

Part I

CREATOR/CREATION
RELATION

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Chapter 1

DISTINGUISHING GOD FROM THE WORLD

Two features which have shaped philosophical considerations of divinity in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim worlds since the beginnings of such reflection – God’s simpleness and God’s eternity – have recently been subject to severe questioning. An entire theological movement (so-called “process theology”) has developed to offer an alternative construction of divinity, while an increasing number of philosophers of religion simply proceed as though these features (which are “formal features”) no longer constrained discourse about divinity.¹ While the arguments which theologians offer for rejecting the “classical doctrine” differ somewhat in perspective from those which philosophers offer for avoiding the “Anselmian conception” of divinity, there is significant overlap between the two groups.²

I shall focus here on the forms of argument philosophers normally adduce for eschewing divine eternity and simpleness, and I shall try to show how alternative routes inevitably jeopardize the cardinal teaching of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions, that of creation. (I have already shown [see note 1 below] how theological alternatives in fact replace creation with a far weaker notion of *creativity* borrowed from Whitehead; I shall merely state here that the tendency which some forms of Christianity have of virtually eclipsing creation by redemption can only weaken the import of redemption itself.) The direction of my constructive argument, then, shows how philosophical theology must answer not only to criteria

¹ On “formal features,” see my *Aquinas: God and Action* (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), pp. 14–17, where I acknowledge my indebtedness to Eddy Zemach.

² Schubert Ogden refers to “classical theism,” following Charles Hartshorne, while Tom Morris speaks of “the Anselmian conception”: “The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Anselm,” in *Faith and Philosophy* 1 (1984), pp. 177–87.

of consistency but also do justice to practices and beliefs shared in living religious traditions, much as philosophers of science construct models of explanation with a keen eye to laboratory practice. The reference to three distinct “monotheistic” traditions is meant to offer converging and mutually corroborative testimony, as shall be seen, and not to propose a syncretic common faith.³

Philosophers have come to be persuaded that it is impossible to link an eternal God with temporal events (here their arguments often overlap with those brought forward by “process theologians”), and that the very notion of divine simplicity is freighted with incoherence. Yet the arguments which have persuaded so many of them display little understanding of the roots of the notions being disputed as they were elaborated in the service of the three traditions referred to above. Those dealing with divine eternity invariably settle for its abstract component – *timelessness* – without asking themselves whether that dimension captures the traditional sense of *eternity*.⁴ Two articles by Norman Kretzmann and Eleonore Stump (on “Eternity” and “Absolute Simplicity”) can be extremely useful in confronting this current myopia. Each offers constructive ways of recovering the tradition and responding to certain consequences of the traditional notions which many have judged should invalidate them.⁵ While indebted to their treatment, I propose to undergird a wider endeavor to understand the central role played by *simpleness* and *eternity* in doing philosophical theology, by showing how these formal features secure “the distinction” of God from the world.⁶

Without a clear philosophical means of distinguishing God from the world, the tendency of all discourse about divinity is to deliver a God

³ “Monotheism” is of course an abstraction, though useful in identifying a family of faiths; on the proprieties of speaking of a “common faith,” see my review of Wilfrid Cantwell Smith’s recent publications: “Faith and Religious Convictions: Studies in Comparative Epistemology,” in *Journal of Religion* 63 (1983), pp. 64–73.

⁴ A common starting point for philosophers is Nelson Pike’s *God and Timelessness* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), which presumes the identification: see my “God’s Eternity,” in *Faith and Philosophy* 1 (1984), pp. 389–405. Characteristic arguments against the notion of divine simplicity can be found in Alvin Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1980). I prefer “simpleness” to “simplicity” for rhetorical reasons: see *Summa Theologiae* (= ST), vol. 2: *Existence and Nature of God*, trans. Timothy McDermott, O.P. (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1964).

⁵ Norman Kretzmann and Eleonore Stump, “Eternity,” in *Journal of Philosophy* 78 (1981), pp. 429–58; “Absolute Simplicity,” in *Faith and Philosophy* 2 (1985), pp. 353–82.

