

## Chapter 52

# A modern defence of divine simplicity

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PEOPLE often suppose that theology is grounded in an understanding of the nature and attributes of God considered as a particular individual. It is, for example, pretty axiomatic among modern philosophers of religion that God is a person, where 'person' means something like a consciousness or mind with beliefs and thoughts.

Yet this line of thinking would have seemed strange to earlier generations of thinkers. Here I am referring to what is sometimes called the tradition of classical theism, by which I mean the doctrine of God which you can find in writers like Augustine, Anselm and Thomas Aquinas. For it is characteristic of classical theism to say that God is incomparable and incomprehensible. *De Deo non possumus scire quid sit*—'It is impossible to know of God what he is'.<sup>1</sup> *De Deo scire non possumus quid sit, sed quid non sit*—'We cannot know what God is, but only what he is not'.<sup>2</sup> These are assertions which classical theists ask us to accept in all seriousness, and in doing so they do not just mean that God is a mysterious sort of thing which we cannot understand because we are not quite clever enough or because our researches are still in their infancy. They mean that God belongs to no class at all and that he defies the conceptual equipment by means of which we identify things and single them out as members of a world.

Thus it is that in the writings of classical theists we come across the doctrine of divine simplicity. God has no nature in any intelligible sense. He is divinity through and through without parts or aspects. On this account, everything that God is *is* God. Or, as some classical theists express it, God *has* no attributes but *is* his attributes. And these are nothing less than God himself. As St Anselm puts it:

You are therefore the very life by which You live, the wisdom by which You are wise, the very goodness by which You are good to both good men and wicked . . . You are truth, You are goodness, You are blessedness, You are eternity, and You are every true good . . . There are no parts in You, Lord; neither are You many, but You are so much one and the same with

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1. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, 1, 7 ad 1.
2. *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, introduction to q.3.

Yourself that in nothing are You dissimilar with Yourself. Indeed You are unity itself not divisible by any mind. Life and wisdom and the other (attributes), then, are not parts of You, but all are one and each one of them is wholly what You are and what all the others are.<sup>3</sup>

Writing in the same vein, Aquinas argues that we can speak of God either by means of concrete terms (as if 'God' were the name of an individual in the world) or by means of abstract terms (as if it were the name for a non-individuated nature). In his view, 'God is Wisdom' or 'God is Goodness' are just as true as 'God is wise' or 'God is good'. Or, as Aquinas himself says:

God is both simple, like the form, and subsistent, like the concrete thing, and so we sometimes refer to him by abstract nouns to indicate his simplicity and sometimes by concrete nouns to indicate his subsistence and completeness; though neither way of speaking measures up to his way of being, for in this life we do not know him as he is in himself.<sup>4</sup>

By 'form' here Aquinas is alluding to what, for example, is shared by all people when it is truly said that each of them is human. We might call it their common humanity. Aquinas's point then is that though we cannot call particular people 'Humanity' (we cannot say that Mary is Humanity or that Fred is Humanity), we can refer to God by the name signifying his nature. Mary and Fred are not Humanity, but God is Divinity.

Yet is this teaching at all believable? And is it of any theological significance? Edmund Hill has recently called it 'profound theology . . . a mature metaphysics of divine being' which sets us on the road to a proper account of the Trinity.<sup>5</sup> That is a minority view, however. Much more typical of the contemporary verdict is the conclusion of Ronald H. Nash. 'It would appear', says Nash, 'that Christian theologians have no good reason to affirm the doctrine of divine simplicity. It seems doubtful that the doctrine adds anything significant to our understanding of God. . . . Perhaps, like Emil Brunner, we should conclude that the doctrine has no practical value: it is pure speculation "which has nothing at all to do with the God of the Christian Faith".'<sup>6</sup>

## II

What is wrong with the doctrine of divine simplicity? Here we might mention two lines of criticism.

(a) First, so it might be said, the doctrine leads to absurdity. This is Alvin Plantinga's chief objection to it.<sup>7</sup> 'If God is identical with each of his properties', says Plantinga, 'then each of his properties is identical with each of his properties,

3. *Proslogion* XII and XVIII, trans. M. J. Charlesworth, *St Anselm's Proslogion* (Oxford, 1965).

4. *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, 13, 1.

5. Edmund Hill, *The Mystery of the Trinity* (London, 1985), p. 55.

6. Ronald H. Nash, *The Concept of God* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1983), pp. 95 f. The quotation from Brunner comes from *The Christian Doctrine of God* (Philadelphia, 1950), p. 294.

7. Alvin Plantinga, *Does God Have A Nature?* (Milwaukee, 1980).

so that God has but one property.' The conclusion here is false, says Plantinga, because God has several properties. It is, he adds, also false because 'if God is identical with each of his properties, then, since each of his properties is a property, he is a property', while 'if God is a property, then he isn't a person but a mere abstract object; he has no knowledge, awareness, power, love or life'.

