

Geach Is Right, but God Is Good

Defusing Eric Wiland's Threat to Divine Goodness

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Abstract: Peter Geach argues that “good” and “bad” are always logically attributive adjectives. Geach’s thesis is highly plausible and enjoys the support of many philosophers. But Eric Wiland provides a metaphysical interpretation of Geach’s thesis which, in conjunction with the classical thesis that God is *sui generis*, generates a forceful argument that the statement “God is good” is nonsense. Thus, Wiland’s interpretation of Geach threatens any philosophical, theological, or religious tradition which maintains that God is *sui generis* and regards the statement “God is good” as true or even sensible. In this paper, I defuse Wiland’s threat to divine goodness and propose an alternative interpretation of Geach which does not render “God is good” nonsensical. So, “God is good” makes sense, even if God is *sui generis* and Geach is right that “good” and “bad” are always logically attributive adjectives.

Keywords: Divine goodness, Attributive goodness, Divine attributes, Classical theism, Peter Geach

Introduction

Peter Geach argues that “good” and “bad” are always logically attributive adjectives.¹ Geach’s thesis is highly plausible and enjoys the support of many philosophers.² But in a recent paper, Eric Wiland provides a metaphysical interpretation of Geach’s thesis which, in conjunction with the classical thesis that God is *sui generis*, generates a forceful argument that the statement “God is good”

¹ Geach (1956, 33–42).

² For recent defenses of Geach’s position, see Casey Elliott (2023); Mahrud Almotahari and Adam Hosein (2015); Johan Brännmark (2009); Sven Danielsson (2007); and especially David Alexander’s book-length treatment, *Goodness, God, and Evil* (2014). Notably, Judith Jarvis Thomson largely endorses Geach’s account, though she adds her own nuances; see her *Normativity* (2008).

is nonsense.³ Thus, Wiland's interpretation of Geach threatens any philosophical, theological, or religious tradition which maintains that God is *sui generis* and regards the statement "God is good" as true or even sensible. In this paper, I defuse Wiland's threat to divine goodness and propose an alternative interpretation of Geach which does not render "God is good" nonsensical. So, "God is good" makes sense, even if God is *sui generis* and Geach is right that "good" and "bad" are always logically attributive adjectives.

I proceed as follows. In the first section, I explain Geach's thesis that "good" and "bad" are always logically attributive adjectives, and I present his primary arguments for this position. In the second section, I explain Wiland's interpretation of Geach's thesis and the threat it poses to divine goodness when conjoined with the thesis that God is *sui generis*. In the third section, I expose Wiland's assumption that attributive adjectives are essentially kind-dependent, and I show that this assumption is unjustified by Geach's text. I also demonstrate that Wiland's assumption is superfluous to Geach's account of attributive adjectives by drawing attention to a plausible alternative account of attributive adjectives. Because Wiland's assumption is both unjustified and superfluous, I argue, it is easily rejected. In the fourth section, I propose Thomas Aquinas's metaphysics of goodness as an alternative metaphysical explanation of Geach's thesis which does not render "God is good" nonsensical. Thus, I demonstrate the compatibility of the three theses that "good" and "bad" are always logically attributive adjectives, that God is *sui generis*, and that the statement "God is good" makes sense. In the fifth and final section, I consider and respond to three objections.

1. Geach on Good

In order to understand and assess Wiland's threat to divine goodness, we first must understand Geach's thesis that "good" and "bad" are always logically attributive adjectives. In this section, I explain Geach's position and his primary arguments for it.

Geach begins by drawing a distinction between two sorts of adjectives: logically predicative adjectives and logically attributive adjectives. He writes, "I shall say that in a phrase 'an A B' ('A' being an adjective and 'B' being a noun) 'A' is a (logically) predicative adjective if the predication 'is an A B' splits up logically into a pair of predications 'is a B' and 'is A'; otherwise I shall say that 'A' is a (logically) attributive

³ Wiland (2018).

adjective.”⁴ Then, Geach fleshes out what he means by “splits up logically” by way of examples. Consider the adjectives “small” and “big.” The predications “X is a small elephant” and “Y is a big flea” do not logically separate into the two pairs of predications: “X is small” and “X is an elephant” on the one hand, and “Y is big” and “Y is a flea” on the other. Otherwise, a simple argument would show that a big flea is a big animal and a small elephant is a small animal. Therefore, “small” and “big” are attributive adjectives. Likewise, *alienans* adjectives, such as “forged” and “putative,” are attributive. As Geach observes, “‘x is a forged banknote’ does not split up into ‘x is a banknote’ and ‘x is forged’, nor ‘x is the putative father of y’ into ‘x is the father of y’ and ‘x is putative’.”⁵ On the other hand, “red” is a predicative adjective, because the statement “x is a red book” *does* split up logically into the predications “X is red” and “X is a book.”⁶

After distinguishing predicative adjectives and attributive adjectives, Geach puts forward his thesis: “‘good’ and ‘bad’ are always attributive, not predicative, adjectives.”⁷ Call this Geach’s Thesis.

Geach’s Thesis (GT): “Good” and “bad” are always logically attributive adjectives.

Geach defends GT first by arguing that “bad” is an attributive adjective. “Bad,” Geach reasons, is “something like an *alienans* adjective” insofar as

we cannot safely predicate of a bad A what we predicate of an A, any more than we can predicate of a forged banknote or a putative father what we predicate of a banknote or a father. We actually call forged money ‘bad’; and we cannot infer e.g. that because food supports life bad food supports life.⁸

⁴ Geach (1956, 33). Following Geach’s usage, I will call these simply “predicative” adjectives and “attributive” adjectives, though always intending Geach’s special logical sense. Furthermore, I will use “split up logically” to mean the kind of predication-splitting Geach demonstrates by his examples. For a helpful formalization of Geach’s phrase “splits up logically,” see Thomas Magnell (1993, 152).

⁵ Geach (1956, 33).

