Religious Language as Analogy

St Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274)
The suggestion that religious language should be regarded as analogous is primarily attributed to the philosopher St. Thomas Aquinas. He thought religious language was meaningful and that the via negativa does not express what believers are saying about God. However, he did not think that religious language expresses God’s attributes directly, in the way that language does express human attributes.

It is important to note that Aquinas’ theories start from confirmed religious belief and work backwards from that in justifying it.

Aquinas thought that there are basically three ways in which our talk about God can be viewed: Univocal, Equivocal and analogy.

Aquinas rejected univocal and equivocal language when talking about God:

Univocal language: This is where words are used to mean the same things in all the situations where they are used e.g. white board, white collar, white wall. In each case, the word 'white' is being used in the same way - to refer to the colour white. If we are speaking univocally, we are claiming that God is good in the same way humans are. Aquinas rejected this as he believed God to be perfect. Because of this, imperfect humans cannot be good in the same way that God is – God is pure goodness – so religious language cannot be univocal.

Your examples of univocal language:

Equivocal language: This is where words are used to mean different things in different contexts e.g. 'gay' can be taken to mean 'jolly', 'homosexual' or more recently 'rubbish'. The problem here is that when a word is used to mean a different thing, it is robbed of its original meaning because of the new application. If we are speaking equivocally, we mean that God is good in a totally different way to humans. Aquinas rejected this too. He argued that if we speak equivocally about God, we cannot be stating anything that we know about him as we are saying that the language we use to describe humans or the experienced world around us, does not apply to God.
If the word ‘good’ had a special and separate meaning when applied to God, it becomes meaningless to say that God is good. Your examples of equivocal language:

Aquinas believed that there was a ‘middle way’, a way of talking meaningfully about God. This middle way is analogy. Aquinas described two types of analogy:

**Analogy of attribution** - tells us what the qualities of something are.

**Analogy of proportion** - tells us the extent that something corresponds to what it should be.

**Analogy**

An analogy is a similarity between like features of two things, on which a comparison may be based, for example, the analogy between the heart and a pump.

We have come across the use of analogy before, in Paley’s analogy of the watch for the Design Argument, and in Plato’s Cave analogy.

We can distinguish an analogy from:

- A simile which is a figure of speech in which two unlike things are explicitly compared, as in “Beatrice is like a rose.”

- A metaphor which is a figure of speech in which a term or phrase is applied to something to which it is not literally applicable in order to suggest a resemblance, as in “Money is God.”

Aquinas felt the only language we could use to talk about God was the language that we use every day, as that is the only language we have. When we apply these meanings to God, however, we understand that God is perfect, so the words do not apply wholly, and therefore are analogous.
Problem:
When using analogies, we need some common ground upon which to base the analogy. When we are talking about pumps and hearts this is fine, as we have some experience of both.

God, however, is so far beyond human understanding that we do not share any common ground between God and whatever is being compared, e.g. we understand watches and watchmakers, but when it comes to the created world and God there is a gap.

Aquinas' response to this is that there is common ground because God has a relationship with the world and us, in that he made it and sustains it, and therefore we have some shared ground.

The analogy of attribution
Aquinas believed it was possible to work out the nature of God by examining his creation. Aquinas took it for granted that the world was created by God and for him, the link between creator and created order was clear.

In the analogy of attribution, Aquinas takes as his starting points the idea that God is the source of all things in the universe and that God is universally perfect. He then goes on to argue that all beings in the universe in some way imitate God according to their mode of existence:

'Thus, therefore, God is called wise not only insofar as He produces wisdom, but also because, insofar as we are wise, we imitate to some extent the power by which He makes us wise. On the other hand, God is not called a stone, even though He has made stones, because in the name stone there is understood a determinate mode of being according to which a stone is distinguished from God. But the stone imitates God as its cause in being and goodness.'

Brian Davies (An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion) uses the example of:
The bread is good
The baker is good.
Clearly the word 'good' does not mean exactly the same in each case - good bread might mean it is soft and tasty whereas this is probably not what we think of a good baker as. Nevertheless, by examining the bread, we can deduce that the baker is good.