Part of Plantinga's worry here is that the doctrine of divine simplicity is incompatible with theism. And others have felt the same. One way of affirming the doctrine is to hold that God is not an individual. Sometimes it is said that God is not a thing or a being. And yet, so it has been asked, how can God exist if he is not an individual? And what is the difference between 'God is not a thing or a being' and 'Nothing whatsoever is God'?

(b) A second possible criticism turns on the notion of existence. Defenders of the doctrine of divine simplicity speak as though they identify God's nature with the fact that God exists. Take, for example, Aquinas. As his treatment of God's simplicity draws to a close, he denies that in God there is a mixture (*compositio*) of *essentia* (essence) and *esse* (existence). According to Aquinas, God *is* existence. He is *suum esse* (his own being) or *ipsum esse subsistens* (subsistent existence itself). But some would now deny this on the ground that it misconstrues the logic of assertions concerning existence.

Why? The likely answer would be that there is no such thing as existence *simpliciter*, and there is nothing which can be it or have it as a property. On this account, existence is what is expressed when it is asserted that a concept has instances. It is a property of concepts or predicates rather than a property of objects or subjects. To say that something exists is not to describe it or to tell us something about it. It is to say of some description or account that it truly applies to something or other.<sup>8</sup> In terms of this position the conclusion would seem to be that, in its Thomist form at any rate, the doctrine of divine simplicity is a piece of nonsense. It tries to tell us what God is by using expressions which could never tell what anything is.

Some would add that it implicitly endorses the so-called Ontological Argument, which Aquinas officially rejects. Critics of the argument have urged that, since existence is not a property of objects, one cannot deduce the existence of God from the concept of God. Some have then gone on to say that, by the same token, Aquinas on divine simplicity is misguided. As Terence Penelhum puts it:

The distinctive character of the concept of existence precludes our saying that there can be a being whose existence follows from his essence; and also precludes the even stronger logical move of *identifying* the existence of anything with its essence. These are the Anselmian errors all over again. . . . Since Aquinas differs from Anselm in holding that God's existence has to be inferred from his effects and not from the mere concept of God, he is traditionally credited with having seen what is wrong with the Ontological Proof. He did see it was wrong, but not *why* it was, for he commits the same error himself. He says that we do not

8. This is a very rough account of an approach associated with writers such as Frege and Russell. For a careful attempt to expound it see C. J. F. Williams, *What Is Existence* (Oxford, 1981).

have the requisite knowledge of the divine nature to deduce God's existence from it; but his own argument leads us from finite beings to a being whose existence does follow from his nature, and this entails that *if* we knew God's nature we could deduce his existence from it—and *this* is the mistake. To say that although God's existence is self-evident in itself it is not to us, is to say that it *is* self-evident in itself, and the error lies here. It is not our ignorance that is the obstacle to explaining God's existence by his nature, but the logical character of the concept of existence.<sup>9</sup>

### III

Are these objections decisive, however? To start on a positive note, let us first consider what might be said in their defence.

To begin with, then, if A and B are identical, then A and B might be the same thing. So if the properties of God are identical with each other, they could be the same property, and God could be that property if God is his properties. Yet it seems odd to say that different properties can be the same property, and just as odd to say that God is a property. There must be some sense in which to say, for example, 'God is wise and powerful' is to say two different things about him, that he is wise *and* that he is powerful. It must also be somehow true that if we say 'God is wise and powerful' we say something *about* God and do not simply name him (as if 'is wise and powerful' were a synonym for 'God'). Fred maybe bald, but his baldness is not him. Similarly, it would seem nonsense to hold that God and, say, his wisdom are the same (supposing, that is, that we ascribe wisdom to God, and supposing we say that it is an attribute or property of him).

Then again, is there any clear sense to assertions of the kind 'God is not an individual' or 'God is not a thing'? Neither 'individual' nor 'thing' serve by themselves to pick out one thing rather than another. In Wittgenstein's terms, they are 'formal' concepts as defined in *Tractatus* 4.126–4.12721. One might therefore conclude that being told that God is neither an individual nor a thing is not to be told anything of God at all. Alternatively, one might hold that if God is neither an individual nor a thing (or an object or a being, as is sometimes said), then God is nothing, which anyone can be forgiven for reading as 'God does not exist'.

So arguments like those of Plantinga are clearly on to something. And the force of their drift can surely be appreciated if we remember what is typically said of God—that he acts, for example. To say that something acts is to say that it undergoes a process or that it brings one about. Acting is something that is done. It is ascribable to genuine subjects or agents. And what, one might ask, are subjects or agents if they are not things or individuals? Even Aquinas calls God a *res* (thing). He also concedes that God is an individual in some sense. He ascribes to God the individuality proper to things whose nature is not material.