⁶ As a friend pointed out to me, some adjectives are usually predicative but may be attributive in particular cases. For example, “red” is usually a predicative adjective, but it is an attributive adjective in the statement “her point is a red herring,” which does not split up logically into “her point is red” and “her point is a herring.”

⁷ Geach (1956, 33).

⁸ Geach (1956, 33).

On the other hand, the attributive nature of “good” is not as immediately evident, for “good” is not *alienans*: whatever is true of an A is true of a good A. Nevertheless, Geach demonstrates the attributive nature of “good” by contrasting the pair of phrases “red car” and “good car.” As explained above, “red” is a predicative adjective. Now, Geach reasons, it is possible that I ascertain that a distant object is a red car because I see it is red, although I do not recognize it is a car, while a keener-sighted and colorblind friend recognizes it is a car, although he does not see it is red. This example demonstrates that “X is red” is logically independent from “X is a car.” Therefore, “X is a red car” splits up logically into “X is red” and “X is a car,” and so “red” is a predicative adjective. Nevertheless, Geach observes, it is not possible that I ascertain that the distant object is a good car by similarly pooling the independent information that it is good and that it is a car. This demonstrates that “X is good” is not logically independent from “X is a car.” Therefore, “X is a good car” does not split up logically into “X is good” and “X is a car.” From this example, Geach concludes that “good” is always an attributive adjective. Following these two arguments, Geach restates his thesis: “even when ‘good’ or ‘bad’ stands by itself as a predicate, and thus is grammatically predicative, some substantive has to be understood; there is no such thing as being just good or bad, there is only being a good or bad so-and-so.”⁹

Geach’s arguments have generated several interesting debates regarding whether GT is true, whether his arguments for GT are sound, and what the metaethical implications of GT might be. I will not enter these debates.¹⁰ Instead, I will take for granted that GT is true. As will become evident, what concerns us is not whether GT is true, but rather how we interpret GT. As we interpret GT, we should notice two things. First, we should observe that Geach’s account of attributive adjectives is limited. In fact, Frank Sibley goes as far as to claim that, “we need, but are never given, a definition or elucidation” of the terms “logically predicative” and “logically attributive.”¹¹ Now, Sibley’s claim is too strong, for Geach does elucidate his terms by explaining that predicates with predicative adjectives split up logically whereas predicates with attributive adjectives do not. Nevertheless, Sibley’s point is well-taken. Geach primarily explains attributive adjectives in terms of their logical behavior—that is, they form predicates that do not split up logically—but Geach

⁹ Geach (1956, 34).

¹⁰ In addition to the sources cited in n. 2 above, important discussions of GT, its motivations, and its implications include Thomas Byrne (2016); Judith Jarvis Thomson (1997); Philippa Foot (2001, 2–3); Charles Pigden (1990); R. M. Hare (1972); John Stevenson (1972); John Donnelly (1971); and Alfred MacKay (1970).

¹¹ Sibley (2001, 156).

does not give a developed account of attributive adjectives to explain *why* they behave this way. Of course, any account of attributive adjectives we develop will inform our interpretation of GT. Nevertheless, we must maintain the distinction between our interpretation of GT informed by our account of attributive adjectives and GT itself, which is merely the thesis that “good” and “bad” are always attributive adjectives.

Second, we should observe that GT is primarily a linguistic and logical observation, and Geach offers little or no metaphysical explanation for GT. To this point, Johan Brännmark suggests, “if Geach’s linguistic intuitions are on the mark, . . . the real philosophical task is to develop a metaphysical position which respects those intuitions to a reasonable degree.”¹² Like any account of attributive adjectives we develop, any metaphysical position we take to explain GT will inform our interpretation of GT. Nevertheless, we must maintain the distinction between any metaphysical position taken to explain GT and GT itself.

2. Wiland’s Threat to Divine Goodness

In this section, I explain Eric Wiland’s interpretation of GT and how it threatens divine goodness. To do so, I reconstruct from Wiland’s line of reasoning an argument that if Geach is right and God is *sui generis*, then the statement “God is good” makes no sense. Now, it is unclear whether Wiland ultimately endorses the argument he suggests because it is unclear whether he maintains that God is *sui generis*. Nevertheless, there are several forceful motivations for the position that God is *sui generis*, independently of Wiland’s position. Therefore, we must take seriously Wiland’s line of reasoning and the threat it poses to divine goodness, even if Wiland is ambiguous about his own position.

As he interprets Geach, Wiland articulates the logical function of attributive adjectives thus: “the [attributive] adjective cannot be meaningfully and correctly detached from the specific generic noun it modifies.”¹³ Here, Wiland is more or less restating Geach’s observation that attributive adjectives form predications that do not “split up logically,” in Geach’s sense of the phrase. But Wiland also gives an account of attributive adjectives to explain why they function logically this way. According to Wiland, “attributive adjectives modify the object of the adjective by specifying a way of being *that kind* of object.”¹⁴ Now, Wiland’s account of attributive adjectives needs clarification, for he seems to equivocate between a linguistic sense

¹² Brännmark (2009, 338).

¹³ Wiland (2018, 2).

¹⁴ Wiland (2018, 2, emphasis his).

and a metaphysical sense of the word “object.” Adjectives modify nouns, not things. So what Wiland calls the “object of the adjective” is the noun modified by the adjective. That is, Wiland first seems to use “object” in a linguistic sense. But when Wiland says “a way of being *that kind* of object,” he seems to use “object” in a metaphysical sense, meaning a thing that belongs to some kind referred to by the noun modified by the adjective. So, Wiland’s account of attributive adjectives can be stated more clearly: attributive adjectives modify nouns by specifying a way of being a member of some kind referred to by that noun. In other words, in a predication of the form “X is an A B,” where A is an attributive adjective and B is a noun, A modifies B by specifying a way of being an instance of the kind referred to by B.

Wiland’s account of attributive adjectives is *prima facie* plausible. But whatever the merits of his account of attributive adjectives, it is a step beyond Geach. As stated above, Geach observes that predicates with attributive adjectives do not split up logically, but he does not explain why, nor does he develop an account of attributive adjectives to the extent that Wiland does.

