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A Critical Exegesis and Interpretation of the Work of Austin Farrer

by

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Undergraduate honors thesis under the direction of

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1.1 Background Information

The limits of our language contain a certain natural barrier which constricts our talking/thinking about God. Theology has a tendency to bump up against these limits in a way that is revealing of human character. Since the split between theology and philosophy in the late Middle Ages, theology has more and more been on the defensive and its reputation as a 'science' is all but lost. The frameworks of belief which are natural products of our contemplation of the divine have been pushed to the side in modern times to make room for frameworks influenced more by experimental science and the presentation of exclusively empirical evidence. In the mid-20th century, Austin Farrer made an attempt to show why holding onto such beliefs as 'God' and 'ultimate Cause' is not to be seen as naïve or superstitious, but rational and coherent. Through a number of writings, Farrer develops this argument in a fashion that must be appreciated for its consistency and philosophically meticulous method. My present task is to put forward an intelligible interpretation of this argument, which ranges over his full career.

Furthermore, I will try to show how this particular argument deals not only with the explicit problems therein, but the overarching problem of language throughout. This Wittgensteinian island on which we are stranded is the most daunting of theological obstacles. It seems that we must remain silent about the things which cannot be talked about, but many people feel the urge to continually try. If it is only babbling that escapes my mouth, then let me be called a fool; but, as Wittgenstein pointed out, it is not the island on which we stand that is important, but the ocean surrounding it, and for some this ocean is the divine in its fullest.

My intention with all of this is to offer an interpretation of Farrer's work which will exhibit his tenacity in presenting rational theology as not only being valid, but *validating* certain frameworks of belief that possess intrinsic rationality and coherence and that deserve genuine attention on the part of those who would normally not give a second glance. By this, I mean the taking seriously of genuine theistic belief as an area of human life that modernity has relinquished to the fringes as superstition at *best*.

Farrer was working in a primarily analytic framework, but it can be said of his work that it is at least partially concerned with synthesizing the dominant linguistic mode of the early-to-mid-20th century English philosophers with the metaphysics of traditional theism and even some of the positions held by certain French philosophers of the time (under the loose banner of existentialists) that held metaphysics to be something different than it traditionally was thought to be. A loose analogy can be drawn between the synthesizing work of Farrer and the works of thirteenth century thinkers like St. Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus. In both instances, these thinkers were interested in taking belief structures that existed without much constructive criticism and synthesizing them with the most logical systems of thought available. In the case of Aquinas, he was wrestling with the new Aristotelian logic that had become prevalent in the thinking of the Universities (namely Paris) and the Latin Averroists. Aquinas's philosophy, then, can be seen as an attempt to synthesize Aristotelian logic and metaphysics with traditional Christian theology. In the case of Farrer, we see a thinker dealing with the introduction of a complex modern logical system and the dominance of verificationist theories of truth, while trying to maintain the rationality of theistic modes of thought and the value inherent in metaphysical description.

The previous analogy is superfluous to a certain extent, but it serves to show that issues of rationality and coherence have plagued theological thought since its beginning (or at least since it became distinct from philosophy). It is a grand enterprise to try and bring the two areas back together, but one that seemingly must be attempted if theology is to be vindicated as being rational and possessing valid means to ascertain truth.

1.2 Task of the Rational Theologian

Thinking theologically, some may say, does not come naturally to a man. It is not the case that we are born with a copy of the *Summa* in our hands or our first uttered words are some proof of the existence of an infinite being. But the same can be said for any discipline whose primary task is to describe and explain the world around us (biology, chemistry, astronomy, geometry, etc.). What these studies (theology included) try to get at, what they try to form answers for, are the everyday occurrences and events, the experiences and observations we all make in the course of our lives. Some of these observations come by way of sense experience, some are experienced in our minds, but nonetheless, our attempts to explain, describe, and justify these experiences make up the body of learned subjects.

Theology, insofar as it follows this pattern, is concerned with making apparent to the recipient the principles which themselves already seem apparent to the theologian. On this matter, Farrer writes, “The principles of rational theology are supposed by theologians to be evident in themselves, but he knows they are not evident to every mind,” adding of the rational theologian, “it is his business to make these principles as evident as he can to reason, and by processes proper to reason.” (FI 1)

Most of us, I will assume, can agree that behind our commonplace beliefs must be some grounding in reason. When we assert that the sky is blue an explanation grounded only in that belief does not suffice: The sky is blue because I perceive it to be what I call blue and I believe it to be so. No one would accept this as a reasonable explanation if a scientist uttered it; then why do some think it acceptable to take such explanations of God as consummate statements of proof? The task of the rational theologian is to take the everyday assertions of the religious man and provide a reasonable account of the content of those assertions, such that belief in such content can be viewed as rational and coherent.

A second aspect of rational theology, and one that will be very important to my argument below, is its relation to genuine theistic belief, which takes the form of lived religious practice and devotion. Specifically, the drawing out and clarification of the elements of genuine theistic belief. Proofs of God, or even more general proofs of absolute/infinite being, often fall into the trap of providing a proof for something that the everyday theist (i.e. The Methodist, Baptist, Sunni, Shiite, etc) has neither a conception of nor interest in. When one of these believers says “God”, he does not often mean “unmoved mover” or “that than which no greater can be conceived”, he roots his conception of God in something very different, something concrete. It is the theologian’s true task to draw out this belief. Farrer says about this “that rational theology ought to make explicit and to define, nothing else but what is and what has been implicit in genuine theistic belief.” (FI 44) In other words, Farrer believes that there are implicit understandings of the divine that are to be found in lived religious experience and it is at least part of the theologian’s job to pull these tacit conceptions out, expand them, and

explain them rationally: “Whatever the rational theologian may pretend to do, he will in fact be considering a question posed to him by religious belief; and he may as well be above-board about it.” (FI 1) That is, if they are truly there. If they are not, it is equally the theologian’s task to point out the vacuous nature of such belief. “If belief has been reasonable, it has had reason, and our only business must be to draw this out and restate it. If we are the first to have found true reasons, we must condemn our predecessors in faith as simply superstitious.” (FI 3)

Why does Farrer think that the beliefs inherent in theism must be defended from those who wish to undercut the validity of statements made about God? After all, many (I would dare even say ‘most’) practicing theists shrug off the criticisms of philosophers as matters which have no bearing on the ‘convictions of their hearts’. But is this the proper way to go about things? Should not the convictions of the heart be at least *rational* or spring up from rational grounds of belief?

It is a matter of putting heart into a rational conviction, and bringing mind into the heart’s devotion. Theism is not an emotional attitude; there is hard thinking behind it, and sound reasons of which the believer has no cause to be ashamed, in any company. We should not let ourselves be browbeaten by people who take natural science to be the sole method for establishing truths of fact or of existence, and who refuse to let the scientific quest for knowledge extend beyond the boundaries of the sciences themselves. (Farrer 1966, 70)¹

It is a common observation that modernity has taken on natural science as the determiner of truth for the masses, even when such truth may seem contrary to reason. But what is habitually overlooked is the winnowing effect of the method the sciences use

to reach that truth. It is the nature of the sciences to limit their scope of observation and, in this limiting, hone in on what exactly they are trying to record. Far be it from me to criticize this particular limiting action, for it yields results which cannot be denied as beneficial. However, this limiting of scope often acts as a sieve, isolating those observations which are of interest and can be quantified, and leaving anything else out. The effect of this on a culture that embraces the sciences is to inculcate the individual with a sense of pure scientific realism about elements of reality. The things which cannot fall under the microscope or show up on a data set have a tendency in such a society to be denied a place in existence.

Unlike the particular sciences, it can be said that theology is concerned with the “big picture”. It looks at elements of the world as wholes, i.e. as collections of interrelated and complex systems, and tries to understand them in relation to God. This idea often leads religious thinkers to “the careless conclusion, that because science works by selection and theology by rounding out, theology has no concern with science and can ignore it.” (GD 23) But this is simply wrong. Science may concern itself with details, but these details are merely bits of the “big picture”. Studying such details should enhance our understanding and bolster our appreciation for such a picture:

If the religious approach is concerned with the whole picture, it is concerned with everything that can contribute either detail or order to the picture. The map of the countryside is not the countryside, but if you are trying to get the countryside into your head, the map will help you. It is a pity to think of nothing but the map and miss the country; but it is a pity also not to organize your vision of the country by the help of the map. (GD 23-24)

The same, then, may be said about theology in relation to philosophy. Many believe that theology has no concern with mainstream philosophy. But how can this be the case if modern philosophy is seen as a legitimate field of enquiry? Theology must incorporate the methods of modern philosophy on some level in order to legitimate claims about God. If the two cannot be brought together or if you cannot philosophically analyze, at least to some extent, the content of theological thinking (namely God and our relation to him), then such content must be either thrown away or reformulated so that it can be made philosophically intelligible. This seems like a bold claim, but it is not. It is merely the affirmation that our various belief structures must be consistent with one another as a matter of human integrity.