The argument concerning existence seems likewise to be getting at something

9. Terence Penelhum, 'Divine Necessity', *Mind* 69 (1960), repr. in *The Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Basil Mitchell (Oxford, 1971). I quote from Mitchell's text, pp. 184f.

important. It is, for instance, hard to believe that if we ask whether God exists, and if we ask what God is, the answer to the second question could be the same as the answer to the first. 'There is a God' does not say what God is. As Aristotle observes, 'There is nothing whose essence it is that there is such a thing, for there is no such kind of thing as *things that there are*'.<sup>10</sup>

The reply might be that to say that something exists is indeed to say something about it and that existence is therefore a property which something can have or with which it can be identified. It might be held that '— exists' can be what is sometimes called a 'first-level predicate' that it can function like '— is hot' in 'John is hot'. But there is much to be said against this conclusion. We might define a first-level predicate as an expression which yields a proposition when attached to one or more proper names. Such expressions will do the same if attached to a definite description like 'The Pope who succeeded John Paul I'. But while we get an intelligible proposition by, say, attaching 'The Pope who succeeded John Paul I' to the expression 'eats Polish sausage', we get a curious result by attaching to it 'exists'. What does 'The Pope who succeeded John Paul I exists' mean? And what, outside philosophy, would '—exists' mean if attached to a proper name? If you tell someone out of the blue 'Brian Davies exists', will he not presume that something peculiar is going on? And will he not be right?

Well, maybe not. Some people, at any rate, seem to have no problems with utterances like 'Brian Davies exists'. Yet now there is another point worth mentioning. This is that paradox seems entailed by the suggestion that existence is a property of objects or individuals. Are we to suppose that, for example, an existing cat is different from a non-existing one? And what if we deny that such and such exists on the assumption that to do so is to deny that it has a particular property? If we say, for example, 'Honest theologians do not exist', then we purport to be talking about honest theologians, we seem to presuppose that they are there to be talked about, but we also deny that they are real. It therefore seems that assertions like 'Honest theologians do not exist' are implicitly contradictory and that assertions like 'Honest theologians exist' are true of necessity. But that is just unbelievable. There must be an honest theologian somewhere, though no theologian is bound to be honest.

With reference to all this, a useful corrective comes in the work of Frege. According to him, 'the content of a statement of number is an assertion about a concept'.<sup>11</sup> This, says Frege, is perhaps clearest with the number 0.

If I say 'Venus has 0 moons', there simply does not exist any moon or agglomeration of moons for anything to be asserted of; but what happens is that a property is assigned to the concept 'moon of Venus', namely that of including nothing under it. If I say 'the King's carriage is drawn by four horses', then I assign the number four to the concept 'horse that draws the King's carriage'.

10. *An. Post.* 92b, 13–14.

11. Gottlob Frege, *The Foundations of Arithmetic*, trans. J. L. Austin (Oxford, 1980), p. 59.

There are difficulties here, but we can at least say that Frege looks to be right about one thing. For he goes on to say that 'existence is analogous to number' so that if his analysis of number statements is on the right lines, then that is the right analysis of statements of existence. And the fact is that existence is analogous to number. For statements of existence are statements of number. As C. J. F. Williams puts it:

Statements of number are possible answers to questions of the form 'How many A's are there?' and answers to such questions are no less answers for being relatively vague. In answering the question 'How many A's are there?' I need not produce one of the Natural Numbers. I may just say 'A lot', which is tantamount to saying 'The number of A's is not small', or 'A few', which is tantamount to saying 'The number of A's is not large'. If I say 'There are some A's', this is tantamount to saying 'The number of A's is not 0'. Instead of saying 'There are a lot of A's' I may say 'A's are numerous' and instead of saying 'There are some A's' I may say 'A's exist'. All these may be regarded as statements of number.<sup>12</sup>

According to Frege, a proposition like 'There exists no rectangular equilateral rectilinear triangle' states a property of the concept 'rectangular equilateral rectilinear triangle'; it 'assigns to it the number nought'. In that case, something similar is true of 'A rectangular equilateral rectilinear triangle exists', for that is the contradictory of 'There exists no rectangular equilateral rectilinear triangle'. If statements of existence are number statements, therefore, such statements ascribe a property to a concept, not to an object, if statements of number ascribe a property to a concept.

#### IV

Yet even if we can swallow all that it still seems to me that defenders of the doctrine of divine simplicity need not be unduly alarmed.