Wiland’s account of attributive adjectives informs his interpretation of GT. Wiland writes, “Geach proposed that the adjectives ‘good’ and ‘bad’ always function attributively.”¹⁵ This is simply a restatement of GT. But Wiland continues, articulating his particular interpretation of GT: “Nothing is simply good or bad, but instead is a good or bad instance of some kind or other. . . . We can sensibly ask only whether something is a good K (where K denotes some generic kind), and then the answer to that question essentially depends upon what kind of thing is under discussion.”¹⁶ Since Wiland understands attributive adjectives as specifying a way of being an instance of the kind referred to by the noun modified by the attributive adjective, he interprets GT as asserting that the sense of predications of “good” essentially depends upon some kind referred to by the noun modified by “good,” which Wiland calls “a goodness-fixing kind.”¹⁷ By appealing to goodness-fixing kinds, Wiland is moving beyond Geach’s primarily logical observation into metaphysical explanation. He later explains GT in even more explicitly metaphysical terms: “goodness is a two-place relation between a particular and a kind, a kind of which the particular is a member.”¹⁸ Again, whatever the merits of Wiland’s metaphysical explanation of GT, Wiland goes beyond Geach, who does not provide any such metaphysical explanation.

¹⁵ Wiland (2018, 3).

¹⁶ Wiland (2018, 3).

¹⁷ Wiland (2018, 3, 4).

¹⁸ Wiland (2018, 4).

After explaining and interpreting GT, Wiland considers its implications for philosophical theology. In particular, he argues that GT renders both the Argument from Evil against the existence of God and the Ontological Argument for the existence of God unsound. Wiland takes a rather interesting route to make his case, arguing for theses he then seems to abandon. Although Wiland's ultimate position is unclear, however, his line of reasoning can be reconstructed into a forceful argument that if GT is true and God is *sui generis*, then the statement "God is good" is nonsense. Wiland proposes a plan to argue for three theses, in order of increasing specificity:

I will initially argue that (1) God is not a member of any kind; then, more modestly; (2) God is not a member of any kind that has standards of goodness internal to it; then, finally and sincerely; (3) God is not a member of any kind that has standards of goodness internal to it such that God would be defective with respect to said standards by failing to prevent suffering.¹⁹

Wiland offers little argumentation in defense of (1) besides noting that many theists hold that God is *sui generis* and utterly unique, such that God is not a member of any genuine kind. Then he considers an objection to (1): since it is true that God has existed for more than four minutes, it seems like God belongs to the kind of beings that have existed for more than four minutes; so (1) is false. Wiland seems to admit this objection, for he responds, "while God may be a member of some kinds, God is not a member of any kind that has standards of goodness internal to it,"²⁰ that is, (2). Again, Wiland offers little argumentation in defense of (2) besides noting that the existing-more-than-four-minutes kind does not have standards of goodness internal to it, which is insufficient to establish (2). Wiland then considers a final objection: it seems that God belongs to the kind of beings that are intelligent. But this kind has standards of goodness internal to it, so (2) is false. Wiland responds by asserting (3). He writes, "God is not a member of any kind for which [not] alleviating avoidable suffering counts as a defect."²¹

The upshot of this line of reasoning, Wiland contends, is that the Argument from Evil against the existence of God fails. The Argument from Evil relies on something like the following as a premise: if God is good, then God will alleviate avoidable suffering. But, Wiland reasons, if GT is true and God does not belong to any kind for which not alleviating avoidable suffering counts as a defect, then "God is good"

¹⁹ Wiland (2018, 4).

²⁰ Wiland (2018, 5).

²¹ Wiland (2018, 5).

is an ill-formed statement that makes no sense. Therefore, the premise “if God is good, God will alleviate avoidable suffering” is likewise ill-formed nonsense. Since the Argument from Evil relies on an ill-formed, nonsensical premise, the Argument from Evil is unsound.

Next, Wiland more briefly argues that the Ontological Argument fails for similar reasons. The Ontological Argument takes as a premise something like the following: God is that than which no greater can be conceived. But “great” is an attribute adjective, Wiland suggests, for the same reasons that “good” is. Therefore, the sense of any predication of “great” essentially depends upon some kind referred to by the noun modified by “great.” But again, God does not belong to any kind. So “God is great” and “God is that than which no greater can be conceived” are both nonsense. Therefore, since the Ontological Argument relies on an ill-formed, nonsensical premise, the Ontological Argument is unsound.

Now the theist will likely find the failure of the Argument from Evil a welcome conclusion, perhaps even worth the price of jettisoning the Ontological Argument. Nevertheless, Wiland’s solution to the Argument from Evil exacts an even heavier price, namely the conclusion that “God is good” is nonsense. Wiland himself acknowledges as much when he admits, “The solution is heterodox in so far as I do not maintain that God is good. But we are still entitled to say that God is free of defect. God is without flaw. God is in no respect bad. Maybe that is all the orthodoxy we need.”²²

Now, Wiland’s line of reasoning, in conjunction with the thesis that God is *sui generis*, can be reconstructed as a forceful argument against the sensibility of affirmations of divine goodness. I more formally reconstruct this argument thus:

1. If GT is true, then the sense of a predication of “good” essentially depends upon some kind to which belongs the thing of which “good” is predicated.
2. If the sense of a predication of “good” essentially depends upon some kind to which belongs the thing of which “good” is predicated, then “good” cannot be predicated sensibly of something which does not belong to any kind.

²² Wiland (2018, 6). Now, the following principle is plausible: if “*x* is *F*” is nonsensical, then “*x* is not *F*” is likewise nonsensical. Furthermore, the following claim is plausible: “bad,” “defective,” and “flawed” are always attributive adjectives. Although I will not defend this principle and this claim, I note that, if they are true, then by Wiland’s own reasoning, he cannot affirm even the orthodoxy he desires. Supposing that “bad,” “defective,” and “flawed” are always attributive adjectives, and supposing that “*x* is not *F*” is nonsensical if “*x* is *F*” is nonsensical, then by Wiland’s reasoning, the claims “God is not bad,” “God is not defective,” and “God is not flawed” are just as nonsensical as “God is good.”