⁶ For “the distinction,” see Robert Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason* (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983/Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1995).

who is the “biggest thing around.” That such is the upshot of much current philosophy of religion cannot be doubted; that it stems from overlooking the crucial role of these “formal features” is the burden of this article. The wary will note that talking about a God distinct from the world will inevitably involve one in analogical forms of speech, yet the aversion many philosophers show to this dimension of our discourse can only reflect an oversight of recent explorations of this domain.⁷ It may also be the case that this aversion stems from an overpowering concern for clear-cut meaning which issues in treatments of God in which little care is taken to do justice to the notion of God as “the creator of heaven and earth.” If this be the case, the current surge of interest in philosophy of religion may ill-serve religion, since (adapting an observation of Aquinas) misleading conceptions of matters divine on the part of believers can only subject the faith to ridicule.⁸ Lest my own efforts seem overly pretentious, I am not promising an adequate response to the objections raised to God’s eternity and simpleness. I am trying to make the case for grappling with those objections more honestly and directly, after the manner of Kretzmann and Stump, in an effort to capture the role these formal features play in philosophical theology. For disregarding or overlooking their role risks failing to speak of God at all.

Inner Connection of Eternity with Simpleness

I have consistently referred to *simpleness* and *eternity* as “formal features” of divinity, thereby marking them off from attributes or characteristics. It is like determining whether to treat light as particles or waves, after which one may ask about the velocity of the particles or the length of the waves; or whether to adopt an “event” or a “substance” ontology. Formal features concern our manner of locating the subject for characterization, and hence belong to a stage prior to considering attributes as such – a stage which will in part determine which attributes are relevant and certainly how they are to be attributed to the subject in question. (Or if one remains wedded to an indiscriminating use of “property,” these would be *ur-properties*.) The order of Aquinas’ treatment in the *Summa Theologiae*

⁷ See James Ross, *Portraying Analogy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Patrick Sherry, “Analogy Reviewed,” in *Philosophy* 51 (1976), pp. 337–45; “Analogy Today,” *ibid.*, pp. 431–46.

⁸ Most notable are treatments of divine knowledge which proceed, quite innocent of the creator/creature relation, to presume God to be an omniscient onlooker.

clearly distinguishes those features the psalmist attributes to God from these formal ones, thereby making a semantic and ontological distinction among what many would indiscriminately call “divine attributes”.⁹ It is my contention, moreover, that it is the formal features which secure the proper distinction of God from the world, thus determining the kind of being (so to speak) said to be just and merciful, and hence establishing critical modifications in those attributes. This complex assertion will be unraveled as we proceed. In short, God’s simpleness and God’s eternity are part of what assures us we are talking about divinity.

How so? Aquinas’ treatment is illustrative here, the more so as one realizes how much he is resuming developments in Muslim and Jewish philosophical theology which preceded him.¹⁰ The first step is to articulate a nominal definition of God suitable to all three traditions: “beginning and end of all things and of rational creatures especially.”¹¹ While this formula would be compatible with an emanationist view like Avicenna’s, Aquinas will develop it in an unmistakably creationist manner, following Maimonides.¹² A first step in that direction is to note an immediate consequence of the formula itself: the One who begins and is the end of all things is *not* one of those things. Or as Aquinas put it, “God does not belong to the genus of substance.”¹³ God is not one of the items in the world of which God is the origin. Avicenna expressed this distinction in terms of *necessary* and *possible* beings, where the First alone exists “by its essence” (and is hence *necessary*) while everything else – *possible* in itself – derives its existence from the First.¹⁴ Aquinas prefers to mark the distinction by separating what is utterly without composition (or “simple”) from everything else, which is *composed* of essence and *esse* (or existence). The idea for such a division came to him from Avicenna, but his development of it assures a clear creation perspective by insisting that the “proper effect” of the simple One is the to-be (*esse*) of the cosmos. So the formal feature of divine simpleness is intended to distinguish God from every-

⁹ See my *Aquinas* (note 1), chapter 2, and Mark Jordan, “Names of God and the Being of Names,” in *Existence and Nature of God*, ed. Alfred J. Freddoso (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), pp. 161–90.

¹⁰ See my *Knowing the Unknowable God* (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986).

¹¹ ST 1.2. intro.

¹² The crucial difference between these perspectives is of course the gratuity of the universe; hence Josef Pieper insists that creation is “the hidden element in the philosophy of Aquinas,” see: *Philosophia Negativa* (Munich: Kösel, 1953).

¹³ ST 1.3.5.1.

¹⁴ *al-Shifa: al-Ilahiyyat* I, eds G. C. Anawati and S. Zayad (Cairo, 1960), chapter 8, section 4 (p. 346, line 11).

thing else – God’s creation. That is, divine simpleness assures God’s distinction from “all things” as well as providing the ground for asserting the gratuity of creation.