Pursuing this line of thought, however interesting it may be, will not further our cause. For now, let us contrast the idea of a modern scientific ideology, which could be typified by verificationism, with the idea of a modern theistic ideology, of which Christianity serves as a certain type (while there are definitely others that could be placed here). It is often said by the verificationist that the statements of any given religious ideology are meaningless (in the sense that they are unverifiable). On the other side, the genuine theist asserts the statements of his belief with a feeling of immunity from such principles, claiming that his faith is grounded solely in 'religious experience' and inherently meaningful (even if not provably so). But is such unanalyzed belief worthwhile? Does not the theist have some obligation to evaluate his belief more thoroughly? After all, he is inclined to posit an Absolute Being that is the creator of all that exists and, at the same time, mysteriously intervenes in not only his personal history, but the history of the universe. Is it not reasonable, then, to think that such a being would

create things in such a way that a logical man could ascertain some rational and coherent system therein, and meaningfully express his beliefs to others? In other words, should not there be a tenable philosophy running along side, though separate from, religious belief? The believer may not possess such a philosophy, and it is not a requirement of faith. But it is a requirement that such a philosophy be possible only because if the beliefs are about anything real, then we must be able to think about them critically. In *Finite and Infinite* Farrer defends theism against the negative claims of positivism (namely, A.J. Ayer's form of verification theory) and in *Faith and Speculation* he, at least partially, deals with the positive claims of the emotivism which grew out of that positivism. In both cases he uses the criticisms provided by such philosophies to revise and build upon the philosophy which he believes underlies theistic belief. The point being, progress in theistic thinking must mirror the way in which progress is made in philosophy, while at the same time retaining certain assumptions and beliefs inherent to faith. Philosophizing must be for the believer the same as for the non-believer: a path to wisdom and clarity of thought. "So, by his philosophizing, he both expresses and maintains his belief... It must be open to endless correction, and the correction must be a technical job, whatever else it may be besides." (FS 14)

Farrer believes that there is, in fact, an implicit rationality in religious belief and that the difference of the two ways of thought lies not in the irrationality of one or the other, but in the different uses applied to 'rationality'. The theist looks up. He tries to find the overarching order of things in the universe and is forced to posit 'God' (for a number of reasons). The verificationist looks down. He "takes an aspect or sphere of being which we can construe with a certain degree of clarity and order" and eliminates that which falls

outside this sphere. (FI 9) In either case there are assumptions which serve as the starting point for enquiry, but it is with theism that these assumptions, after evaluation, do not appear to be self-evident. Thus, we must enquire into the validity of such assumptions and search for an adequate starting point upon which theism might begin to build its philosophical structure.

1.3 Farrer's Hypothesis

Farrer takes as part of his hypothesis the apprehension of God by man. This is the single most important assertion and one that is explained, taken apart, and put back together over and over again throughout his work. By starting with the idea of God being apprehended, Farrer is boiling down the apparent plurality of assertions which must be relegated to 'faith' to just one. He is then required to take those assertions and show how they can follow *logically* from that primary utterance. Farrer believes this is important, not just as a rational defense of religious belief, but also to put into perspective those beliefs which have a tendency to simply 'tack' themselves onto the theist's body of belief when it is left largely unevaluated. In addition, Farrer believes that a fuller understanding of the rationality behind theism should bring about a deeper respect for beliefs which are taken for granted by believers. If, however, the enquiry should take the opposite turn, then it will have proven that at least some of these beliefs are completely groundless and must be thrown out.

Another aspect of this hypothesis, one that will come to play a significant role in the later writings, is the assertion that talk about God is cognitively/referentially *meaningful*. The doubt here is manifold and arises out of the problem of analogy along with certain worries generated by positivist concerns (as seen in his "empirical criterion",

which will be described below). This doubt raises its head continually as Farrer works his way from the problem of analogy and into other problems presented by genuine theistic belief. I will try to show how Farrer uses several of his previous positions to form a complex argument in support of the claim that we *can talk meaningfully* about God.

2. Finite and Infinite

In his most prodigious work, *Finite and Infinite*, Austin Farrer sets out to analyze the apprehension of the divine through a detailed account of finite substance and its relationship to infinite substance. His main concern is to show how thinking metaphysically about the divine is not insurmountably problematic, but can proceed rationally from the claim that we apprehend the infinite (God). I wish to focus on this analysis of the metaphysical relation between finite and infinite, in order to flesh out Farrer's notion of our apprehension of the divine and with an eye towards the problem of analogy, which seems, at all times, to loom behind Farrer's discussion like an unwelcome guest at a party.

2.1 Farrer's interpretation of the apprehension of God

First things first, how do we, as finite beings, come to apprehend an infinite being such as God? F. Michael McLain summarizes Farrer's main contentions in *Finite and Infinite* in a most intelligible fashion:

- (a) that 'to be' is to be active; everything which is can and ought to be understood as a more or less complex unity of operations; (b) we think of activity or operation in others and experience it in ourselves as varying in intensity and scope; (c) the variation in modes of activity causes us to ask of any existent; why is it so? That is, why does 'it' possess just this mode of actuality? It is in wrestling

with this question that we come to ‘apprehend’ the Being who transcends all modality of activity as we know it, whose ‘modality’ is simply to be. (McLain, 1970)

This, I believe, summarizes Farrer’s argument in the best way possible. He moves from our apprehension of finite being to our apprehension of infinite being by appealing, first, to a revised concept of finite substance, then to our mind’s natural tendency to structure the apprehension of such substance’s activity/operation as varying in degrees of intensity and scope, and finally to our apprehension of the infinite by means of an understanding of the order our minds create for such activity and an aspiring to what naturally lies at the top of this ‘scale of activity’.

2.1.1 Definition of ‘to be’ as activity or operation

Farrer begins his argument by defining being as operation or activity:

For ESSE is not PERCIPI, ESSE is OPERARI, and an *operatio, energeia*, has a plurality of elements entering into it. It is a real concentration in which they are drawn together in a certain pattern, so that they could not exist nor be conceived to exist without it, nor it without them. Operation with its characterizing pattern has a certain continuity. Such a continuity of operation, with its necessary constituents, is a finite substance. (FI 21)

Therefore, there is in fact a form applied to matter that creates in that matter a certain uniformity that causes us, upon apprehension, to regard that matter as a unified whole (primary substance). When we view the unified and patterned activity present in a body of matter we are able to regard it as a human being, or a tree, or any other thing. This is Farrer’s preferred conception of the relation between substance and constituent. He

believes that this activity contains a formal structure, that we can intelligibly perceive this structure, and that, because of this, we can draw a relation between agency and interior effect which is different from the relationship between substance and constituent.

Because of this second relationship, we are able to analyze our own deliberate action as a form of interior effect, which allows us to make deliberate action the model for our thinking of activity as such. From this, we are able to construct a scale of activity which reaches both down, sliding into non-deliberate action, and aspires upwards towards deliberate action we seem incapable of.

2.1.2 Our ability to comprehend such action as ranging in intensity and scope

It is the contemplation of this ‘scale of activity’ that Farrer claims is the way in which we apprehend the divine. So, how do we create and understand such a scale? Farrer says that it is our ability to grade certain of our own internal activities as to their intensity and scope and place them in an order ranging from the barely deliberate (breathing, eating, walking, etc.) to the complex and comprehensively deliberate (writing a paper, building a car, running a marathon, etc.) that allows us to construct a conceptual ‘scale’ of activity. We use the scale to understand activity as such by simply sliding up and down it. Moving down the scale, we eventually reach action that cannot be said to be deliberate, but is understood as activity nonetheless: first we come to actions like breathing, which can be deliberately controlled, but is involuntary for the most part, then the actions of our body which wholly lie outside of our control, like the functioning of our organs. Continuing to move down the scale, we perceive the various activities which constitute even our organs following them all the way down to cellular activity and even further to molecular and atomic “activity”, so on and so forth. Thus we proceed from

action we know ourselves to perform to the action of, say, molecules by retracting that element of deliberation we posit to our own conscious actions and recognizing the reality of ‘activity’ as a structure and form in those things, which naturally possesses the same interrelated and immanent phases of activity.