3. Therefore, if GT is true, then “good” cannot be predicated sensibly of something which does not belong to any kind.
4. God does not belong to any kind.
- C. Therefore, if GT is true, then “good” cannot be predicated sensibly of God.

The consequent of Premise 1 restates Wiland’s interpretation of GT, and so Premise 1 follows from Wiland’s interpretation of GT. Premise 2 is plausible because, if the antecedent is true, then the thing that “good” is predicated of belonging to some kind is a necessary condition for “good” to bear sense when predicated of that thing. And if that thing does not belong to any kind, this necessary condition is not met. Therefore, “good” cannot bear sense when predicated of something which does not belong to any kind. But an adjective must bear some sense to be predicated sensibly of something. Thus, if the antecedent of 2 is true, the consequent follows. Premise 3 follows from Premises 1 and 2 by a hypothetical syllogism.

Premise 4 is a restatement of the classical thesis that God is *sui generis*. To be fair to Wiland, it is unclear whether he maintains this position. Although Wiland initially declares he will argue for Premise 4, he seems to abandon it in favor of the more limited claim that God is not a member of any kind for which failing to alleviate avoidable suffering counts as a defect. But shortly thereafter, Wiland states more strongly, “God cannot be good or bad *tout court*,” and again, “I do not maintain that God is good.”²³ These statements follow from the stronger conclusion that “God is good” is nonsense, but they do not follow from the weaker conclusion that “God is good such that He will alleviate avoidable suffering” is nonsense. Yet the stronger conclusion requires Premise 4 rather than the more limited claim that God is not a member of any kind for which failing to alleviate avoidable suffering counts as a defect. Thus, some of Wiland’s statements imply he does maintain Premise 4 after all. I note this ambiguity out of charity; I do not want to misrepresent his position. For the same reason, I describe Wiland’s line of reasoning as a “threat” to divine goodness rather than an argument against it, and I describe the above argument as “reconstructed from Wiland’s line of reasoning” rather than attributing it to him as “Wiland’s argument.” Nevertheless, it is trivial whether or not Wiland maintains Premise 4 because the premise enjoys strong motivation in its own right. Therefore, the reconstructed argument shows how Wiland’s reasoning poses a serious threat to affirmations of divine goodness, even if Wiland himself does not hold that God is *sui generis*.

²³ Wiland (2018, 6).

Premise 4 is a classical thesis that enjoys strong support historically and today. Many philosophers, especially those of the tradition of classical theism, maintain that God is absolutely *sui generis*.²⁴ In other words, God does not belong to any genus, class, or kind, but rather, God is utterly unique. Furthermore, they do not hold that God merely happens to be unique, as though there remains the possibility of other gods belonging to the same kind (a view that David Bentley Hart calls “monopolytheism”).²⁵ Rather, they maintain that God is essentially unique; He is such that there cannot be another like Him.

In addition to the support of these thinkers, Premise 4 is plausible and motivated for several more reasons. For one, Premise 4 seems to follow from other theses about God, especially those common to the tradition of classical theism. For example, a strong doctrine of divine ultimacy or divine aseity, according to which nothing can be really or logically prior to God, seems to entail Premise 4, because a kind seems to be logically prior to its members. Or, a strong doctrine of divine simplicity, which denies all real distinctions in the divine nature,²⁶ seems to entail Premise 4, since being a member of a kind seems to require a real distinction in the member between some common principle whereby the member is a member of its kind (such as genus or essence) and some individuating principle whereby the member is distinct from other members of its kind (such as specific difference or existence).²⁷ Additionally, the theist may desire to affirm Premise 4 to accommodate a doctrine of divine transcendence: God does not belong to any kind because He transcends all kinds, including the categories and modes of operations of His creatures.²⁸ Finally, the theist may wish to affirm Premise 4 on account of authority. In particular, Catholics may consider Premise 4 part of a proper interpretation of the teaching of the First Vatican Council, which teaches that God is *singularis*, “unique.”²⁹ For all these reasons Premise 4 is plausible and motivated in its own right.

From Premises 3 and 4, a syllogism produces the conclusion of the reconstructed argument: if GT is true, then “good” cannot be predicated sensibly of God. If “good” cannot be predicated sensibly of God, then statements which appear to predicate

²⁴ Philosophers who explicitly defend this position include, to name just a few, Avicenna (2005, 34–38); Henry of Ghent, (2006, 25.3); Thomas Aquinas, (2012a, I.25; 2012b, I.3.5); Brian Leftow (1991, 71–72); Barry Miller (1996, 64–5); James Dolezal (2011, 73); and Edward Feser, (2017, 186).

²⁵ Hart (2013, 127).

²⁶ For a helpful comparison of the strong doctrine of divine simplicity with weaker doctrines of divine simplicity, see Timothy O’Connor (2023).

²⁷ Edward Feser (2023, 18).

²⁸ Such divine transcendence may prove helpful in reconciling divine causality with human freedom, as argued by Joseph Trabbic (2017) and W. Matthews Grant (2019, 71–2).

²⁹ Heinrich Denzinger (2012, sec. 3001).

“good” of God must be ill-formed and nonsensical, including the simple thesis that God is good. Call this thesis Divine Goodness.

Divine Goodness (DG): God is good.