What then can *simpleness* mean? And why must one say that God is simple? To reply to the second question first: because we have no other way of assuring ourselves that we are talking about the One from whom all things come. What distinguishes divinity from all that is not divine, in such a way as to be able to characterize that One as the source of all the rest, must have to do with the *nature* of the subject in question and not simply its *attributes*. It will not do to inquire into God’s knowing, willing, or moral character without first asking what sort of thing it is to which we are attributing knowledge and will and moral character. The price one pays for adopting such a short-cut is uncritically to presume similarities between God and humans, as in the opener: “assuming God to be a person. . . .”¹⁵ Or one presumes a univocal understanding of powers (or properties) like knowing and willing, as though the world consisted of such properties, shared by God and creatures according to more or less. Both presumptions can be found in current philosophy of religion, presumably embodying a fear that admitting analogical discourse leaves us conceptually at sea. Yet a vague notion of similarity, coupled with strategic avowals of difference (at least in degree) hardly represents a critical approach to the central issue: the distinction of God (creator) from the world (creation).

How does *simpleness* secure that distinction? To answer this question we must articulate what *simpleness* means. I have noted that Aquinas’ elaboration of divine simpleness replaced a distinction which Avicenna had drawn across the field of being (all that is) between that which is necessary in itself and that which is possible in itself (and made necessary – in another sense – by another). What is “necessary in itself” is so because it exists “by its essence” (*bi-thatihi*). Aware as he was of the many senses of the term “necessary,” Aquinas eschewed using that term as the primary one distinguishing God from all that is not God, preferring to articulate Avicenna’s distinction in terms borrowed from him as well: essence and existence (*esse*).¹⁶ What gives divinity the necessity peculiar to it is the formal fact that God’s nature is nothing other than its own existence: to

¹⁵ This statement is particularly ambiguous from within the Christian tradition, which has appropriated the term “person” to express divine triunity. That our discourse about, as well as our address to, God is *personal* cannot be gainsaid; yet asserting God to be a *person* begs a number of critical questions.

¹⁶ For the story of that borrowing and subsequent transformation on the part of Aquinas, see Armand Maurer, *On Being and Essence*, second revised edition (Toronto: Pontifical

be divine is (simply) to-be. That is what *simpleness* means for Aquinas, at any rate, who uses it principally and essentially (*primo et per se*) of God alone.¹⁷ There is no doubt that Aquinas' treatment is something of a seamless robe, for one must at least acknowledge the possibility of conceiving existence (*esse*) as he does, on the analogy of act or activity, to allow that such a characterization could capture what we mean by divinity, however remotely or "formally." I shall indicate ways in which that can be made plausible when I treat of *simpleness* in relation to creation. For now, some tentative concessions need to be made to allow the main lines of the argument to be sketched out.

So simple a One would exist without needing a cause of its existing, so its being simple would not be a merely negative feature, like lacking parts. Indeed this way of characterizing divine simpleness makes it equivalent to *aseity*, yet goes on to spell that out in terms of its *existing* "by its essence" (*per se*). Other things that one would be inclined to call *necessary* may therefore be usefully characterized as "pertaining to every possible world," yet such considerations remain conceptual. Were such things actually to exist as part of *this* world, then they would either pertain to its structure, and so enjoy the simpleness proper to formal structure without a claim to separate existence, or they would be brought into existence, and in that sense be "composed." (Aquinas presumed the heavenly bodies and angels to be such objects, so he used his distinction of essence from existence to distinguish them from divinity while acknowledging their everlasting status.)

It should be becoming clear how much Aquinas' specific articulation of divine simpleness as the identity of God's essence with the divine act of existing seems tailored to a characterization of God as creator: the One who bestows existence. Let us first, however, see how *eternity* emerges from simpleness so conceived, by way of necessary implication and as an articulation of the sense of *simpleness* developing here.

This One whose essence is simply to-be cannot be limited by quantity (since it is not bodily) nor by genus or species, since its essence – to-be – "overflows" both genus and species. So what is simple is also unlimited or, more traditionally, infinite. Nor can such a one be temporal, since it does not come to be, and so is not subject to motion or change, of which time is the measure. So what is simple must be beyond

Institute of Medieval Studies, 1968); and my "Essence and Existence; Avicenna and Greek Philosophy," in *MIDEO* 13 (= *Melanges de l'Institut Dominicain des Etudes Orientales*)(1985), as well as *Knowing* (note 10).