Moving up the scale presents us with activity which is increasingly deliberate. It will be important here to point out that Farrer views deliberation as always possessing a degree of intelligence and valuation. In any case, when we move up the scale we aspire from our limited experience of deliberate activity, which is based on limited intelligence and, thus, a skewed sense of valuation, to fully deliberate activity (i.e., possessing full knowledge and perfect valuation). From this aspiration, we can also make the leap in thought to that being which makes not only fully deliberate actions, but makes them free of limitation (contrasted with our high degree of limitation). Thus, we reach something like a concept of deity through a contemplation of finite activity, we may deem this freely and fully deliberate activity the Absolute activity.

From here, we will see how this idea of a scale of activity relates to our apprehension of an infinite being: “The cosmological idea consists of the elements – absolute activity (or being), finite activity (or being), and the relation between these.” (FI 37) It can be reasonably said that to determine any characteristic made of the absolute activity it must be looked for in the finite activities, for, in describing ourselves as a unified bundle of finite operation, we are admitting that we can have no direct access to the full content of infinite activity (or being). That is, though through analogy with what we do have access to (i.e. finite activity) we may be able to assign some further description to the activity of the absolute, we can never fully exhaust this description. We

must admit to the limitation of our analogizing and of our access to the possible content of absolute activity.

Farrer makes an important distinction regarding this characterization of the mode of divine activity. He distinguishes between the *merely logical*, and the *real*. It is important to keep the task of rational theology at hand when thinking of all this: to make explicit and define only that which has been implicit in genuine theistic belief. And this form of demonstration can only be done by means which are available to us and which are effective: logical abstraction. The ordering of degrees of activity is merely logical, “not real in any way. It is not a real possibility that anyone should come to apprehend the bare notion of ‘that degree of activity which is supreme’ without giving to it any character.” (FI 47) Therefore, some characterization of the activity must be given in order to comprehend the ordering of those activities. Doing so will also bring it into accord with the task of the rational theologian by bringing out those characteristics which exist already in genuine theistic belief, but whose origins have not been properly analyzed.

Farrer points out, and I think correctly, that the initial apprehension of God by men is not highly abstracted, but *applied*. It is the simple apprehension of perfection in existence that is to be found first, although the abstract form of this perfection may be logically prior to the application. In apprehending the absolute, we first think of perfection in existence, which carries with it an idea of existential dependence, which is the applied characterization of God’s absoluteness. “To say that God is simply Absolute is to say that He is the *perfect existent*.” (FI 31) In analogizing from the spiritual operation we find present in ourselves to the perfection of such operation that would be present in God, we are actually coming only to a notion of God as the perfection of

human spiritual activity. “God, the absolute form of existence, is apprehended in the instance of ‘my existence’... God, then, is grasped as ‘the absolute Being, archetype of human spirit’ – neither of these without the other.” (FI 47)² But if there is going to be any analysis of divine apprehension, it must be done through analogy and for that purpose a characterization of absolute activity must take place in order for us to comprehend it. And if there is to be a characterization of the absolute activity, it must come from that field of modes which we are familiar with, those modes of activity which we possess. The most apt of which is spiritual activity. Farrer sums this point up in true Wittgensteinian geist: “We can only think as we can think, and what is outside our scope is not capable of discussion.” (FI 48)

2.1.3 Our apprehension of the infinite (God) by means of our understanding of the scale of activity

With this in mind, let us move on then to the preferred analogy Farrer believes leads the mind down the path of divine apprehension. In the previous section we made a point of defining that which is characterizable in the idea of Absolute activity as those spiritual operations within ourselves which we deem perfectible and which we would include in any mode of absolute activity which we ourselves would aspire to. This aspiration to the absolute activity (or being) will then constitute the pillar that will serve to hold up our logical analogy.

By looking into ourselves, by basing our aspiration on those internal activities which we see as “limited”, but deem perfectible, we are building a notion of an ‘internal scale’ of activity:

The dynamic is in our existence; we *are* the act of will asserting itself as well as it may against its limitation, and therefore we are very well capable of a notional

distinction between freedom and what contains it. ... Freedom is felt as distinct because it actively copes with such a field of limitation, but we cannot actually conceive it as doing otherwise.

The notion of ‘coping with its limitation’ involves that of the interior scale. If freedom can cope with limitation, it does so by realizing a higher degree or mode of activity which places it in a more satisfactory relation to its own limitation; and this is to rise in the interior scale. (FI 50)

Which activities, per se, should we use in the construction of this interior scale? We have already talked of the activities of the spirit and these may be equated with intellectual activity (as manifest in understanding, comprehending, and, most generally, knowing). The short discussion above of the interaction between freedom and limitation expresses a second aspect or ‘idea’ of spiritual activity: that of the *will*. Any further aspects of spirit, Farrer believes, branch from these two:

The further aspects of spirit are contained in these: *delight* in their fulfillment, *goodness* in their realization of their own principles, *love* in their pure interest in and fostering of their objects, and enjoyment of *beauty* in the contemplation and creation of the forms of things. All these appear to us to be aspects of the idea, and ends of aspiration, and predicable – so far as we can yet determine – of God. (FI 52)

It is this activity – this particularly *human* activity – that is used to form an idea of a ‘scale’ which gauges the operation/activity by varying degrees of intensity and scope. The medievals had a rough idea of this scale that can be seen in the natural hierarchy they perceived in creation. The so called “*scala-naturae*”, which is discussed in more depth

below, existed as more of a description of what they thought to be the case in the world, while the interior scale is a logical movement of aspiration; however, the *scala-naturae* did explain the activities of creation as varying in degree and leading to the natural pinnacle of things: God. It is easy to see the use in such a theological device as the *scala-naturae*, but it is riddled with problems from both the metaphysical and epistemological angles.³ The hope of Farrer is that reforming such a scale in terms of the content and structure, in order that it may be more philosophically sound and grounded in our particularly human experience, should validate its use as an analogy for understanding divine apprehension. Whereas the medievals were working *down* from their definition of God as creator (*caeli et terrae effector*), Farrer wishes to work his way up from inside our own terrestrial minds. The medievals descended the ladder, but the rational theologian must show, as part of his original task, that the ladder can also be *ascended*.

This ascension of the interior scale, then, is the way in which men come to apprehend a notion of the absolute activity (or being) – God. And the content of such activity is described above and is dependent upon our understanding of our own spiritual activity. This means that we can only access a sliver of the divine reality, and of this sliver we cannot even know how representative it is of the divine (pure) reality.

3. The Problem of Analogy

3.1 Defining the Problem

The problem of analogy, in its classical formulation by St. Thomas Aquinas, can be stated as such:

If we are to use creaturely terms significantly for the creator without degrading him to creaturely status, there must be terms applicable to creature and creator

neither univocally (in an identical sense) nor merely equivocally (in unrelated senses) but in some thus way, viz. analogically (in senses not identical, but somehow related).⁴

The problem lies in the interpretation of such analogical statements. When we interpret analogical statements we substitute a non-analogical description of phenomena for the analogical one. With theological statements, however, there seem to be no non-analogical substitutions available to the interpreter. All terms used to describe God must be taken from the finite experience of beings such as ourselves. God's uniqueness and transcendence force the disconnect between our finite powers of description and the aspects of his infinite being which we are trying to describe.

The various purported solutions to the problem of analogy rely almost entirely on robust metaphysical accounts of being. Aquinas argued that God was *absolute* or *elemental* being, i.e. that his essence was identical with and inseparable from his existence. We, as finite degrees of being, cannot comprehend sheer, absolute being, but we are able to comprehend the notion of such being as standing in some relation to our own being as an analogy of proportion, in the same way the infinite stands to the finite. For Aquinas, this is how we understand the absoluteness of God's being and the analogies which must proceed from that understanding.

Similar to this understanding of being drawn from an analogy of proportion, Aquinas believed that there could be an understanding of God's characteristics ("attributes and actions") reached through an analogy of proportionality. Such an analogy draws on the understanding of being we gained from the above analogy and follows thus: As my goodness is to my being, so God's goodness is to God's being. In this way, we

take some excellence we perceive in ourselves as it stands to our finite being and attempt an understanding of that attribute in God, as it stands to God's infinite being (which is supposed to be intelligible because of our use of the analogy of proportion).

Farrer's take on this problem is slightly different, because his metaphysical account of being (as activity and operation) is different. Furthermore, his account of metaphysics in general (or what he believes to be the proper work of metaphysics) restricts his ability to offer a 'solution' to the problem of analogy. He will instead opt for a more accurate description of the 'mystery' inherent in such a disparity between creature and creator (this will be discussed below in detail). As for now, I will offer a description of the place analogy holds in religious belief, as Farrer sees it.