(a) To begin with, it is by no means obvious that the expressions we use to refer to God and his properties cannot be the means of referring to one and the same reality. In this sense God might be identical with his properties and they might be identical with each other. A natural tendency here is to construe such a view as saying that properties which are different are not different when God has them and that God is nothing but a property. That is how Plantinga seems to construe it. But another interpretation of the view is possible. Its defender might accept that ascribing different properties to God is done by means of sentences which differ in meaning. In this sense he might agree that God has different properties. But then he might say that the reality to which our talk of God latches on is not something distinct from its properties and not something with distinct properties. As P. T. Geach indicates, there is a comparison available to us here in the light of mathematical functions. "The square of —" and "the double of —" signify two quite different functions, but for the argument 2 these two functions both take the number 4 as their value. Similarly, "the wisdom of —" and "the power of —" signify different forms, but the individualizations of these forms in God's case are

12. Williams. *op. cit.*, pp. 54 f.

not distinct from one another; nor is either distinct from God, just as the number 1 is in no way distinct from its own square.<sup>13</sup> This is no more than an analogy, of course. But it ties up well enough with the doctrine of divine simplicity. Defenders of the doctrine do not deny that, for example, 'God is wise' means something different from 'God is powerful'. In this sense they can be said to accept that God has different properties. What they deny is that what is signified by 'the wisdom of God' is possessed by God as a property distinct from that of being powerful. They also deny that 'the wisdom of God' and 'the power of God' refer to something other than what is signified by means of the word 'God'.

(b) Second, it can be argued that writers like Plantinga and Penelhum misconstrue the doctrine of divine simplicity because they treat it as telling us something about God's properties while the doctrine precisely denies that God has properties, at least in one sense. That sounds paradoxical, but what I am getting at is really quite familiar, at least in some circles. With respect to Aquinas the point has been very effectively made by David Burrell and by earlier writers such as Victor White and Josef Pieper:<sup>14</sup> from first to last the doctrine of divine simplicity is a piece of negative or apophatic theology and not a purported description of God. I should have thought that this fact was obvious from even a casual reading of authors like Augustine and Anselm. It is particularly evident from a reading of Aquinas since he is quite explicit that in saying that God is simple he is giving an account of what God is not. This is clear from texts like the Introduction to *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, 3, where Aquinas describes what follows (of which the first thing is his exposition of divine simplicity) as a consideration of 'the ways in which God does not exist'. What this in turn proves to mean is that Aquinas is not saying that, for example, God's properties are unqualifiedly identical with each other and that God is unqualifiedly identical with all of his properties. To cast things in a more modern idiom, the Thomist doctrine of divine simplicity is an exercise in 'logical grammar'; its aim is to tell us the sort of conclusions about God which are not to be drawn. And one thing being said by it is that God is not to be thought of (cannot be known) as something with properties distinguishable from each other, or as something we can conceive of as distinct from the nature we ascribe to it.

(c) Our third reply follows from this. For now I want to suggest that the conclusion just referred to is not only intelligible but also true. For if there is a God, then he is the Creator. And this truth has implications which we can turn to by reflecting for a moment on the notion of creation.

What does it mean to call God the Creator?

Everyone agrees that it means that God is the source or the cause of all his creatures, that it is by virtue of his action that they are there at all, that creatures are

13. G. E. M. Anscombe and P. T. Geach, *Three Philosophers* (Oxford, 1973), p. 122. Cf. P. T. Geach, 'Form and Existence', in *God and the Soul* (London, 1969), pp. 491.

14. David Burrell, *Aquinas, God and Action* (London and Henley, 1979); Victor White, *God the Unknown* (London, 1956); Josef Pieper, *The Silence of Saint Thomas*, trans. John Murray and Daniel O'Connor (Chicago, 1965).

'made' by God. By 'creatures' here I mean everything other than God, everything that can be significantly referred to as an individual or object.

But it is important to stress that, in the full theological sense of the term, to say that God 'creates' is not just to say that he brings it about that things come to be. That could be taken only to mean that he causes them to begin to exist, while to say that God creates is normally to be construed as saying that he is also responsible for the existence of things since they are made to be by him for as long as they exist. He is, as we might put it, the cause not just of becoming but also of being.<sup>15</sup> Hence we find writers who have no difficulty in supposing both that God is the Creator and that the created world never had a beginning. As far as the theological notion of creation goes, it is there being any world at all that matters, not just the fact that the world began to be.

And to this one can add another point.

Causes in the world always operate in the context of the world, and they bring things about by changing the world. But the traditional notion of creation rules this out in the case of God. For it asserts that God is the cause of the existence of everything apart from himself. It also states that creation is out of nothing (*ex nihilo*). In that case it follows that creation (God's creating) is not essentially a matter of change. For there is no pre-existing material to be altered by it. So to say that God exists is to say that there is a Creator who, for as long as his creation exists, is the cause of its being, but not by modification of anything. As one might also put it, the continued existence of anything other than God depends on God as a causal agent, but not as one who causes by acting on anything. God, so we might say, cannot make any difference to anything. And this will not be because he is feeble or distant. It will be because he is present to everything as making it to be for as long as it exists.