So, if the argument is sound, then the truth of GT demands a rejection of DG, not because DG is false, but because DG is ill-formed and nonsensical. This conclusion is disconcerting for several reasons. For one, philosophers since Aristotle have argued for DG, independently of divine revelation.³⁰ Now, it is possible that such philosophers have been mistaken about whether God is good or even whether He exists. Nevertheless, they all seem to think that DG is at least a sensible thesis worth arguing for. The conclusion that DG is nonsensical implies that all philosophers who have argued for DG have in fact argued for an nonsensical thesis, which seems rather implausible. Second, belief in DG is a primary motivation for religious worship and devotion, even if religious devotees do not explicitly affirm DG. Although one may reject DG and nevertheless express gratitude to God for the good gifts he provides, such expressions of gratitude seem not to be the highest and most genuine form of religious worship, which reverences God for His intrinsic goodness.³¹ If DG is nonsensical, religious worship loses a primary motivation. Finally and perhaps most significantly, DG is a fundamental religious belief for many. Both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament predicate “good” of God. I for one am not ready to claim that the Psalmist speaks gibberish when he proclaims “Lord, you are good” (Ps 86.5) or that Christ speaks gobbledygook when He says “No one is good but God alone” (Mk 10.18). For at least these three reasons, the rejection of DG as nonsense is an unwelcome conclusion entailed by GT and the argument reconstructed from Wiland’s line of reasoning.

So, what is the theist to do if he or she maintains that God is *sui generis* yet wishes to affirm that DG is true or even just sensical? One obvious solution is to reject GT. If GT is rejected, the conclusion of the reconstructed argument has no import, and the theist can affirm DG. In fact, if the theist considers Wiland’s line of reasoning sound and finds DG more persuasive than GT, the theist could argue that GT is false by *modus tollens*. I am sympathetic to such a move, insofar as I am more committed to DG than to GT. Nevertheless, GT enjoys support independently of concerns for DG. Therefore, rejecting GT comes at the cost of rejecting its motivations and the arguments rendering it plausible. For the theist who wishes to affirm DG but finds

³⁰ For example, Aristotle (1991, 1072b13–1073a2).

³¹ For a recent argument that worship is a response to God’s intrinsic goodness, see Scott Davison (2024).

GT highly persuasive, the only feasible solution is to defuse the threat that Wiland's line of reasoning poses to DG.

3. Defusing Wiland's Threat to Divine Goodness

In this section, I defuse Wiland's threat to DG by exposing and rejecting an assumption he makes regarding the nature of attributive adjectives, namely the assumption that attributive adjectives are essentially kind-dependent. This assumption, I will argue, is unjustified by Geach's text and superfluous to Geach's account of attributive adjectives. Wiland's interpretation of GT depends on this unjustified and superfluous assumption. Therefore, Wiland's interpretation of GT can be easily rejected, and the argument against DG reconstructed from his line of reasoning fails.

Recall Wiland's explanation of what it means for "good" to be an attributive adjective: "we can sensibly ask only whether something is a good K (where K denotes some generic kind), and then the answer to that question *essentially depends upon* what kind of thing is under discussion."³² Wiland assumes that the sense of a predication of an attributive adjective such as "good" essentially depends upon some generic kind K to which belongs the thing that the attributive adjective is predicated of. For convenience, if the sense of a predication of an adjective depends upon some kind to which belongs the thing that the adjective is predicated of, then I will call that adjective a *kind-dependent* adjective. Wiland assumes, then, that attributive adjectives are *essentially kind-dependent*.

Wiland's assumption that attributive adjectives are essentially kind-dependent is compatible with and even appears to explain Geach's observation that predications of attributive adjectives do not split up logically. Nevertheless, Wiland's assumption is not justified by Geach's text and it is superfluous to Geach's position. What Geach says about attributive adjectives does not entail nor require that attributive adjectives are essentially kind-dependent. (In fact, Geach only uses the word "kind" once in his article, and then only in his description of the position of the "Oxford Moralists," whom Geach refutes.³³) Geach comes closest to implying that attributive adjectives are essentially kind-dependent when he states, "there is no such thing as being just good or bad, there is only being a good or bad so-and-so."³⁴ Wiland interprets Geach's statement to mean, "Nothing is simply good or bad, but instead

³² Wiland (2018, 3, emphasis mine).

³³ Geach (1956, 37).

³⁴ Geach (1956, 34).

is a good or bad instance of some kind or other.”³⁵ But notice that Wiland interprets Geach’s phrase “so-and-so” to mean “instance of some kind or other.” Wiland’s interpretation is not justified by the context, for in the previous sentence, Geach writes, “even when ‘good’ or ‘bad’ stands by itself as a predicate, and is thus grammatically predicative, some substantive must be understood.”³⁶ Geach’s statement suggests that by “so-and-so” Geach means merely “some substantive” — that is, some noun. Geach does not say that the understood substantive is or must be a generic noun, nor that it refers to some kind. Of course, it is possible that the substantive understood in a predication of “good” happens to refer to some kind. But Geach neither claims nor implies the referent of the substantive must be some kind or an instance of some kind essentially or necessarily. Thus Geach neither claims nor implies that attributive adjectives are essentially kind-dependent. Therefore, Wiland’s assumption that attributive adjectives are essentially kind-dependent is not justified by Geach’s text.

Furthermore, Wiland’s assumption that attributive adjectives are essentially kind-dependent is superfluous to Geach’s account of attributive adjectives. Wiland develops his account of attributive adjectives as a sort of explanation for Geach’s observation that attributive adjectives form predicates that do not split up logically. But Wiland’s account of attributive adjectives is superfluous to Geach’s observation, for Geach’s observation can be explained with an alternative account of attributive adjectives, one that does not render attributive adjectives essentially kind-dependent. For example, in contrast to Wiland stands the account of attributive adjectives defended by Miles Rind and Lauren Tillinghast. According to Rind and Tillinghast, attributive adjectives need only be “substantive-dependent” in order to form predicates that do not split up logically in the way described by Geach.³⁷ Rind and Tillinghast explain that

an attributive adjective may be defined as an adjective that cannot be used to make a logically complete predication unless it modifies some substantive; or, in slightly different phrasing, as an adjective that forms predicable terms through, and only through, combination with substantives.³⁸

If an adjective forms predicable terms only through combination with substantives, a predicate involving this adjective will not be able to split up logically, for splitting

³⁵ Wiland (2018, 3).

³⁶ Geach (1956, 34).

³⁷ Rind and Tillinghast (2008, 83–8).