¹⁷ ST 1.3.7.

change – not unmoving, as the traditional term “immutable” is often taken to mean, but beyond the categories of *kinesis* or *stasis*. (Such an avowal, however necessary as a consequence, will require a notion of *activity* which is not motion if it is to be plausible – again the seamless-garment aspect of this treatment of divine simplicity.)

We have not quite concluded, however, to God’s eternity, but only to the fact that divinity, to be the “beginning and end of all things,” must lie beyond change. What does eternity add to this? Boethius’ classic definition suggests the answer: “the possession all-at-once (*tota simul*) of unending *life*.” Whatever is eternal, in the full-blooded sense in which that is intended when claimed as a formal feature of divinity, must be alive – existing or actual, if you will – and not merely the sort of thing to which temporal becoming is irrelevant, as it is to mathematics.¹⁸ God’s eternity, then, specifies the modality proper to an activity which is not a movement, and it is this dimension which the variant “timeless” omits. If God’s eternity entails *timelessness*, as derived via the argument that divinity lies beyond becoming, it remains the case that the timelessness entailed is *not* what we associate with mathematical entities or truths. And since “timeless” is inevitably closely connected with such things as these, to which becoming is irrelevant, it seems at least rhetorically misleading to speak of God as timeless, as it is certainly inaccurate to equate eternity with timelessness.

So God’s eternity, on this account, also prepares the way for asserting the One to be creator, as it underscores the fact that God’s nature is simply to-be, by recalling that whatever simply is must lie beyond the realm of becoming, of cause-and-effect, and so be eternally. Aquinas’ pregnant analogy: “as time measures becoming, so eternity measures to-be (*esse*),”¹⁹ opens the treatment to the act of creation, for the “proper effect” of what acts in this eternal fashion will be the to-be (*esse*) of things.²⁰ So the activity of the eternal One will be conceived, not by analogy with timeless entities impervious to time, but in terms of what makes the world to be. And since “what is” is *now*, the One who makes things to be will be primarily and essentially (*primo et per se*) *present*. The metaphor of *presence* can be a useful one to flesh out this analogy to present existence.²¹

¹⁸ Hence Kretzmann and Stump distinguish *eternity* from mere *atemporality*: “Eternity” (note 5), p. 432.

¹⁹ ST 1.10.4.3.

²⁰ ST 1.8.1; 45.5.

²¹ See John S. Dunne’s evocative treatment in *House of Wisdom* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985).

Finally, I have spoken throughout of “the One.” For the conception of divine simpleness which I have been elaborating not only grounds the distinction of God from the world, but also articulates the faith of those religious traditions which have embodied that distinction in a doctrine of creation – that God is one. And not merely in the sense that there happens not to be another answering to the specifications of divinity, as we have but one sun, but in the sense that this notion of divinity entails uniqueness. Although the assertion that God is one seems to go without saying since the Athenian philosophers undermined the Acropolis, it remains doubtful (at least to me) whether treatments of God which avoid securing the nature of their subject can do anything more than *presume* there to be but one God. The exposition of divine simpleness offered here is presented as a challenge to anyone purporting to speak of God when treating, say, of divine knowledge. If divinity, and with it the distinction of God from the world, be not secured in some fashion such as this, how will we know we are treating of God? And if not this way, what are the alternatives?

Difficulties with Eternity

The difficulties which philosophers have found with eternity are two-fold: (1) arriving at a proper conception of an eternal entity, and (2) relating such a being to temporal affairs. The first difficulty shows up immediately in our language, which appears to be irremediably tensed. Attempts to construct a tenseless verb inevitably founder on relating the action depicted to what is happening now, and sacrificing all connection with the token-reflexive “now” leaves one with a thoroughly abstract form of discourse – since whatever happens, happens now. Yet it must also be noted that these difficulties have arisen in relation to a purportedly *timeless* discourse. What would happen were one to discriminate God’s eternity from timelessness, in the manner suggested?