But what now follows from this? If we are working within the framework of the doctrine of creation, what might we deduce about God *qua* Creator?

To begin with, of course, we will have to deny that God is something bodily. Otherwise he will simply be part of the world the existence of which is said to depend on him in terms of the doctrine of creation.

This, in turn, means that God cannot be comprehensible in terms of what Aristotle meant by 'genus' and 'species'. God cannot be classified as a member of the world; he will be no possible object of research for biologists, zoologists, physicists and chemists.

Nor can he share with things in the world certain of their essential features. He cannot, for instance, be confined in a space, for that presupposes bodily existence and location. Nor can he be something changing or changeable, where 'change' is ascribable to a thing precisely in virtue of its materiality.

So God cannot move around. Nor can he be altered in other ways that depend on or involve bodily changes. He cannot, in fact, be *altered* by anything. To be altered

15. Cf. *Summa Theologiae*, 45. cf. James Ross, 'Creation', *The Journal of Philosophy* 77 (1980).



by something is to be on the receiving end of the causal operation of something. It is to be passive to the action of something else. Yet if God is the cause of his creatures being there at all, he cannot be like that. All of God's creatures will be God's effects in that their whole reality will derive from him and will spring from him as making it to be. In this sense the causal relationship between God and creatures must be asymmetrical. In this sense God cannot be altered by anything.

But not only that. For, in spite of what I said earlier, we can also deny that God is an individual.

By this I do not mean that God is in no sense a subject or an agent. I am not denying the reality of God. But suppose one concentrates on the sense of individual (arguably its most common sense) according to which to call something an individual is to imply that there could always be another of the same kind. In that case, so I am arguing, we would be right to deny that God is an individual. We can deny that he can be thought of as sharing a nature with other things.

For how do we distinguish between individuals sharing a nature? How, for example, do we distinguish between one dog and another?

We cannot, to begin with, distinguish between them in terms of their nature as dogs. Their being canine is something they share. They are dogs in precisely the same sense and we cannot appeal to this fact as a means of distinguishing between them.

But nor can we appeal to what Scholastic writers would have called their accidental attributes—differences which can serve to help us distinguish between things of a kind without putting them into different kinds. I mean, for example, that we cannot distinguish between Fido and Rover by noting that one of them has brown hair and the other has black hair, or that one is in the kennel and the other in the field. For to say that is already to presuppose that we have two and not one, that we have *one* and the *other*. It may indeed be that one dog is brown and the other is black. But such differences cannot make the two dogs to be two. The two dogs could not have these varied fortunes if they were not already distinct.

So how do we distinguish between one and another of the same kind of thing? The question is a hard one, but what seems to be going on, I suggest, is that we distinguish between individuals in the world by pointing to them somehow. In the end, as it seems to me, we distinguish between Fido and Rover not just by describing them (by saying what they are by nature or by saying what they look like exactly or where in fact they are and so on) but by simply recognizing that Fido is *this* thing and Rover is *that* thing, that Fido can be located by nodding at *this* parcel of matter, and Rover by nodding at *that* one.

In other words, we distinguish between individuals in the world because they are material or because they exist in a context of materiality. In this sense to understand something as an individual is to understand it as part of the material world. And in this sense we can deny that God is an individual. For if God is the Creator *ex nihilo*, then, as we have seen, he cannot be anything material.

Another way of putting it is to say that *who* God is cannot be something different

from *what* God is. John and Mary are both human beings. But John is not Mary and Mary is not John. They are individual people. And though they are human they do not, as individuals, constitute human nature. Along with many others, they exemplify it. Suppose we express this by saying that they are not as individuals the same as their common nature, that who they are and what they are can be distinguished. Then, so I am arguing, if God is in no way material, who he is and what he is are not distinguishable. We cannot get a purchase on the notion of a class of Gods. In terms of the doctrine of creation, 'God', so we may say, is not the name of any class at all. It has to be construed as the name of a nature, as analogous, that is, to 'Man' and 'Horse' in assertions like 'Man is a rational animal' and 'The horse is a quadruped'.