³⁸ Rind and Tillinghast (2008, 86).

up the predication will separate the adjective from its substantive and the term will no longer be predicable. So, Rind and Tillinghast's account of attributive adjectives explains why predications of attributive adjectives do not split up logically, and thus their account explains Geach's observation about attributive adjectives without assuming that the substantive must refer to a kind.

Similarly, J. L. Austin observes that certain adjectives, which he calls "substantive-hungry," are such that their sense is dependent on the substantive they modify.³⁹ Accordingly, substantive-hungry adjectives cannot be separated from their substantive without losing their sense. Though he does not cite Geach nor develop his observation as thoroughly as Geach, Austin makes more or less the same observation regarding substantive-hungry adjectives that Geach makes regarding attributive adjectives. Austin even offers "good" as an example of a substantive-hungry adjective. But notably, Austin does not regard substantive-hungry adjectives, including "good," as kind-dependent. Like Rind and Tillinghast, Austin understands "good" as substantive-hungry or substantive-dependent rather than kind-dependent.

Even if one remains unpersuaded by Rind and Tillinghast's account of attributive adjectives or Austin's account of "good" as a substantive-hungry adjective, these accounts reveal that it is sufficient for attributive adjectives, including "good," to be merely substantive-dependent or substantive hungry in order to form predicates that cannot split up logically; attributive adjectives do not need to be essentially kind-dependent to function this way. Therefore, Wiland's assumption that attributive adjectives are essentially kind-dependent is unnecessary to explain Geach's observation that attributive adjectives form predicates that do not split up logically. So, Wiland's assumption is not only unjustified by Geach's text, but it is in fact superfluous to Geach's account of attributive adjectives. If Wiland wishes to motivate his assumption that attributive adjectives are essentially kind-dependent, he cannot appeal to Geach alone; he must provide independent motivation.

Wiland's assumption that attributive adjectives are essentially kind-dependent is fundamental to his interpretation of GT and the argument reconstructed from his reasoning. Recall Premise 1:

1. If GT is true, then the sense of a predication of "good" essentially depends upon some kind to which belongs the thing of which "good" is predicated.

³⁹ Austin (1962, 68–70).

It is not immediately obvious if Premise 1 is true, for GT does not state whether attributive adjectives are kind-dependent. GT only states that “good” and “bad” are always attributive adjectives. So, what GT means, and hence whether Premise 1 is true, depends on what attributive adjectives are. If one assumes, as Wiland does, that attributive adjectives are essentially kind-dependent, then GT entails that “good” is essentially kind-dependent, and so Premise 1 is true. On the other hand, if one denies the assumption that attributive adjectives are essentially kind-dependent, then GT does not entail that “good” is essentially kind-dependent, and so Premise 1 is false. Therefore, Wiland’s assumption that attributive adjectives are essentially kind-dependent is fundamental to his argument. If Wiland’s assumption is rejected, Premise 1 is false and the reconstructed argument against DG fails. But as I have argued, Wiland’s assumption is unjustified by Geach’s text and superfluous to Geach’s account of attributive adjectives. Therefore, Wiland’s assumption that attributive adjectives are essentially kind-dependent, Wiland’s interpretation of GT, and Premise 1 can all be easily rejected. Thus, the argument against DG reconstructed from Wiland’s line of reasoning is easily rejected, and Wiland’s threat to DG is defused.

Furthermore, the theist who wishes to affirm DG can reject Wiland’s assumption that attributive adjectives are essentially kind-dependent without rejecting GT altogether. On the account of attributive adjectives as essentially substantive-dependent or substantive hungry, as defended by Rind, Tillinghast, and Austin, GT means that “good” is essentially substantive-dependent. That is, “good” forms predicable terms only through combination with substantives, or to put it differently, the sense of “good” essentially depends upon some substantive. But “God” is a substantive, for in ordinary usage “God” is a noun that refers to God, even if philosophers and theologians dispute precisely what God is. So, in the predication “God is good,” the substantive “God” is understood, as in “God is (the) good (God).” The substantive “God” provides the sense of “good,” such that “good” means something like “good in the way proper to *God*.” This renders the predication “God is good” sensical.

Taking “God” as the understood substantive modified by “good” in “God is good” does not conflict with GT. As Catherine Peters argues, Geach’s point is that “good must always be understood in conjunction with a nature,” and even when we predicate “good” of God, we understand “good” in conjunction with a nature, namely the divine nature. So, predicating “good” of God does not “require the positing of goodness apart from a good ‘so and so,’” and thus DG does not conflict

with GT.⁴⁰ Therefore, defusing Wiland's threat to DG by rejecting his assumption that attributive adjectives are essentially kind-dependent does not require the rejection of GT altogether, but rather opens the possibility of reconciling GT and DG.⁴¹

4. An Alternative Metaphysical Account

Since Wiland's interpretation of GT relies on an unjustified and superfluous assumption that attributive adjectives are essentially kind-dependent, he must provide independent motivation for his interpretation of GT. It may seem that Wiland motivates his interpretation of GT metaphysically. As stated above, Wiland articulates his interpretation of GT in metaphysical terms: "goodness is a two-place relation between a particular and a kind, a kind of which the particular is a member."⁴² On Wiland's metaphysical theory, the goodness of a particular is a relation that depends essentially on that particular's kind as one of its relata. This theory entails that "good" is an essentially kind-dependent adjective, and thus Wiland's metaphysics seems to explain GT and support Wiland's particular interpretation of GT. Nevertheless, it is not the only metaphysical explanation of GT. In this section, I propose Aquinas's metaphysics of goodness as a plausible alternative metaphysical explanation of GT. Aquinas's metaphysics of goodness renders "good" merely substantive-dependent rather than essentially kind-dependent, and thus it explains GT without supporting Wiland's particular interpretation of GT.

In Thomistic metaphysics, a being can belong to a kind (a *genus*, in Thomistic terminology) only if that being's essence is really distinct (that is, distinct in reality rather than distinct merely in the mind) from the being's *esse*, or act of existence.⁴³

⁴⁰ Peters (2018, 294). At first, it may seem that Peters attributes to Geach the position that attributive adjectives are essentially kind-dependent, for "nature" seems to be a synonym for "kind." Nevertheless, in the Thomistic terminology that Peters is using, "nature" is not simply synonymous with "kind." Although Aquinas argues that God is not contained in any genus (by which I take him to mean that God does not belong to any kind), Aquinas also maintains that God has a nature, albeit a nature very different from those of creatures (2012a, I.3.3, I.3.5).