This eternal being could hardly be thought of as one to which temporal occurrences were irrelevant, since they exist by virtue of its eternal to-be. It follows, of course, that there is only one such – God – and that such a One, as the source of the existence proper to each temporal existent, would better be imagined *inside* the becoming which time measures than *outside* it. There is, to be sure, a specific sense in which the eternal One is timeless (or “outside time”) as well, namely the fact that the present tense applied to such a one never becomes the past, as it does with everything else. So, while there has to have been a first moment in time

marking the beginning of the created universe, we cannot properly say that God *created* the world but that God *creates* the world. (The Creed sidesteps this issue nicely by using the noun instead: “We believe in one God . . . Creator of heaven and earth. . . .”) Since the reference point, however, is normally not the divine action but its effect, religious language can properly speak of “the great deeds God has done on behalf of God’s own people.”

It is no less true, of course, that we cannot speak a language whose present never becomes past, any more than we could function with an idiom pretending to be tenseless. So attempting to construct such a language would produce countless puzzles, as we tried to make it do what our tensed discourse does. Yet there is no need to construct a language for God, but only to draw attention to strategic disanalogies with our tensed discourse. Kretzmann and Stump have been helpful in assembling reminders for discussions of the way God knows what will happen. Often misleadingly referred to as “the future,” as though there were a determinate scenario waiting in the wings, the object of God’s knowing what will be the case has spawned more than philosophical puzzles, in provoking acerbic theological controversies. The very thought that God knows what I will do can evoke a frisson of terror, as well, in the religious soul.

Much current discussion of God’s knowledge concentrates on whether and how God knows “the future” without pausing to reflect on the ambiguities in that term – like the hapless soul who gave up a prestigious post for a future one (which “failed to materialize,” as we say). The presumption of a determinate scenario for what the case will be appears to subserve a characteristic form of argument. God must know everything that is the case, for divine omniscience permits no surprises. Cast in terms of knowing which propositions are true, along with the corollary that once something is true, it is timelessly true, God is then said to know what will take place since omniscience requires that God know which side of a disjunction is true, lest God be surprised.

The switch to propositions allows one to let go of one’s tenses here, giving the discourse its scrambled air, which becomes further confused as “true propositions” seem to refer only indirectly to what *is* the case. As a result of these maneuvers, one can sidestep Aristotle’s quandary over future contingent events – a discussion which shaped Aquinas’ treatment of the matter. Aristotle, for whom a true statement asserts what is the case, acknowledges sufficient determinacy regarding what might happen to offer a general description with its negation, insisting that one or the other would indeed be the case (the law of bivalence). But no one can know whether the sea battle will occur tomorrow or not (which of the

disjuncts “is” the true one), until it occurs. We can predict, of course, as a BBC spokesman acknowledged in the midst of a news blackout in the Falklands crisis: “there will have been casualties.” But predictions are not statements. So strictly speaking, no one can know what will take place, so long as we keep true assertion linked to fact. Not even God can, concurs Aquinas, since “the future” does not yet exist, and what does not exist is not there to be known.²²

Holding on to one’s tenses, then, seems to be linked closely with keeping true discourse tied to states of affairs: what *is* the case. Those who forego both, as do proponents of “middle knowledge,” seem caught in a stranger paradox than the one at least some of them thought they were escaping. The paradox they would avoid is the one the wary reader will have associated with Aquinas: since God cannot know what *will* happen, but must know everything, all that was, is, or will be must be present to God eternally. The logic is impeccable, since only what *is* the case can be known to be the case, but one is at a loss to say just how what has not yet happened can be *present* to God. We are faced with an equivocation on “present” which can be resolved only by articulating the sense proper to an eternal present, plus its relation to the present of tensed discourse – “what is the case” – both of which lie quite beyond one whose discourse is tied to tenses.

How could proponents of “middle knowledge” be caught in a paradox stranger than this one? Because their presumption of a determinate scenario also requires that what will be the case be present to divine knowledge, yet be so without benefit of the strategic disanalogies with tensed discourse which accompany asserting God to be eternal. As a result, God can be said to know beforehand what the case will be, since God knows which of each pair of disjuncts is true. But the last “is” must be a timeless one, so God can be said to know “the future” even though what God knows has not yet taken place. Chary of a resolution involving an eternity which lies beyond our capacity properly to conceive, they need to rely nevertheless on a notion of *timelessness* which allows them to state something quite inconceivable: namely, *what* I will do before I have done it. Eternity, as one of the terms in the earlier paradox, at least lies *beyond* our powers of conception; while a timeless affirmation of the free actions of an actual subject *while* that subject is yet a possibility defies reason: *de posse ad esse non valet illatio*.²³

²² ST 1.14.13.

²³ See the observations of Anthony Kenny in *God of the Philosophers* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), pp. 70–1.