3.2 “The Problem of Analogy”

Many theologians have attempted to provide arguments for and against analogical talk about God, while just as many of them have tended to ignore the problem. Farrer believes that analogy as a means of talking about God is an inescapable feature of any theology that holds God as a unique being (“By the ‘unique’ in this argument we do not mean simply that which alone exemplifies certain special characteristics; we mean that which shares no identical characteristics with anything else, and so cannot be placed in a proper class with others.”⁵) If we take this simply from the linguistic standpoint, the problem can be formulated as follows: The language we use is modeled on things in the world, which, by definition, cannot share characteristics with God (who is unique). Thus, any literal talk about God, since it is formulated in our finite language, seems impossible (in the sense that no cognitively or referentially meaningful statements can be formulated). This problem poses particular difficulty for the propositions of revelation in

biblical writings. How can divine truths be communicated through revelation if the above problem holds? Farrer believes that any possible answer to the question of analogy must take at least part of its form in an extended metaphysical account, particularly in the relationship between finite and infinite.

Farrer believes that divine truths are communicated through the images found in revelation, i.e. the scriptures of the New Testament, the most important being the Gospels. These images were related supernaturally to the Apostles, that is, in the form of God incarnated in Jesus Christ. This last sentence takes a good bit of unpacking to make sense. First, what Farrer means by supernatural is more related to his idea of mysteries than to classical or modern interpretations of 'supernatural'. Farrer takes human consciousness to be comprised not only of the obvious acts of sense experience and intention, but also a myriad of functions and attributes which remain veiled to our evaluative operations (whether scientific or otherwise) and, thus, to our knowledge. He describes the mind (i.e. our active consciousness) as the "luminous apex" or a cone whose base reaches far into a shadowy and obscure mist. (GV 22) Supernatural acts, then, are essentially the awakening of certain parts of this veiled base in order to make leaps in comprehension and understanding. But what causes this leap in our mind? Farrer says that Christ, as God incarnate, revealed to the Apostles divine truth by enacting certain images which had come to constitute their understanding of God and his actions in the world. In other words, Christ, in revealing himself to the Apostles, was revealing a definite action by God, in history, through which certain common images could be reinterpreted in the wake of the incarnation event and certain truths about the Divine

could be newly ascertained. Such interplay of image and event *was* the revelation produced in the natural minds of the Apostles.

But what, if any, divine truths can images alone communicate? This is a particularly troublesome question if we have already accepted the idea that truths about God are revealed through imagery that falls upon a person “in an act of inspired thinking.” (GV 57) Does not there have to be some fact of the matter which stands behind the image that we can also see and understand? In general, when we use imagery, we understand it only by first testing it against the reality for which it is a symbol.

But in the case of supernatural divine revelation, nothing but the image is given us to act as an indication of the reality. We cannot appeal from the images to the reality, for by hypothesis we have not got the reality, except in the form of that which the images signify. (GV 58)

Here the problem of analogy stands at an epistemic impasse. And it extends outward from talk about God to talk about anything existing uniquely. How can we understand an image when we have never known anything of the sort that the image means to represent? Is it possible in these types of cases to ascertain some bit of understanding, some bit of knowledge about reality, from the images themselves? Can the reality which these images supposedly represent be talked about meaningfully when there is nothing apart from the image to check the image against? Farrer attempts to answer this question by first reducing the problem from divine revelation to rational theology, then to metaphysical philosophy in general. In this way, if he can show that analogy does in fact get at some understanding of reality within the broad context of metaphysics, then he might hope to show the same for the further derivations of such

thought. In other words, he wishes to show that some of the paradoxes and mysteries we face in regard to the infinite, that is, in regards to rational enquiry about God (i.e., rational theology) are present in our enquiries into the finite as well (e.g., some metaphysical difficulties). So that, if we can shed some light on the finite mysteries by participating in analogical discourse about them, then we may be able to move up the ladder and do the same for the infinite.

In regard to metaphysics, Farrer tries to find some middle ground between the hard-line positivists on the one side, and the old style metaphysicians on the other. The positivists claim that no metaphysical proposition can be evaluated as true or false and can therefore contain no real value. The classical metaphysicians claim that metaphysical propositions are not only truth apt, but get at real features of the world and contain solutions to “problems” arising from our understanding of reality. He believes that, contrary to the positivists, doing metaphysics *can* shed light on misunderstandings we may have about reality; however, he also believes the metaphysicians to be wrong in that he does not think it is possible for metaphysics to solve “problems” by giving hard and fast answers. Farrer makes here a clear distinction between his thought about metaphysical issues and problems proper.

There are, properly speaking, no metaphysical problems and no metaphysical solutions... The business of metaphysics is not with problems but with mysteries, and mysteries are not to be solved, but (always inadequately) to be described. (GV 63)

It is on this point that Farrer hopes to show how analogical thinking may have value, while providing no “truths” in the verifiable sense. Some unpacking, though, will be required in order to grasp the function of the problems/mysteries distinction.

The realm of the ‘problematic’ is that realm in which right answers can be provided. (GV 65) That is to say, whenever a person approaches reality with a “fixed measuring instrument”, whether it be physical or conceptual, problems will inevitably arise to which there are definite (and fixed) answers. Farrer uses the example of the yardstick to make clear this point. If a man approaches a tree with a yardstick, there will be a definite answer as to the magnitude of the tree in relation to a yard. The man may have to modify or enhance his system of measurement, which may in itself provide problems and solutions. In any case, there is a real and definite answer to each problem in the man’s world relative to his fixed measuring instrument. Farrer believes that problems of this sort belong to the sciences. For the sciences, like the man, approach the world with measuring stick in hand and interpret reality in only those terms which relate to these conceptual (or literal) instruments. Farrer says that this is what can be called the scientists ultimate respect for ‘fact’.

He contrasts this respect for fact with what he calls respect for ‘being’. Respect for being is what the metaphysician is to concern himself with; and respect for being grows from the contemplation of the *mysteries* of reality, not the *problems*.

Where the attitude of almost passive respect combines with a rigorous demand for understanding, metaphysical activity will appear. Since no ready-formulated tests are to be applied, and no yardstick is presupposed, no determinate and soluble problems arise for the metaphysician: to his

enquiries there are no ‘right answers’. He is not faced with the limited and manageable relation which arises between a conceptual instrument and the object it is applied to: he is faced with the object itself, in its fullness: and the object meets him not as a cluster of problems but as a single though manifold mystery. His purpose is to understand it as well as he may. Since the human mind understands in the act of discourse, and not by simple intuition, to understand will be to describe. The metaphysician seeks to understand his mysteries in seeking to describe them. (GV 67)

Thus, the metaphysician’s attempt at understanding is a dialectical one, for that is how the mind understands objects. Providing measurements and causal descriptions of a table does not get at what the table *is*, but setting a book upon it, playing a game on it, or sitting down to eat at it *does* better our understanding of ‘table’. By continually discarding his descriptions and replacing them, breaking them and rebuilding them, the metaphysician hopes to get closer and closer to the object he describes. But here lies the difference between the scientist and the metaphysician. The metaphysician will *never* come up with a right answer to the problems he undertakes, his descriptions will always be inadequate for the object he is considering. A definite framework yields definite relations, but the metaphysician is faced with pure description, and such description yields *no* definite relations. That is why these “problems” are instead called *mysteries*. The metaphysician can point to these natural mysteries when he is describing them and come to some feeling as to the adequacy or inadequacy of the description; but he can never claim to have solved the mystery, for it is not factitious in nature.

The positivist wants to claim here a victory. By admitting that a verifiable truth will not come of the action of continually refining descriptions through analogy, he will say that the practice has no value. But Farrer disagrees. Farrer will echo Wittgenstein when the latter declares:

My whole tendency and I believe the tendency of all men who ever tried to write or talk Ethics or Religion was to run against the boundaries of language. This running against the walls of our cage is perfectly, absolutely hopeless. Ethics so far as it springs from the desire to say something about the ultimate meaning of life, the absolute good, the absolute valuable, can be no science. But it is a document of a tendency in the human mind which I personally cannot help respecting deeply and I would not for my life ridicule it. (Lecture on Ethics, citation needed)

The whole purpose of metaphysics, in Farrer's sense, is to run against the walls of language, to try and see over them, to try to understand that which rejects understanding. This banging of the metaphysician's head against the mysteries of his existence may seem fruitless, but the action is not to be discarded so easily. It is valuable in its own right. It provides understanding of 'being' by taking the very form of the human mind's inner dialogue, its imagery and analogy, and subjecting it to judgment after judgment. It is a very human struggle, one that pits the finite against the infinite; and it must be valued for just that, if it is going to be valued at all.

Farrer presents here, I think, a very good argument for trying to understand natural mysteries in terms of analogical thought, but what of the question at hand? Can

non-analogical truth be had from the images which function in the description of natural mysteries? Farrer answers both *yes and no*.