And to all of this one can add something else. For if everything other than God owes its existence to him, then God owes his existence to nothing. He is underived. If he exists, he is also underivable, for if he could owe his existence to something not himself that thing would have to exist independently of him. And that can be expressed by saying that God and his existence are identical. This is something which it makes sense to say even allowing for the sort of considerations about existence, properties and so on noted earlier. Maybe it is true that existence is not something subsistent. Maybe it is no distinctive property. But if there being a thing depends on its being created (if the existence of *x* derives from what is not *x* as creatures are said to derive from God), then the thing and its existence can be distinguished simply on the ground that what the thing is will not suffice to secure its being there. And, by the same token, God can be distinguished from it by saying that this cannot be true with reference to him, or that what he is and the fact that he is are not distinguishable. For if such were not the case, then he too would be created. He too would be such that in the sense just noted he and his existence could be distinguished.

In other words, if we concede the doctrine of creation, there is a case for saying that statements like 'God is his own being' or 'God is subsistent existence itself' are perfectly in order even though at one level they can be challenged. They will serve to remind us that we cannot think of God as something which depends for its existence on the activity of anything outside itself, that God is uncreated and uncreateable.

That, it seems to me, is what Aquinas wants to say. In denying that in God there is *compositio* of *essentia* and *esse* he makes three points in the *Summa Theologiae*. First, he says, the existence of God cannot be 'externally caused'. Second, there is no potentiality in God (i.e. he cannot be changed or produced by anything). Third, God is the 'primary existent' (*primum ens*, the ultimate or first cause of creatures). The upshot would seem to be that, according to Aquinas, to say that God is *esse* is not to assert an identity statement comparable to assertions like 'John Smith is really Bill Jones'. What it seems to be is what, as I have noted, Aquinas says that the whole of his doctrine of divine simplicity is—an account of what God is not. What it says is that God is neither made to be by anything nor able to be made by

anything. And, in spite of what writers like Penelhum argue, this is not to hold that the fact of God's existence is deducible from his nature. The second thesis here is a positive one, while Aquinas's, it seems, is negative. Apart from that, in terms of Aquinas's thinking, if God's existence were derivable from his nature, someone could know what it is that is signified by 'God'. He could also see that it includes what is signified in saying that something exists. 'God' would be in principle definable and 'existing' could be recognized as part of its definition. Yet Aquinas rejects this view. 'God' for him is not definable since God belongs to no genus or species. Even if this were not so, he says, the existence of God could still be denied without contradiction. There is nothing for Aquinas in the meaning of 'God' which entails the truth of theism. According to Aquinas we do not really know what we mean when we use the term. What we can know is the world of creatures, or at least part of it. 'God' is the name given to the unknown source of this. Though that is not to say that 'God', for Aquinas, is a piece of gibberish. His position is as Herbert McCabe has expressed it. 'When we speak of God, although we know how to use our words, there is an important sense in which we do not know what they mean. Fundamentally this is because of our special ignorance of God. We know how to talk about shoes and ships because of our understanding of shoes and ships. We know how to talk about God, not because of any understanding of God, but because of what we know about creatures.'<sup>16</sup> That, in a nutshell, is the drift of the famous discussion of analogy and the like, *de nominibus Dei*, q.13 of the *Prima Pars*. A careful reading of it will reveal, I think, that Aquinas does not subscribe to the Ontological Argument even unofficially. Insofar as he holds that God is a 'necessary being', his point is that nothing can or does create God.

(d) But now for another problem. Suppose we concede what I have been urging. Are we not still left with a decisive objection to the doctrine of divine simplicity? For will it not now be true that God is not a *person*? And if we say that God is not a person, should we not also agree with Plantinga after all? Does not the doctrine of divine simplicity leave us with something other than theism?

Well, why should it be thought that it does? If what I have been saying is cogent, the opposite is true. For what is theism if it is not belief in the existence of God the Creator? And that belief, so I have argued, leads to what can be recognized as the doctrine of divine simplicity.

In any case, must a theist agree without demur that God is indeed a person? Does he need to accept the presumption of people like Plantinga here?

There are certainly reasons for saying that to believe in the existence of God is to believe in the existence of a person. It is held, for example, that God has knowledge and will, and these are commonly and naturally associated with people. So if people are our models for persons, and if God has knowledge and will, it would seem that God is a person. That looks like a perfectly sensible thing to say.

16. *Summa Theologiae*, Blackfriars ed. (London and New York), vol. 3, trans. Herbert McCabe OP (1964), Appendix 3 ('Signifying Imperfectly'), p. 104.

But this kind of argument can be made to cut both ways. For people are also commonly associated with, for example, bodies and parents and food and drink and sex and society and death. Yet God is said to be above such things. He is said to be bodiless and immortal or eternal. So it also seems appropriate to deny that God is a person. If people are our models for persons, then in an obvious sense God, it would seem, is not a person. And this argument can be developed.