By avoiding characterizing divinity in those ways which assure its distinction from the world and hence entail divine eternity, or else by denying such a formal feature in favor of an everlasting God in time, the claims of divine omniscience have nonetheless forced these philosophers into admitting into divine knowing a quality of timelessness akin to eternity, and also to create an object of knowledge “midway between” what is actual and what is merely possible. Hence the term “middle knowledge.” It should be clear how such a treatment prefers propositions to statements regarding what is the case, so that it can speak of true propositions abstracted from what the case *is*. If proponents of divine eternity equate that condition with timelessness, then the difference between the two positions may be largely tactical: where one puts the emphasis. If, however, eternity belongs to God alone as the One whose essence is simply to-be, and as such is the source of each thing existing, then the resolution in terms of eternity will involve an ontology centered on existence and actuality. It is in these terms that we shall now examine divine simpleness.

The Case for Divine Simpleness

The simpleness proposed offered more than a mere denial of multiplicity in divinity, but was positively articulated by insisting that God’s nature is simply to-be (*esse*). Aquinas, in his treatment, offers further reasons why no other mode of composition can be found in divinity – potency/act, matter/form, genus/species, substance/accident – but the positive reason underlying every negation is the identity of God’s essence with God’s very existing. The greatest obstacle to accepting this account as coherent lies in trying to conceive what is meant by existing, or *esse*. It cannot be an accident of substance, since it is presupposed to the notion of substance as *that which is*, whereas accidents presuppose substance. Nor can it be a merely formal feature like *identity*, since such features hold indifferently of possible and actual things, whereas we mean by *esse* the *act* of existing: that which makes something to be here and now.

Here is where Aquinas’ maneuver recommends itself. Existing is to be conceived as a constituent feature of whatever is, as toads are constituted toads by the constituent structure called toadness. In the case of *esse*, however, this constituent feature is not merely formal but actual. So Aristotle’s analogical complements of potency and act are recapitulated a step beyond matter/form to allow the essence to be realized in an existing individual. The analogy of *act* cannot be further analyzed, as

Aristotle saw, but can be displayed. What we call actions are paradigmatically actions of existing subjects, so the *ur*-action, if you will, is the existing of the acting subject.²⁴

One cannot get *behind* this fact of existing, any more than one can *explicate* why the arrival of a newborn infant is always more than the sum of the processes which brought it into being. What now exists is one capable of acting, and in the case of humans, of taking responsibility for one's actions. That is the surplus which must be recognized ontologically even when one cannot analyze it any further. A strategic way to recognize it is to conceive existence as *act* (not *an* act) perfecting the essence as form does matter, by realizing the nature in an existing individual. As the *ur*-act, then, accounting for the constitutive fact that individuals are agents, existing will not be relegated to the status of a mere *given*, or of a presupposition. It will be the source of all further capacities for development and self-actuation which characterize such an individual. (In other words, certain ranges of action are typical of certain types of things, but only the existing individuals of the species can *do* them.)

This last move is the crucial one. If one accepts it, the account given of divine simpleness can be made quite plausible, whereas without it – with a notion of existence as a mere given or presupposition – simpleness remains a puzzle. If one begins with properties, for example, rather than with an acting individual, one will be puzzled to know how two distinct properties, like knowing and willing, could be identified with the divine essence, as simpleness demands, without thereby losing their distinctness in becoming identified with one another.²⁵ The assertions of simpleness seem incompatible with an elementary application of logic. Moreover, Aquinas' response to this objection appears, from such a perspective, to be a semantic slight of hand: "the words we use for the perfections we attribute to God, although they signify what is one, are not synonymous, for they signify it from many different points of view."²⁶

If we assume the primacy of existing individual agents, however, the difficulties can be met and Aquinas' response found to be insightful. For then what we call properties will be located as distinct powers in a subject capable of acting. Where the subject in question is the uniquely divine one, however, which is act without potency, then the distinct acts

²⁴ A further way to display that activity which characterizes the being of an individual is to attend to the way in which judgment crowns the activity of knowing: see my "Essence and Existence" (note 16) or *Knowing* (note 10).

²⁵ See Alvin Plantinga (note 4), pp. 37–8.

²⁶ ST 1.13.4.