⁴¹ David Alexander also offers three ways one may reconcile DG with GT, the second of which is closest to the ideas of Catherine Peters and myself (though I have sympathy for Alexander's first solution as well). See Alexander (2014, 119–120).

⁴² Wiland (2018, 4).

⁴³ Aquinas (1953, 6.3). For an explication of "essence" as understood by Aquinas, in contrast to contemporary understandings of "essence," see Gyula Klima (2002). For explication of *esse* as

When a being's essence is really distinct from its act of existence, the being's essence limits and determines the being's act of existence to the being's particular kind.⁴⁴ Socrates's essence, humanity, limits and determines Socrates's act of existence to the human kind of existence, such that Socrates exists as a human and not as, say, a dog. Furthermore, according to Thomistic metaphysics, existence and goodness are convertible, which is to say existence and goodness are identical in reality and distinct only in the mind.⁴⁵ So, since existence and goodness are identical in reality, if a being's essence and act of existence are really distinct, the being's essence limits and determines not only the being's act of existence but also the being's goodness to its particular kind. Socrates' essence, humanity, determines his goodness to the human kind of goodness, such that Socrates is good as a human, or good in a human kind of way. Therefore, if a being's essence and act of existence are really distinct, then the sense of "good" is dependent on some kind to which belongs the thing that "good" is predicated of. In the predication "Socrates is good," the sense of "good" is determined by Socrates' kind, human, such that "Socrates is good" means "Socrates is good *in the way proper to humans*" or more simply "Socrates is a good human." But because a being's goodness is limited and determined to a particular kind *only if* the being's essence and existence are really distinct, "good" is kind-dependent *only when* predicated of a being whose essence and existence are really distinct. In other words, "good" is merely *accidentally* kind-dependent, not *essentially* kind-dependent.

Now according to Thomistic philosophical theology, God's essence and existence are not really distinct.⁴⁶ Therefore, God's essence is not a kind, and it does not limit

understood by Aquinas, in contrast to some contemporary understandings of existence, see Gaven Kerr (2015).

⁴⁴ Aquinas (2012a, II.52; 1950, 1.2). For a more detailed explanation of the essence–*esse* relationship, see Gaven Kerr (2015, 57–66). Additionally, Barry Miller builds a powerful argument beginning with a Fregean analysis of existential claims to the conclusion that a concrete individual's existing is composed of two ontological constituents: an instance of existence that actualizes the individual, and the individual which bounds its own instance of existence. Though Miller's language differs from Aquinas, his notion of "instance of existence" is very similar to the Thomistic "act of existence," and his notion of "individual" is very similar to Thomistic "essence." So, in addition to classical Thomistic reasoning, Miller's argumentation lends plausibility to the Thomistic thesis that essence limits and determines existence to its particular kind. See Barry Miller (2002; 1996, 15–59). For discussion of Miller's argumentation, see Giovanni Ventimiglia (2012). For a systematic interpretation and defense of Miller's argumentation, see Elmar Kremer (2014).

⁴⁵ For recent arguments for and defenses of the convertibility of existence and goodness, see David Oderberg (2021; 2014); Edward Feser (2014); and Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann (1991).

⁴⁶ Aquinas (2012a, I.18, I.22; 2012b, I.3.4, I.3.7). For a contemporary defense of this claim, see Alexander Pruss (2023).

or determine God's existence to this or that particular kind. Furthermore, since existence and goodness are convertible, God's essence does not limit or determine His goodness to this or that particular kind. So, even though the sense of "good" is understood in conjunction with the substantive "God" referring to God's essence, the substantive "God" does not limit or determine the sense of "good" according to any particular kind. Therefore, on Thomistic metaphysics, "good" is substantive-dependent but not kind-dependent in the predication "God is good." That is, the sense of "good" depends on God, not on some kind to which God belongs. Thomistic metaphysics, then, explains GT and motivates an interpretation of GT according to which "good" is merely substantive-dependent, not essentially kind-dependent. Although this explication of Thomistic metaphysics is necessarily cursory, the metaphysical theses to which it appeals are at least plausible and enjoy support in recent literature. So, Thomism provides a plausible metaphysical explanation of GT that does not support Wiland's interpretation of GT.

5. Objections and Responses

In this section, I consider and respond to three objections.

Objection One: Geach states that attributive adjectives demand a substantive for their sense, but Geach rules out neither Wiland's assumption that attributive adjectives are essentially kind-dependent nor Wiland's metaphysical explanation of GT. Therefore, Geach does not rule out Wiland's interpretation of GT. Pointing out that Geach states attributive adjectives demand substantives rather than a kinds does not block Wiland's interpretation of GT. For example, one could assume that the substantives modified by attributive adjectives always refer to kinds.⁴⁷

Response: I grant that I have not blocked Wiland's interpretation of GT in the sense of demonstrating that it is incompatible with Geach's claims or internally inconsistent. Instead, I have drawn attention to the fact that Wiland's interpretation of GT is just that—an interpretation. It is compatible with Geach's claims, but it goes beyond them. Furthermore, I have argued that, where Wiland goes beyond Geach, we can easily reject Wiland's interpretation of GT without rejecting GT. The objector is right that one could assume that substantives always refer to kinds—that is, one could assume with Wiland that attributive adjectives are essentially kind-dependent. Nevertheless, I have shown that this assumption is just that—an assumption. It is not justified by Geach's text, and it is superfluous to Geach's observation about the logical behavior of attributive adjectives because plausible

⁴⁷ I thank an anonymous reviewer for this valuable objection.

alternative accounts of attributive adjectives likewise explain his logical observation. Wiland has not offered independent argument for his assumption that attributive adjectives are essentially kind-dependent, and until he does so, one could easily reject this assumption. Likewise, I have shown that Wiland's metaphysical explanation of GT is superfluous insofar as Thomistic metaphysics constitutes a plausible alternative explanation of GT. Wiland has not offered independent argument for his metaphysical theory, and until he does so, one can easily reject his theory in favor of Thomistic metaphysics (or another metaphysics, for that matter). In sum, I have shown that Wiland's particular interpretation of GT is easily rejected in favor of an alternative interpretation of GT that reconciles GT, the thesis that God is *sui generis*, and DG. Thus, I have defused Wiland's threat to DG without rejecting GT.