Take, for example, the notion of knowledge. People, we might say, are essentially knowers. Something is wrong with them if they do not know things. But how does it come about that people come to know? They learn, of course. And they do so because they are things in the world on which other things in the world impinge. But God cannot be like this. He is supposed to have made the world, and he is not supposed to be part of it. So God, it would seem, just does not know as people know. And if people are our models for persons, and if this implies that God knows as people know, then God is not a person.

Or consider the question of space. People are in space. So they are here and not there, there and not here. Yet God is supposed to be everywhere, which can be taken to mean that he is also nowhere. So again the point can be pressed. If people are our models for persons, and if this implies that God is what people are, then God is not a person. For God is not anywhere, while people are always somewhere.

And so one might go on. I am not denying that God can be called a person. But it can also be said that he is not a person, not because one wishes to say that God does not exist, but because one can be readily struck by the differences between God and the paradigmatic instances of persons provided by the existence of people. If it seems obviously true that God is a person, it seems no less true that he is no such thing.

Nor does this seem something which has to be denied by those anxious to preserve what we might call an orthodox vocabulary about God. The striking fact here is that the formula 'God is a person' is by no means a traditional one. It does not occur in the Bible. It is foreign to the Fathers and to writers up to and beyond the Middle Ages. Nor does it occur in any of the creeds. In Christian circles, of course, one can appeal to the formula of the Trinity: that God is three persons in one *ousia* or *substantia*. But that formula does not say that God is a person or that he is three persons in one person.

## V

So there is much to be said for the doctrine of divine simplicity. And this, in turn, means that there is much to be said for classical theism over and against the alternative which I referred to at the outset.

Yet this conclusion clearly raises some major questions. Classical theism, with its doctrine of divine simplicity, evidently goes with the view that God is deeply mysterious. It is an agnostic conception of divinity. If this conception is valid, therefore, how, for example, are we to account for our talk about God? Or is it that

we cannot really speak of God at all? And, as many will want to ask, what about the Bible? How does classical theism fit with what the Bible says? Or is it, perhaps, that the two are incompatible?

Such are some of the problems, and I cannot hope to deal with them adequately here. Broadly speaking, however, I have four main things to say about them.

The first is that theists in general have no *a priori* need to be anxious simply because of the unknowability of God. That has been denied on the ground that 'to say that something transcends the human understanding is to say that it is unintelligible', from which it has been held to follow that 'it is impossible for a sentence both to be significant and to be about God'.<sup>17</sup> But there can surely be more than we can understand. And, if I am right, that is what theists are bound to concede. For it follows from the doctrine of creation, which leads in turn to the view that God is simple. And that view entails that in certain ways he is incomprehensible.

The second point is that much of what gets taken as positive assertion about God can equally (or perhaps more usefully) be read as negation. Take, for example, the classical assertion that God is wholly immutable. Is it to be read as a description of God? I should say 'No'. It can be read as saying what God is not, *and no more*. That, at any rate, is what it says on the lips of a writer like Aquinas, who on this point is often badly misconstrued. He holds that God is changeless because God is the non-material cause of all changing beings. That is frequently read as saying that God is static or frozen or indifferent. Then we are reminded that God is active and loving, and Aquinas is dismissed as unbiblical or un-Christian or both. But that reaction is just unfair. Aquinas's point is that whatever God's life consists in, it cannot consist in him changing in specifiable ways that creatures change. His activity and love is the activity and love of the Creator. To say this is quite different from saying that God is static and so on.

The third point concerns a range of typical positive assertions about God. These, I think, can often be read as positive but inadequate. They are inadequate because they should not be thought to reflect a knowledge of God in himself. But they are positive because they do, in a sense, serve to characterize God.

First the questions of inadequacy. Take, for example, the familiar assertion that God is personal. I have no difficulty with that and I therefore presume that I am committed to saying that God, for instance, has knowledge or will. But I deny that we have a comprehension of something called the personality of God, and I deny that we should talk of God as if he were the man in the next street. Our language for what is personal (and hence our primary understanding of this) comes from our knowledge of human beings. And we ought to be struck by the difference between what it takes to be a human being and what it must take to be God. Consider again the idea of knowing. Our personal lives as knowers are the lives of users of language who come to know as we are acted on by things in the world. But if God is the Creator, his personal life as a knower cannot be this. His knowledge cannot be that

17. A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (Harmondsworth, Middx, 1971), p. 156.

of someone tied to language, nor can it be something acquired because things have some effect on him and by doing so cause him to know. My knowledge is the knowledge of a creature. But God is what accounts for there being any creatures. And that means that though we can say that, for example, God is personal because he has knowledge, this is not to explain what he is. In this sense 'God is personal' is inadequate.