The answer is *no*, he says, if you are talking about some piece of true *thinking*. What he means by this is that there is no bit of thinking about the mystery which lies behind the analogy, and expresses the same meaning as the analogical thoughts. For example, if one takes the description by analogy of some everyday object, it is possible to describe the same phenomena in non-analogical thoughts and conserve the meaning: ‘This can of peanuts is like a maraca. If you shake it, the peanuts inside reverberate against the walls of the can causing sound waves which are similar to those of a maraca when shaken.’ But if one takes the description of a mystery of reality and tries to provide a non-analogical description that means the same as the analogical thought, he hits a wall: ‘The mind-body relation is like a ghost in the machine. There is some invisible manipulating force which commands the material body... and so on.’ Any way the metaphysician tries to describe the mystery lands him in analogical thinking.

Now, the answer is *yes*, Farrer says, if the truth that is to be had is the truth of the existent reality the metaphysician is trying to describe. For, as far as natural mysteries are concerned, he can still point to them with no description or analogical thinking.

Without analogizing he can do no more than point to them, or at the most name them: he cannot express or describe them... The relation of self and body is *there* in our act of existing, and it is that to which our analogical discourse reacts: but it does not get expressed in any parallel and non-analogical reaction. (GV 74)

So, in this way the metaphysician is able to share some truth about natural mysteries without analogizing. He is able to point to the existent reality of the mystery.

But now, in order to answer the primary question, we must step back up the ladder to the theologian's realm. Can the rational theologian point to some non-analogical truth about divine mysteries, say the existence of God, as did the philosophical metaphysician? On the face of it, it seems a much more difficult task for the theologian. The metaphysician is able to point to obvious relations in existence. But the theologian is stuck even before this. The mystery of the divine is not as obvious as the mysteries of nature. In fact, the "mystery" of the divine can be shrugged off along with the general idea of transcendence in a way that "natural" mysteries cannot. But, assuming that the existence of God stands to reason, let us continue in order to see how Farrer thinks the theologian can answer the questions put to him.

To begin with, I will paint Farrer's picture of rational analogies and natural theology. How do we come to know God "naturally" or through rational enquiry? Let me first ask, how do we come to know anything in this way? Farrer's answer here gets straight to the point: "All our voluntary thinking is ultimately the development of involuntary thinking which has already occurred in us." (GV 87) In such a way, the development of our involuntary sense perception leads us, eventually, to think about the physical world around us; the development of our involuntary behavioral thought leads us, eventually, to voluntary thought about our 'self'; and it would seem to follow that our involuntary thought about the perfect and absolute would lead us to deliberate thought about God. But Farrer rightly points out a problem with this idea. He says that thought about physical things comes about because our mind is forced, in a way, to think about

them as our senses are continually bombarded with stimuli. In the same way, our mind is forced to encounter behavioral thought because of our innate behavioral instincts. But there is seemingly nothing that could force the mind to think, involuntarily, about God. No simple perceptions occur within our senses that lead to thoughts on God. “If the mind begins to perceive God involuntarily, it must be that acts of discourse about God are forced upon the mind.” (GV 88)

What does Farrer mean here by saying an act of discourse could be forced upon a mind? He is trying to get at the idea that by some thought about finite existence our mind could naturally infer a relation to the infinite. In this way, if I am thinking about my own perception, and I begin to think about how limited and imperfect it may be, my mind may very well expand this thought by relating my limited form of perception to some sort of absolute or infinite form of perception. Thus, my mind is, in a way, being forced to open discourse about the infinite, or God. My mind, in its reflection on a finite aspect of reality, is able to see that finite aspect as a symbol for the infinite and, eventually, draw a relation between myself and God. “The natural mystery which is the starting point of rational theology is the finite manifesting itself as the shadow of the infinite.” (GV 91)

This is what Farrer wants as an answer to our question about the rational theologian. Farrer wants to point to this and have it be for him the non-analogical truth in the form of an existent reality that links the rational theologian and the metaphysician.

But what finite aspect of reality, one might ask, do we have to ponder in order to apprehend the absolute? Farrer opens this discussion by referencing the medieval idea of the scale of being. In the classical notion of the *scala-naturae*, beings are ordered according to what Farrer calls the “principle of the dominant form.” This is the notion

that beings on the lower end of the scale are dominated by the structure of their matter. As we ascend the scale, form becomes more and more dominant in such a way that at the top of the scale there exists absolute form. “In the lower strata of being, form is heavily and confusedly embedded in its matter. To follow the scale upwards is to see its progressive emancipation.” (FI 42) The classical argument follows with the idea that consciousness (or mind) is a direct result of the development of form; thus, absolute form, or the highest point on the scale, is representative of the absolute mind, thus the absolute being (God) sits atop the scale as pure, unfettered, and absolute spirituality.

Although this scale was obviously very useful to the medievals, Farrer thinks that it cannot be so useful to the rational theologian. He criticizes the *scala-naturae* on two fronts: (a) that it is not as evident as medieval theologians would have liked to believe, i.e. “it is a sophisticated construction, which hardly can have been implicit to the faith of the simple; (b) it is probably an artificial construction, drawing all its positive elements from elsewhere.” (FI 46) These two grievances, when set against the task of the rational theologian, are enough to completely invalidate the *scala-naturae* doctrine. The idea, however, of a scale that our mind naturally forms as an analogy of the relation of finite beings to the infinite, can still be used.

If we are to form a scale then, Farrer points out that it must not fall into the same snares as the *scala-naturae*. We must stop looking for order without, by spreading our mind over accidentals, and turn our perspective within, in order to find that which we know to be the case before we even began looking. He proposes the notion of an “interior scale”, a scale within ourselves that points out differences in degrees of activity and operation. This idea is spelled out in the previous section, [the point here being that

Farrer comes to similar conclusions in *The Glass of Vision* regarding the apprehension of God] but what remains unanswered at this point is how these conclusions can answer the genuine theist's concerns about revelation and the supernatural.

3.3 Why we can then talk about scripture, revelation, the supernatural, etc.

Farrer begins explaining how we can talk (or think) about scripture, revelation, and the like, and how we can ascertain truth from the images therein by relating the “perceptible processes of the inspired mind, the psychological fact” as it were, in the Biblical writers, to the inspiration of the poet. (GV113) How do images function to move these poetic minds to the heights they have surmounted? And how do these images relate their meanings (many as they may be) to our (lowly) minds?

When we read the verses of great poets we are struck by a certain sense of meaning that seems to ring true.

When we say that it is true we are not simply saying that something has really been imagined, and that the imagination has really been expressed. We are saying that, no doubt, but we are saying also that the expressed imagination has great and wide symbolizing power... The phrase which is just right has infinite overtones: as it awakens echoes in all the hidden caves of our minds. (GV 119)

How does the meaning of such symbolism reach our understanding? Farrer answers this question by expanding it to include all meaning and all talk. How does any word succeed in bringing meaningful objects to our mind? After all, a word is “simply a sound in my mouth or the shadow of a sound in my mind.” (GV 119) Farrer rejects the idea that every word has concrete referential meaning so that when we speak or listen we are stringing together objects in our mind to which the words we utter or hear definitely refer. The fact

that we can trace the meaning of a word we use back to definite, concrete particulars does not speak to the act of thought that was used to form that utterance. For in speaking we are most definitely not pondering on the individual particulars each part of our speech is derived from. Yet we have, somewhere in our minds at the time of formulation, an active understanding of those objects which we are describing. This peculiar mystery, of how meaning is present in our minds but not so much as to “clutter up our mental vision with a mass of distinct details” (GV 120) is even more important when talking about poetry. For in normal speech we often try to limit the meaning of words to just what we are trying to communicate. In poetry, however, the words are used to express much more than the obvious meaning.

The point of all this is simply to say that apprehension occurs “in the act of discourse... Though what we apprehend is not the words, what we apprehend is stated in the words; there is no getting behind that mysterious fact.” (GV 121) And in reading the words of great poetry we not only apprehend the *obvious* meaning therein; we apprehend the extended meaning and this extension could, theoretically, be infinite. For it is this deeper, more robust meaning that speaks to the abyssal depths and soaring heights of the human soul.

Now, if the poet is stirred by his particularly sensitive feel for the movement of human existence and writes almost solely on that matter, then what can we say for the Biblical writer? The verses of prophecy in Jeremiah have an obvious meaning, and were the experiences of the prophet not similar to that of the poet the lines of such prophecy could be simply reduced to plain prosaic description. But this is not the case. The lines of Jeremiah take on the character of great poetry in the multitudinous meanings the

prophecies possess. Each word is chosen carefully so as to explode the possibilities of its meaning and have for the reader a particularly individualizing effect, while at the same time remaining clear in its overt message.