Aquinas uses the example of a bull to illustrate this point. It is possible to determine the health of an animal by examining its urine. Aquinas said that if a bull's urine is healthy, then we can determine that the bull will be healthy. Obviously however, the health of the bull is more completely and perfectly within the bull itself and is only reflected in the urine produced by the bull. In the same way God is the source of qualities in the universe and God possesses these qualities first and most perfectly. This sets up an order of reference, meaning that these qualities apply to God first and foremost, then to other things secondarily and analogically. Because we are created in the image of God, it is possible to say that we have these attributes (wisdom, goodness etc) analogically: these qualities are attributed to us analogically, whilst God has them perfectly.

Your summary of analogy of attribution:

The analogy of proportion
This is where analogy is used to talk about the quality that something has in reference to some sort of reference point. We say that God is “all powerful” in relation to human power, in the same way that humans possess loyalty, but in a different way in which dogs possess it.

In this way we understand the attribute (power, loyalty, etc.) and understand that it is of a different proportion to the attribute in humans.

John Hick has given a useful example to help to illustrate this idea:
'Consider the term 'faithful'. A man or a woman can be faithful, and this shows in particular patterns of speech, behaviour and so on. We can also say that a dog is faithful. Clearly there is a great difference between the faithfulness of a man or woman and that of a dog, yet there is a **recognisable similarity** or analogy - otherwise, we would not think of the dog as faithful. Further, in the case of the analogy between the human beings and the dog true faithfulness is something we know in ourselves, and a dim and imperfect likeness of this in the dog is known by analogy.'

The theory is not John Hick's, it was developed by Aquinas, but Hick's example helps to explain it.

The basic idea is that we possess qualities like those of God (goodness, wisdom, faithfulness etc) because we were created in his image and likeness, but because we are inferior to God, we possess those qualities in **lesser proportion** to God. However, when we say a human is good, Aquinas says we are measuring them against a standard of human goodness. When we say God is good, Aquinas says we are saying that God measures up to what it is for God to be God (he is not talking about moral goodness here).

**Ian Ramsey**

Ramsey, in *Religious Language*, presents a model that is similar to Aquinas. Ramsey talks about “*models*” and “*qualifiers*”. To say that “God is Good” is a “model” of what God is (it might be nice to think of it as a scale model of a plane: it is obviously not quite the same as the plane it is modelled after [in size at least], but it is analogous to the full sized plane). The model tends to be simpler than the reality, but gives us an indication of the reality. This is why the model needs to be qualified.

In order to “qualify” the statement for God, we must add a sample of the real scale of it in terms of God, acknowledging that the model does not communicate the complexity of the original. It is more accurate and proper to say that “God is infinitely good.”

Your summary of analogy of proportion:
**Strengths and weaknesses of analogy**

What would you say are the strengths of Aquinas’ approach?

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Criticisms

- Aquinas based his work upon the assumptions that God was ultimately responsible for the creation of the earth (as shown in his 5 Ways) and he also believed that humans were created ‘in the image and likeness of God’ as is stated in Genesis. The idea that we were created has been refuted implicitly by Darwin and explicitly by Richard Dawkins. If you don’t accept Aquinas’ assumptions, you don’t have to accept that we can work out what God is like by examining the earth and life on it.

- Analogy picks some qualities, but not others i.e. the good qualities. The world also comprises **evil**, does **God** possess these qualities as well? This criticism would appear to have been refuted by Augustine, who argues that there is no such thing as evil, just a privation of good.

- Also, analogy can tell us nothing new about God, as it is based upon things that are **already** in existence, it is rather like saying that we can work out everything about a car designer from the car that he has designed.

- Analogy does not stand up to verification, because the object one is trying to illustrate by use of analogy cannot be empirically verified.

- Richard Swinburne (*The Coherence of Theism*) argues that sometimes we don’t use analogy at all. When we say ‘God is good’ and ‘humans are good’, we may be using ‘good’ to apply to different things, but we are using it to mean the same thing: i.e. we are using the word good univocally.

The criticisms of people like AJ Ayer are difficult to reject and an analogical statement referring to God is impossible to verify. However, analogy is incredibly valuable for people who are **already** in the religious language game, that is, people who already believe. It can help them to make sense of a concept that really is beyond human comprehension and would work as a great aid to faith. This was the perspective that Aquinas was working from.