On the other hand it is a natural thing to say and, in this sense, it is true. For the language of personality is naturally applied to God. Only I think it is this not because we know what God is, but rather because we know what he cannot be and because we can sensibly express that in positive terms. God cannot be bodily by nature, nor can he be something whose action is determined by the action on him of things within the world. If that were not the case he would be part of what I mean by 'the world'. Since he is the Creator, however, we are constrained to say that he brings things about. So in this sense he must be active. How, then, can we help thinking of him except as something personal? Given that we are not to think of him as inanimate and as determined by the action on him of things within the world, what else can we say except that the language of personality is somehow appropriate in talking of him? And what do we say there if not that God is personal?

This, I think, is the proper answer to someone who feels that in speaking of God we can only be saying what he is not and that we are in no way saying what he is. There is a sense in which that conclusion is acceptable, for we talk of God with words which first apply to creatures, and these words can always be regarded as inadequate tools for talking of God because of the difference between God and creatures. But, as has often been observed, if our talk of God is simply read as an account of what God is not, then there seems no particular reason for preferring one way of speaking of him to any other, and there is also the danger of departing too radically from anything that could plausibly be called a traditional belief in God. If, for instance, to call God personal is just to say that he is not inanimate, then why not call him square since this can be read as denying that he is round? And if to call him active is just to deny that he is not active, what do we make of talk about the living God who brings things about? On my account, however, these problems do not arise. In my view we can mean what we say about God and it can matter that we apply this term to him rather than that. It is, for instance, true that God is personal and false that he is canine (though that does not mean that he cannot be significantly spoken of as a dog).

On the other hand, in saying what God is we are not comprehending him. The inadequacy of our ways of describing him is as much a fact about them as their truth. We can, if you like, say more about God than we can mean. That, I think, is the point of those who hold that apophatic theology (negative theology) and cataphatic theology (positive theology) are really two sides of a single coin. Both succeed in saying something because each complements the other.

So I am saying that we can speak truly about God. But I am also saying that there

is a sense in which we do not know what he is, what the word 'God' stands for. And, coming now to my final point, I have to add that this view seems to me perfectly consistent with respect to the biblical tradition.

This, of course, is widely denied. The God of the Bible is not the God of classical theism, and so on. And, of course, there is something in that. But what is the biblical God if he is not the inscrutable and mysterious Creator of all things beside whom there is no god and whose ways are truly hidden? 'I am the Lord, and there is no other. . . . To whom will you liken me and make me equal, and compare me, that we may be alike?' Certainly the biblical God is spoken of in the Bible as if he were a creature. But he is also spoken of differently. And a significant thing to note here is the sheer range of the resulting imagery. If my line is right, you would expect to find biblical writers revelling in a myriad of conflicting images for God. And that is just what you do find. God in the Bible is everything from a despotic king to a pregnant woman. He is a father and judge, but also an eagle, a lamb, and a case of dry-rot. And if all that is not a mandate for a strong doctrine of God's transcendence, I do not know what it is.

The reply may be that it is positive description of what God is really like. But I hope it will be clear that I need not dispute that. Nor do I wish to deny that the Bible talks of God in concrete terms and that we should do so too. We can cheerfully concede that God is a pregnant woman because nobody will be misled into looking for her husband. The more concrete our images for God, the less they will be taken as fully adequate and the more they can be allowed to work on us and help us to develop a doctrine of God. But if someone says that these images are the end of the story, then he has a curious way of reading the Bible. He may insist that there is still an enormous gulf between the God of classical theism and the God of the Bible since the former is static and remote while the latter is dynamic and involved. But that seems to me an awful misreading of classical theism. As I have indicated with respect to Aquinas, it is not the view of classical theism that God is static. According to classical theism God is active everywhere and in everything precisely because he is the Creator of everywhere and everything and because this is to be distinguished from him observing, interfering, and so on. Aquinas certainly denies that God is passive with respect to the world, so he denies that God can learn from the world or have it as an object of experience in the empiricist's sense. He also denies that God can be affected by the world. But this does not entail that God, for Aquinas, is not involved. On the contrary, for writers like him God is more involved with things than any created thing can be with another. This is because on their view God does not stand outside creation as an entity over and against his creatures. He is not *other* to creatures as they are to each other.<sup>18</sup>

For some people this view will still seem a long way from what needs to be said about God. It will be argued that God is loving and that stress on him being the

18. Herbert McCabe, 'The Involvement of God', *New Blackfriars* 66 (1985), p. 470; repr. as chapter 4 of *God Matters* (London, 1987):

Creator fails to allow for this fact. But that also seems to me wrong. If to love means to be moved by passion as we can sometimes be when we love, then I should certainly agree that God cannot love. We will not understand the love of God by taking as our paradigm the case of the romantic lover. Yet it is false that love must involve passion. As Christians have recognized for centuries, it can just as well be thought of as a matter of willing what is good for people. And, for classical theists, God certainly does that.