What constrains the images of the prophet, however, must be very different than that of the poet. For the poet, in a free creative act, could form his art around anything in life. While the prophet must be expressing something very different; his images must be constrained by more than just life; but what? Farrer makes a point here to say that it is “impossible to answer this question without betraying some definite metaphysical assumptions.” (GV 125) In other words, for the words of the prophet to hold meaning beyond the overt socio-economic commentary/criticism they possess, they must have a creaturely relationship to some ongoing and eternal creative act (namely, God’s eternal creative act) which shapes the form of his verse and puts into words the struggle the prophet perceives between the eternal truth of God and the rebelliously ignorant spirit of man.

3.3.2 Recapitulation of argument

The original task set before us brings us back to the question of rationality and coherence. We have taken for our hypothesis that God is apprehended and the movements of thought which follow from this apprehension have constrained our account of Being (both finite and infinite), language (insofar as it speaks to the infinite), and ultimately the original apprehension itself. We have now reached a discussion of the place occupied by divine revelation, particularly that revelation found in scripture. Everyone, I think, would agree that this account (however truncated its form may be here) is of utmost importance if we are to stick to our original task; for beliefs about

divine revelation in the form of scripture makes up a great portion of those implicit beliefs which the rational theologian must draw out and explicate. The goal of the previous discussion was to show that for the words of the Biblical writers to have meaning, we must accept a broad metaphysical picture that, at the very least, accounts for the relation that holds between creature and creator, between writer and God. For us to explain how the words of the Biblical writers take on a revelatory character, we must adopt an even deeper metaphysical account of how that relationship works. But do the metaphysical assumptions required for such an account of meaningful revelatory scripture make sense when placed next to Farrer's account of the absolute in *Finite and Infinite*? Farrer, I believe, runs into several problems near the end of *Finite and Infinite* which throw the whole enterprise thus far into peril.

3.3.3 What Farrer does to lose the content of "Being as operation"

Farrer's analysis of finite substance in *Finite and Infinite* yields an account of being as operation or activity. This account of being is essential to Farrer's argument, for it seems to get him out of the old talk of being as found in Aquinas, which was riddled with problems of intelligibility and analogical meaning. Aquinas, as a synthesizer of Catholic theology and Aristotelian metaphysics, was stuck in a mode of thinking that put the priority of metaphysical enquiry on logical analysis, but neglected to provide itself enough content so as to be intelligible. Ideas of absolute being as pure actuality, *ens realissimum*, or that being whose essence was inseparably wrapped up in his existence are all logically sound; however, they do not resonate as intelligible notions of the "Living God", the active, historical God, that notion of the Supreme Being as commonly found in genuine theistic belief. Thinkers after Aquinas fell into this same trap: Leibniz

and Descartes, celebrated for their versions of the cosmological argument, failed to see that logical necessity does not mean existential necessity, for the subject and predicate of the logical proof can be denied together as can the idea of a triangle with its three sides. “A man might as well expect to become richer in knowledge by the aid of mere ideas as a merchant to increase his wealth by adding noughts to his cash-account.”⁶ The mere idea of a necessary being, even if it is logical, does not entail or allow us to infer the existence of such a being. Furthermore, if the subject of these various arguments can only be thought of, then statements about this being cannot be referentially meaningful in a demonstrable way. Farrer, in his rehashing of the arguments, saw that he would need a much richer metaphysical account of being to get around these concerns. He would have to find examples in finite experience that could ground this account and provide a means for apprehension and a basis for argument.

If we look at the arguments Farrer presents in the concluding section of *Finite and Infinite*, we can see where Farrer takes an initial⁷ wrong turn. The last section of *Finite and Infinite*, “The Dialectic of Rational Theology”, contains a number of arguments which are meant to rationally demonstrate lines of reasoning which conclude in the existence of God. Farrer centers his discussion on the so-called “Usiological Arguments.” These arguments aim to demonstrate that finite existence (particularly the co-existence of elements within such finite existence) is only (logically) intelligible if there exists an infinite ground to such existence. To this point, I think, he succeeds. The arguments found here do show, and with clear, logical force, the rationality of positing an infinite existent as the ground for finite existence. This last line, however, should strike a familiar chord in the ear of the reader, a distinctly Aristotelian chord.

By returning to the old mode of argumentation characterized by an attempt to prove the logical necessity of the absolute, Farrer is merely refining the arguments of his predecessors, which reach all the way back to Aristotle. The Aristotelian analysis of substance yields a conclusion that necessitates an unmoved mover. Further arguments, by Aquinas, Leibniz, Descartes, and others are seemingly just either (a) refinements of the original argument by Aristotle, (b) alterations of the argument with the aim of synthesizing views that seem contrary to the Aristotelian metaphysics, or (more often than not) (c) a combination of (a) and (b). These arguments arise out of a “desire to establish divine existence independently of any analogizing from finite to infinite person or spirit.” (FS 129) There is seemingly no problem in the logic of such arguments. A quick analysis of finite substance, in combination with obvious observations of causality, will yield the conclusion that there must be something that causes without itself being caused. The problem inherent to all of these arguments, however, is the objection raised by Kant. Kant was able to show that even those proofs which begin with empirical observation end with reason alone. In his metaphysical view, the infinite gap between the empirical and the transcendental, between a proof based solely on pure reason and one based on “the empirical use of understanding” (i.e. interaction with phenomena) can never be crossed: “...[reason] stretches its wings in vain when it tries to soar beyond the world of sense by the power of mere speculation.”

McLain sums this contention up nicely in his article on the subject:

The point ... is that the argument of *Finite and Infinite* seems to yield only the characterless notion of Absolute Being. The notion defines God ‘neither by what he is nor by how he acts but purely by the functional position of his Being as

supreme term in a speculative scale.’ As such, it is a notion that offends against the empirical principle by which Farrer wishes his own words to be judged, namely, that we can think about no reality about which we can do nothing but think. (McLain, 1970)

In addition to this common problem, Farrer runs into the problem of divesting his notion of ‘being as activity’ of its content. By returning to the Thomistic understanding of being, Farrer loses all of the content for the notion of being that he had built up in the previous sections of *Finite and Infinite*. In losing this content, he is unable to avoid the original problem with the doctrine of analogical predication, viz. its inability to provide an understanding of the proportion which holds between God’s being and ours, due to a lack of intelligible content characterized by the Aristotelian notion of pure actuality. He failed to see in *F&I* that he would need this content in order to make the relation between creature and creator intelligible by a) providing a full understanding of what exactly God’s being consists of and b) using this understanding to build evidence, in the empirical sense, that could be used to circumscribe the Kantian critique of rational theology. What he was building in *F&I* was the content behind his notion of being as operation, which seemed a promising route to bring the old, Greek notion of the apex of being into accord with an intelligible interpretation of how we can relate our finite being to God’s infinite being.

As we have already stated, not only does the notion of Absolute Being found in *Finite and Infinite* offend against the empirical criterion, it fails to provide Farrer with a basis on which to build a more comprehensive account of how such an Absolute Being freely acts in history. Again, Farrer believes rational theology should be concerned with

making explicit the implicit principles of genuine theistic belief. But what principles, other than the positing of a supreme being, do these arguments bring out? How can the logically necessary being in these arguments be shown to possess the will and power to move in nature and history?

4. Faith and Speculation

We have gone over this ground time and again, and its hard, cold soil seems to refuse to yield to our digging. But let us, for the sake of argument, take up our shovels and return to it.

In *F&I* we reached an understanding of Deity as the Absolute Being by constructing an interior scale. By abstracting our own activity and aspiring up the scale of Being we were able to reach an idea of God as the Absolute mode of existence, but we were not to delimit this existence in any way, therefore it remained action without modality: sheer existence. We then undertook an analysis of analogy, trying to ascertain just what about God might be properly spoken of and, also, trying to find an understanding of revelation that fit our notion of God, as set forth in *F&I*. This attempt, however, seemed doomed from the start; for such a characterless notion of God does not seem able to support any account of revelation. But now it seems we have hit an impasse. To ascribe absoluteness to any activity (being), one must deny the determination of any modality for that activity and affirm its absoluteness as activity-as-such. But it seems that for this idea of Absolute Being to make sense with the implicit principles of genuine theistic belief one *must* ascribe *some* modality to the action of God, depleting him of his absoluteness.

At this point, Farrer must give some account of Absolute Being that allows for a freedom of movement between modalities, without a limitation on his absoluteness. In addition, Farrer must make this account somehow fall into accord with the empirical criterion, or risk throwing away his whole enterprise. Farrer attempts to answer these concerns in *Faith and Speculation* by building upon his arguments in *Finite and Infinite* and adding to them a particularly insightful interpretation of the role that *will* plays in the argument *a contingentia mundi*.