(knowing and willing) need not be rooted in separate powers. And one should be able to give an analysis of knowing along the lines of the commendation in Genesis 1: “and God saw that it was good,” in which a single knowing act, carried to its term, reaches its fruition in the enjoyment of what is – insofar as it is – then the knowing and willing which are distinct acts for us will be but the articulations of a single act of knowing in God.²⁷ (The only further premise required here is the unproblematic one that an act of knowing “carried to its term” can well be but one act in a mind sufficiently powerful – by analogy with one who “sees” conclusions quickly.)

What seems more perplexing, in fact, is the multiplication of acts of knowing and of willing by the objects known and loved. It was this hurdle which forced Avicenna and Gersonides (though Muslim and Jew, respectively) to limit God’s knowing to the “definitions and order of things,” whereas al-Ghazali and Maimonides knew they had to defer to Qur’an and Torah to affirm God’s care of each individual “without being able to say how.”²⁸ What can we say? That in knowing God’s own to-be, God knows and takes pleasure in bringing forth individuals “according to their kinds.”²⁹ If this activity is conceived as a selection among scenarios, it will require a distinct act of will, and the articulation would have to be: in knowing God’s own to-be, God knows and takes pleasure in what God *chooses* to bring forth. Yet if the activity is rather understood as a practical knowing, by analogy with doing or making (as *creation* strongly suggests), then no distinct act of choosing will be needed, since the object made is the term of artistic knowing, as the action performed forms the conclusion of a practical syllogism.³⁰ Choices are entailed, certainly, in

²⁷ Such is the thesis of Bernard Lonergan, whose *Verbum: Word and Idea in Aquinas* (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1967) articulates Aquinas’ epistemology in such a way as to allow it to develop Augustine’s mental analogy for the Trinitarian processions in God.

²⁸ The formula “without [being able to say] how” (*bi-la kaifa*) is a classic recourse of al-Ghazali in such matters: see Simon van den Bergh, *Averroes’ Tahāfūt al-Tahāfūt* (London: Luzac, 1969), pp. 151–2, which incorporates al-Ghazali’s original *Tāhāfūt al-Falāsifā*, ed. Suliman Dunya (Cairo: Dar al-Ma’arifa, 1980), pp. 153–4. Or the new translation by Micheal Marmura: *The Incoherence of the Philosophers* (Provo UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1997), pp. 77–8. For the others, see Chapter 4 of the present volume “Maimonides, Aquinas and Gersonides on Providence and Evil.”

²⁹ Edward Booth, O.P., *Aristotelian Aporetic Ontology in Islamic and Christian Writers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983) shows how Aquinas’ ability to formulate God’s creative activity in so neat a fashion relies on his appropriation of pseudo-Dionysius.

³⁰ James Ross makes this fruitful suggestion, among others, in “Creation II” in *The Existence and Nature of God*, ed. Alfred Freddoso (note 9).

human execution, but they subserve the intention coming to realization in the object.

That God's self-knowledge of God's own essence as the to-be in which things can participate in being, after their own fashion, becomes a practical action of creation is of course a free act on God's part, but again, freedom need not (and I contend, ought not) primarily be considered as freedom of choice.³¹ What turns a contemplative *delectatio* into a making defies our articulation, but it need not demand a distinct "decision" on God's part. In other words, the sense in which creation is at once gratuitous yet utterly fitting, according to the axiom that "good diffuses itself," reminds us that divine freedom may be better understood on the model of Zen "resonance" than on that of a western penchant for *decisions*.³² Or to put it another way, the most significant decisions of our lives seem less *made* than they are "taken," as most western languages put it. If the good moves us by drawing us rather than by constraining us, so that following the bent of one's nature can be at once natural and free, why cannot creation be similarly understood?

These considerations are meant to persuade us of the plausibility of a simple divine nature whose unitary act of loving knowing of itself issues in a making (creating) of the universe. Many questions remain, of course, and proper arguments need to be supplied as needed, but enough has been said to suggest that the effort to supply them is worthwhile. The articulation of simpleness as an essence identical with its to-be (or "act of existing") is clearly the critical piece in the pattern. For without the premise that the to-be of a thing is the source of all its activity (and hence of whatever perfects it), we would not be supplied with a unitary perspective or with the heightened sense of *act* needed to speak of creation as the free culmination of divine loving knowledge of itself. We shall see in a moment that this same premise offers fruitful links both with mystical aspirations and with subsequent Trinitarian developments in Christian theology. For the moment, however, it is worth warning that such a simpleness also entails a divinity that is radically unknowable. The very attempt to conceive the *esse* which comprises divinity will have alerted many; the fact that a normal subject/predicate sentence will *ipso facto* be

³¹ Kretzmann and Stump concur, with a careful presentation of Aquinas' strong alternative views on freedom, in "Absolute Simplicity" (note 5).