Objection Two: It seems that Wiland's interpretation of GT is motivated empirically, because every time we predicate "good" of something, the sense of "good" depends upon some kind to which that thing belongs. Consider the examples Geach himself offers: a good car, a good man, a good deerstalker, a good book, a good batting wicket, a good burglar, a good hygrometer, etc. For each of these examples, and for many more that we could generate, the thing in question always belongs to some kind, and the sense of "good" depends on its kind. So, even if Geach does not explicitly say that "good" is essentially kind-dependent, the fact that "good" always appears kind-dependent suggests that it is essentially so. And since "good" is essentially kind-dependent, Wiland's interpretation of GT is justified and Wiland's threat to DG is resuscitated.

Response: This objection is insufficient to prove that "good" is essentially kind-dependent. Every example cited in the objection is an example of something that belongs to a kind. So, the most this objection immediately suggests is that "good" is somehow kind-dependent *in those cases* where "good" is predicated of something that belongs to a kind. In order to salvage Wiland's interpretation of GT, the objector must infer from this weaker claim—that "good" is somehow kind-dependent in those cases where it is predicated of something that belongs to a kind—to the stronger claim that "good" is *essentially* kind-dependent. Such an inference would be justified if the stronger claim was the only plausible explanation of the weaker claim. But it is not. Another explanation is available: "good" is kind dependent *only* when predicated of something that belongs to a kind—that is, "good" is properly and essentially substantive-dependent but also accidentally and derivatively kind-dependent. As stated above, this is what a Thomistic metaphysics of goodness suggests. This explanation makes sense of the apparently kind-dependent nature of "good" in any empirical example the objector generates of "good" predicated of

something belonging to a kind, but it does not justify the inference that “good” is essentially kind-dependent. Since “good” may be merely accidentally and derivatively kind-dependent, the objector’s inference that “good” is essentially kind-dependent remains unjustified by any number of examples of things belonging to kinds. Thus, the attempt to motivate Wiland’s interpretation of GT fails.

Objection Three: Wiland could say that no substantive applies to God literally, and so “good” has no understood substantive in the predication “God is good.” Therefore, even if Wiland concedes that “good” is only substantive-dependent and not essentially kind-dependent, “God is good” is nonsense.⁴⁸

Response: We must clarify what we mean when we say “no substantive applies to God literally.” On the one hand, “no substantive applies to God literally” might mean that no substantive refers to any kind that applies to God literally. In this case, I concede that “no substantive applies to God literally,” for God does not belong to any kind. Nevertheless, this does not entail that “good” has no understood substantive in the predication “God is good.” The understood substantive is “God,” which refers, not to some kind which does or does not apply to God, but to God simply. The understood substantive in “God is good” is not the generic noun “god” referring to the kind “god” or “deity,” like the kind to which the members of the Greek pantheon belong. So even if no substantive refers to a kind which applies literally to God, “good” still has the associated substantive “God,” which renders “God is good” sensical.

On the other hand, “no substantive applies to God literally” might mean that no substantive refers to God literally. I make two points in response. First, common use of the substantive “God” as a noun referring to God literally militates against this claim. Even if we disagree about God’s existence and nature, we commonly use “God” as a substantive referring literally to God. Some may even say “God” functions more or less as a proper name or a rigid designator, referring literally to God. Second, even if we grant the dubious claim that no substantive refers to God literally, this does not preclude a substantive referring to God analogically. Several robust accounts of analogical predication of God are on offer.⁴⁹ The theist is free to adopt such an account of analogical predication and affirm that “good” and its associated substantive refer to God analogically. Thus, “God is good” remains sensical because it predicates “good” of God in an analogical sense, even if no substantive refers to God literally. In fact, Aquinas would affirm that, even if the substantive “God” refers to God literally, “good” still can be predicated of God only

⁴⁸ I thank an anonymous reviewer for this objection.

⁴⁹ For example, those offered by Aquinas and his disciples, examined in Domenic D’Ettore (2019), or more recently, those offered by James Ross (1982) or by Richard Swinburne (2016, 59–75).

in an analogical sense.⁵⁰ So appeal to analogy to make sense of “God is good” has strong precedent.

Conclusion

In conclusion, then, Wiland offers a new threat to the sensibility of affirmations of divine goodness. If God is *sui generis*, Geach is right that “good” is always an attributive adjective, and Wiland’s line of reasoning is sound, then “God is good” makes no sense. But Geach’s thesis that “good” is always an attributive adjective and the thesis that God is *sui generis* both enjoy independent motivation and plausibility. So, if the theist wishes to affirm that God is good or even that “God is good” is sensical, then Wiland’s threat must be defused. But Wiland’s interpretation of Geach relies on the assumption that attributive adjectives, and hence “good,” are essentially kind-dependent. As I have argued, this assumption is easily rejected because it is unjustified by Geach’s text and is superfluous to Geach’s account of “good.” When Wiland’s assumption is rejected, his line of reasoning fails. Furthermore, Rind, Tillinghast, and Austin offer alternative accounts of attributive adjectives which do not make Wiland’s assumption, and Aquinas offers an alternative metaphysical theory which does not support Wiland’s interpretation of Geach. On these alternative accounts, the sensibility of “God is good” is compatible with Geach’s claim that “good” is always a logically attributive adjective. We are free to affirm that Geach is right, but God is good.

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⁵⁰ Aquinas (2012a, I.34; 2012b, I.13.5).

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