4.1 The Empirical Criterion

Before going any further, it may be necessary to spell out more clearly what we mean by the “empirical criterion”. Generally, something like an empirical principle is most associated with the philosophy of Hume, but also finds inspiration in Kant and, later, in the distinct empirical realism which grew out of these two thinkers. The Humean critique of metaphysics, which affirms the importance of realism in philosophy, denies that there are any real metaphysical relations that hold between elements of our perception. Kant affirmed that since we do not have access to the things themselves, the metaphysical relationships that some philosophers claimed held in reality must actually have some grounding in the *a priori*. If not, then they are pure fabrication; the positing of necessary elements of existence from observed ‘facts’ about reality (to which we cannot be said to have access). It is in contemplating the categories and their relation to observances in the world that we come up with an idea of the argument from contingency, but the conclusion of such an argument cannot be anything more than a purely *logical* necessity.

Historically, this debate has taken the same form with the empiricists on one side and the ‘rationalists’ on the other. Farrer believes that in modern times this distinction has more or less completely broken down. Neither side can truly affirm its premises and, at the same time, fully deny the other side’s propositions.

We shall agree that there must be actual uniformities in natural processes, for otherwise we could not codify them as we do. We shall equally agree that the codes themselves are linguistic forms constructed by us, according to logical rules which we find either necessary or convenient. (FS 18)

The frontier is now elsewhere. It no longer runs between the factors of physical knowledge, but between physical knowledge as such and other areas of cognition. (FS 19)

In other words, it is now the tendency of the empirical model to predominate, not only in physical knowledge, but in knowledge as such. The sieve-like effect which was briefly mentioned above is the characteristic trait of such a tendency. Farrer wishes to reject this predomination, in favor of a broader analysis of the sciences on logical grounds (which he believes is already occurring in something like the philosophy of science), with the hope of reaching a clearer picture of the whole of finite being. This is somewhat of a digression, but it serves to show that by using the term ‘empirical’ Farrer is not wishing to make his criterion equivalent with the strictures of knowledge set by the modern scientific framework of belief. It still remains unclear how Farrer wishes to bridge this gap between the finite on the one side and the infinite on the other. Theology, Farrer believes, cannot be included in the sciences, for it tries to get at something

inaccessible to their methods. But the idea of knowledge through interaction cannot be denied as the only legitimate means to justify claims about real existents.

It is here that Farrer realizes what must be done: he must refine the empirical principle in a way that will include rather than exclude. We must have an empirical principle broad enough to put belief in Deity on a continuum with our other knowledge of real entities, including that of the sciences. The discussion above shows that it cannot be found *in* the sciences, and it is reasonable to ask whether or not it will be too much of a stretch for the principle to cover theism. But let us move on, assuming that a reasonable version of the principle can be reached. The method of refinement will take the form of generalization. First, we will ask how we come to the knowledge of any ‘thing’, or affirm its existence, in the general sense. Then we will try to apply these ideas to the affirmation of the divine.

It is through our senses that we come to the knowledge of physical existents. We try to make objective statements about phenomena by abstracting from our experience of them (or rather, *with* them) the ‘relevant’ details of our interaction, then using this abstraction to extrapolate to the “laws” of the physical universe (mentioned above). These statements, however, are never wholly objective, for they are based still on our experience of an interaction with phenomena. Our sensory experience is the result of the interaction between our various sensory activities and the plentitude of activities which comprise our environment. We affirm the existence of these other activities (or beings) because we come to ‘bump up against them’ in a way, i.e. they continually qualify our own activity. It is this type of recognition, the qualification of one’s action towards a being, which Farrer latches on to in forming his empirical criterion:

I mean that to know real beings we must exercise our actual relation to them. No physical science without physical interference, no personal knowledge without personal intercourse; no thought about any reality about which we can do nothing but think. Is not this the highest possible generalization of the empirical principle? Theology must be at least this, if it is to mediate any knowledge whatever. We can know nothing of God, unless we can do something about him.” (FS 22)

Farrer’s empirical criterion can be stated as this: “We can think about nothing – that is, about no (supposed) reality – about which we can do nothing but think.” (FS 36) Just as, in the physical sciences, it takes some interaction with the environment to ascertain some knowledge about a given phenomena, so too theology cannot hope to point to a reality (God), about which we can only think. We must have some empirical experience (in the broadest sense possible) of God before we can claim to have knowledge of his being or characteristics.

Farrer also attempts, with this empirical criterion, to offer a solution to the problem of analogy. If you recall, the true problem with analogies which attempt to compare finite being and infinite being is that we have no *real* knowledge of the infinite part of the analogy, i.e. if I say God’s goodness is to God’s being as human goodness is to human being, I am left to speculate on ‘God’s being’; for, as a finite being, I can seemingly have no real knowledge of it.

If we can only think of such a being as the unmoved mover, and never interact with it, then we cannot posit it as a reality. Farrer wishes to affirm this philosophical realism, which forces him to articulate a notion of God that asserts his agency in the world and in a particular way that allows us to interact with him.

4.2 A Theology of Will

So, Farrer's first concern will be to show how modality may be applied to the Absolute without limiting its activity, thus adding intelligible content to the concept of absoluteness. In building this account, we will try to give an explanation of Farrer's use of the empirical criterion as it pertains to the 'modality' described above. In *Faith and Speculation*, Farrer explores the notion of will in some detail. Let us make a similar exploration for the purpose of finding some intelligible concept to pin on the creator.

What is will? The more appropriate question might be "What is it for a human being to will?" The notion of will combines both action and choice. It can even be said to be an active choosing. "Will' is action itself, in the full and personal sense of the verb to 'act'... We call nothing an exercise of will which does not constitute an act, though the act may be invisible and internal, say the registration of a decision for my guidance tomorrow." (FW 109-110) Our existence is defined by acts of will and any existence which is not sustained by acts of willing can hardly be called an existence. Farrer picked up on this in *Finite and Infinite*, in fact Farrer goes into a very detailed analysis of will in *Finite and Infinite*, but he reverts to a Thomistically structured metaphysical argumentation at the end of that book and falls back into the trap of the problem of analogy. Thus he failed to carry the idea to fruition: (from above) "...we *are* the act of will asserting itself as well as it may against its limitation..."! It is the realization of this limitation on our *agency* and the implications which follow that form the basis of our aspiration! It is a very practical interest in our own doing and willing that leads man to look upward toward the heavens and it is this aspiration which is the beginning of rational theology. The limitation of the will forces the thought upon men's minds of a

will which is *not* limited and is able to realize itself perfectly and effortlessly: the true origin of the internal “scale of being”.

The primitive believer has made the not very profound observation that while some part of his life and his situation is the direct creation of his voluntary choices [or *will*], far too much neither is nor can be. He fumbles in his unenlightened way after the Decider or Deciders of those matters which he cannot himself either decide or control.” (FS 122)

Instead of realizing the importance of will in *Finite and Infinite*, Farrer decides to focus on activity-as-such, which is too abstract an idea to support any intelligible interpretation. When we analyze the arguments of *Finite and Infinite* in the light of this notion of will we come to an extremely interesting conclusion. We said above that we can conceive of operation or activity as ranging in scope and intensity, and it is the contemplation of this scale of being that leads us to posit the existence of an ultimate term to inhabit the farthest reaches of the scale. But what if we take this activity as being an act of will? Then the term we should choose would be ‘Sovereign Will’, that being which freely chooses its existence.

The argument *a contingentia mundi* once again takes on a new form with the primacy of operation given to the will. Just as in the previous formulations, the contemplation of finite existence leads one to the question ‘why is it so?’ But this time, we question why a given being assumes the mode of existence that it does (or, why any given being possesses the mode of activity which it possesses) and by doing so we are led to that being which freely chooses the form of its activity (without limitation). “And thus, proceeding from the ‘why is it so?’ question, we reach the God who is all he wills to be,

and wills to be all he is: for his act is himself, and his act is free.” (FS 118) So, as to the concern that prompted this discussion: What mode of activity does the Absolute assume? Whatever mode it freely chooses, Farrer answers.

How does this account of the Absolute meet the requirements of the empirical criterion? Farrer believes that it is in altering one’s own will to the will of God that we find a means of interaction with the Absolute. What people often call a “life-in-God”, that lived aspect of belief in the Divine First Cause, is, in fact, the believer’s interaction with and non-analogical authentication of the Unconditioned Will.

It is a reality not to be objectively observed (how could it be?) but performed or lived; and so the believer escapes from dependence on mere analogical inference in the same way as the believer in other-personal existence escapes from it; for he lives the belief, a belief which, admittedly, has an analogical shape. (FS 129-30)

So, just as solipsism is continually defeated by interaction with the persons who would be doubted (i.e. by a qualification of our own activities towards those persons), belief in God is authenticated by interaction with the One who is “all he sees it best to be”, in a qualification of our action towards him typically characterized as ‘obedience’ or ‘love’ or a plethora of other terms.

