christian intellectual tradition.”⁴³ For Wood, then, “[t]he worry arises when analytic philosophy remains the only real language of the analytic theologian.”⁴⁴ In addition to being suitably receptive of biblical patterns of language and thought, analytic theologians should work toward receptivity of the wide patterns of language and thought that exist in the classical Christian theological tradition. Such receptivity should be aimed at developing fluency. Such biblical and theological receptivity, and fluency, will strengthen the chances that AT will make substantive contributions to the Christian theological tradition and not only to AT’s “distinctive intellectual tradition.”⁴⁵

³⁹ Ibid., 55.

⁴⁰ Vanhoozer, “Introduction,” 22.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Wood, “Trajectories, Traditions, and Tools in Analytic Theology,” 256.

⁴³ Ibid., 264.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 263.

⁴⁵ See Ibid., 255.

Because the methodology of AT is so intertwined with analytic philosophy and its methodology, however, I wonder if analytic theologians would be better off thinking of themselves as belonging to the Christian theological tradition first and foremost, and then as analytic theologians only insofar as the tools of analytic philosophy offer help for those engaging in the Christian theological task. This modest approach would emphasize the way philosophy has always been used in Christian theology: happily but circumspectly. Christians have always used philosophy in their theological work, but the best theologians have also been willing to adjust or even drop their methodologies wherever they were unfit for fostering faithful contemplation of divine revelation.⁴⁶

3 Conclusions

Theological method is rooted in theological commitments and not only in rational or pragmatic ones, as illustrated above by Thomas's account of theological predication in its broader theological context. Like Thomas, analytic theologians should nurture attentiveness to theology's chief end (the *visio Dei* and the corresponding goals of faithful worship and personal formation), the doctrinal order in which specific doctrinal questions find their proper context and location (beginning from and ending with the doctrine of God), and the practices that facilitate good theological judgment-making (biblical interpretation, prayer, and contemplation). The ad hoc use of AT in Christian theology holds much promise. But analytic theologians should welcome the use of other methods, receptively and generously engaging diverse voices past and present, and participating in the methodological riches of the classical Christian tradition.⁴⁷

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⁴⁶ And such lack of fitness has proven inevitable.

⁴⁷ I am grateful to Biola University for providing financial support for this research. This publication also benefited from a research fellowship at Biola University's Center for Christian Thought, which was made possible through the support of a grant from Templeton Religion Trust.

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