Thus it is the action of obedience, in a broad sense of the term, i.e. the throwing in of one’s will with the will of God, which fulfills this interactive criterion. We respond to the pressure of God’s present and active will by qualifying our action in ways which attempt to align our will to his. In this way, the affirmation of the Divine is more similar to the affirmation of other people than the affirmation of mere objects. In affirming the existence of other people we interact with their willing and doing by qualifying our own

action in response to a pressure we feel to do so. We would feel bad to completely disregard another person's feelings, desires, motives, actions, etc. ('willings', if you will), and in the same way we feel a pressure to respond to the being who wills all that he is and is all that he wills to be by throwing in with that will. It is this interaction through obedience (which takes its form in an infinite number of ways, some of which include faith, hope, love, dependence, etc.), which forms the basis of our fulfillment of the empirical criterion.

“At the same time it must be admitted that life-in-God has not the indubitable evidence of life-in-community.” This, however, should be obvious: if it were the case that the evidence was the same, then the atheist's denial would be as ineffective as the skeptic's solipsistic argument. But we all know that this is not the case. The argument for the fulfillment of the empirical criterion cannot be defended any longer, for if it were wholly successful the idea of God which was the basis for such an argument would be so changed that it would no longer fit our tacit understanding of the divine. Farrer admits to the limits of his argument. Though it is a rational argument, it does not compel the rational person to assent. I believe this to be tied to the notion of mysteries in the following way: it is logical to reach the conclusion Farrer reaches and it seems to make sense to assert that we interact with the Sovereign Will, and in the ways Farrer says we do; however, at the same time, it seems to run against our intuitions, which tell us that no interaction can possibly come between the unique and infinite Cause of all things (the creator) and the finite constituents of that creation. The Sovereign Agent is not one of the things that make up the world, but the affirmation of God's existence must be reasonably similar to the affirmations we make of such constituent 'things'. Yet, it must also be very

much unlike these affirmations, given the essential difference between the infinitely sustaining Agency, which creates the world, and the limited agencies that make it up. insists that, in general, the arguments of rational theology cannot be abandoned for a faith based on sheer 'religious experience': "Our position is that theism must be lived as well as thought; and equally that without being thought it cannot be lived." (FS 130)

The argument, then, ends here. It appears obvious that the empirical criterion will not be fulfilled by any account that holds the divine as transcendent being just being itself. It is a contradiction in terms. It is the faith of the believer alone that can support this notion, and it is that faith which rests in the apprehension of a creator that is absolute in his existence yet admits to a modality of activity which freely interacts with his creation.

4.3 Summary of Farrer's transition in thought

Hopefully I have shown how Farrer's thought made a transition from his early writing in *Finite and Infinite*, through his later writing in the *Glass of Vision* and, finally, in *Faith and Speculation*. It will do well, I think, to sum up this transition quickly so as to make fresh in the reader a sense of the change and to prepare a clearing for some concluding remarks.

In *Finite and Infinite*, Farrer offers a meticulous analysis of finite being in the form of a kind of phenomenology of action. The content and conclusions of this account provides Farrer with the means to justify a sort Thomistic understanding of the relation that holds between finite and infinite; however, a return to the medieval understanding of being (in the form of a Thomistic metaphysics) brings him back time and again to the problem of analogy. In trying to deal with this problem, Farrer realizes that the Thomistic

structure of apprehension is not needed. He still grounds the apprehension in a contemplation of our own being, but shifts the focus from our experience of activity as such (*Finite and Infinite*) to our experience of our own agency in the form of willing and doing (*Faith and Speculation*).

4.4 Final Section

In “Doing Theology Metaphysically: Austin Farrer”, John Glasse comments that Farrer’s later works, particularly during the 1960’s, take on “the ‘therapeutic’ function of linguistic analysis, established by Wittgenstein.” (Glasse, 324) I cannot speak to Farrer’s explicit intentions in this endeavor, however it is my belief that *all* of his works (including *Finite and Infinite*), in fact, take on this therapeutic character. He not only attempts to dissolve the philosophical problems involved in talking about God, he also uses metaphysics as a means to more accurately describe mysteries that produce a form of philosophical anxiety in men. This describing, the continual breaking of the metaphysical image and its reformation and refining, is a means to relieve the philosopher of this anxiety by providing a better understanding of the mystery. In addition to this metaphysical therapy, there is a heavy emphasis on providing logical accounts of theology, in an attempt to validate those beliefs which are implicit in theism. But what is this other than therapy? It is a rational working out or working through of ideas that are held by philosophers, which, when confronted with “problems”, feel the need to reevaluate their beliefs; all with the intention of making the philosopher feel better about holding the troubled beliefs. At some point we must realize that these so-called ‘problems’ are truly mysteries which grow out of an exhaustive contemplation of being. I am not claiming that all of philosophy takes on this therapeutic form. But it must

be admitted that when philosophers dig and dig until they hit solid rock, continuing to scrape our shovels against the surface can only provide us with a deeper understanding and a more awful respect for just how hard the stone is.

It is important to point out that Farrer's thought on the philosophy which underlies theistic belief changes somewhat in *Faith and Speculation*. I said earlier that Farrer saw the task of the rational theologian as drawing out and making explicit the implicit beliefs which are the basis for the theist's understanding of Deity. In a way, with *Finite and Infinite* Farrer was building upon the idea that the everyday believer's apprehension of God must take place through a rigorous contemplation of the supporting evidence and an acceptance of the conclusion (God) based on the arguments built up from such evidence. In *Faith and Speculation*, however, he realizes how far he would have to stretch this idea for it to apply to most believers and alters his interpretation of the relationship between philosophy and lived religious life. His new conception of this relationship accepts the fact that most believers find the source of their 'religion' in "tradition or history, not in a subliminal annex to the philosophy of cognition." (FS 4) In other words, most believers simply find themselves in a lived religious practice and philosophical speculation about the underlying beliefs of that practice either comes later or never comes at all. It could be said that the inquiry should stop here, for there are millions who live their religious life unabashed and with no care for the philosophic underpinnings of their beliefs. However, it seems as if speculative religious thought should be taken seriously, especially by the believer. It seems counterintuitive for the believer to have conflicting frameworks of belief, and it is the job of philosophy to enquire more deeply into the underpinnings of such belief and draw out any

inconsistencies. In *Faith and Speculation*, Farrer reaffirms the importance of philosophy in religious belief, this time by claiming it as a body of supporting belief which is continually self-correcting, continually flowing around the solid pillar that is the lived religious life. "The practice of religion is what brings to life our reasonings about the world's ultimate Cause, and gives reality to them; while on the other side our reasonings about the world give sense and definiteness to a religious faith in God." (GD 70) In addition to this, Farrer wants to say that the importance of philosophic inquiry into religious belief is the importance of consistency: we must see our religious beliefs and the structures which support them as being consistent with the entirety of our knowledge about the world and the various belief structures which support that knowledge.

There are a plethora of arguments against theism. This is not disputable. It may be because the belief in God has existed so long and in an area of thought where philosophic enquiry can hardly be held back, but it is a fact that there are numerous and forceful arguments against this belief. Men hold to these beliefs nonetheless, almost, as it were, flaunting them in the face of such arguments. 'Look at this', the believer sometimes says, 'I possess irrational beliefs and I am content with them.' When the philosopher hears this he shudders at the thought. This may seem like a criticism, but it is not. It is only an affirmation of the idea that men hold beliefs for reasons that may be beyond analysis. The subscription to such motivating reasons is more arational than irrational. The reaching out for that which is beyond our grasp cannot be admonished, for it is a noble striving and one that is at the heart of humankind. It is only when we claim that we have actually attained the thing we pursue that we err.

¹ Farrer, Austin. *God is Not Dead*. 1966, Morehouse-Barlow Co., New York. (Hereafter GD)

² The discussion Farrer makes about our own existence as *imago Dei*, seems to somehow rationalize the idea of *imago Dei* as logically following from the limits of our language and experience. If we can only talk/think about that which we personally experience (ie, human existence), then the revelation of being made in the image of God would seem to validate discussion of God.

³ Again, this is discussed more in depth below.

⁴ “Analogy”, *Twentieth Century Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, Vol. I, 1955, Austin Farrer)

⁵ *Finite and Infinite*, pg. 7

⁶ Kant’s critique of pure reason.

⁷ I say “initial”, because it seems to me that he returns to these problems and provides a much better ‘fix’ in *Faith and Speculation* (discussed below).