³² Such a strategy would suggest ways of responding to Norman Kretzmann's quandary regarding Aquinas and the gratuity of creation, in "Goodness, Knowledge and Indeterminacy in the Philosophy of Thomas Aquinas", in *Journal of Philosophy* 80 (1983), pp. 631–42. For similarly fruitful suggestions, see Etienne Gilson, *Le Thomisme*, 5th edn (Paris: J. Vrin, 1938), pp. 183–5.

ill-formed of God clinches the matter. At this point, the analogous reaches of our discourse have to be pressed into service, yet the fact remains that they are there to be so.³³

Without some such attempt to articulate what distinguishes God from the world of which God is the principle and free bestower of its being, we seem to be left with mere assertions that God is without cause, or *a se*.³⁴ It does not help to insist that God commands all, for one can still wonder whether the being capable of commanding all is in fact creator of all. And if the sense in which God “necessarily exists” is left to compete with that of necessary truths – if one fails to distinguish existential from logical truth – then God can be made to look much like Plato’s demiurge, fashioning the world according to the forms. Whereas on the pattern of a God whose essence is to-be, necessary truths assume a properly formal role as the manners in which created things can participate in such *esse*.³⁵ The critical fact remains, however, that a treatment of divinity which looks only to divine attributes (or properties) without attempting to articulate the uniqueness of the divine nature – announced in the faith-claims of Jew, Christian, and Muslim that God is one – should leave one wondering whether one is discussing divinity or not. And if the tenor of the discussion, besides, leads readers to suspect one to be referring to “the biggest thing around,” then the suspicion may well indicate a fatal flaw in the enterprise.

Simpleness, Eternity, and Religious Life

“Process theologians” regard a divinity beyond change (and hence eternal) who is “pure act” to be inherently unresponsive and antithetical to the God presented to Jews and Christians in the Bible. Some would even hold this “classical doctrine of God” responsible for secularism in the west, since no sensitive individual could respond to such a God.³⁶ Perhaps enough has been said here to suggest that the “classical doctrine” they

³³ This is the burden of Ross’ *Portraying* (note 7). For a theological application, see Roger White, “Notes on analogical predication and speaking about God,” in *Philosophical Frontiers of Christian Theology*, eds Brian Hebblethwaite and Stewart Sutherland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 197–226.

³⁴ Here is the weakness of al-Ghazali’s critique of Ibn Sina, in his *Taháfût* (note 28), pp. 191–2.

³⁵ See *Knowing* (note 10), chapter 4.

³⁶ This is a subsidiary thesis of Schubert Ogden in *The Reality of God, and Other Essays* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966).

revile bears little relation to a thinker as classical as Aquinas. In fact, once one takes *esse* to be the source of all perfections, one finds divine activity to be thoroughly “intentional” in character, relating to itself and its creation with an understanding love which is the quintessence of responsiveness. Moreover, in the measure that the animating spark of one’s own being can be said to be a participation in the very to-be of the One from whom all existence flows, there can be said to be in each of us what John of the Cross calls the “centre of the soul.”³⁷

One way to God, then, could be by way of disciplines of mind and heart directed to that “centre” or source of one’s life. More over, the understanding proffered of eternity as itself at the heart of temporal existence rather than removed from it, suggesting the metaphors of *presence* and *present* life, underscores how God’s simpleness – conceived as pure *esse* – can open the way to an invitation to live present to God in the present of one’s life, in a way mindful of spiritual disciplines in diverse traditions. And for Christians, the fact that the divine to-be expresses itself in a knowing which becomes a *delectatio* opens the way to exploiting the analogies for triunity offered by Augustine and developed by Aquinas, wherein Father, Son, and Spirit are likened to the articulation of our knowledge in a word which brings intrinsic enjoyment as it expresses what is good, true, and beautiful.³⁸

All this by way of suggestion, since the process theologians’ criticism is taken even if it misidentifies its target. Philosophical considerations regarding divinity will fail in their ultimate aim of clarification if they end up presenting a God to which one cannot respond with one’s whole person. For if divinity means anything, it must mean “the beginning and the end of all things, and especially of rational creatures,” and nothing less than “the love which moves the sun and moon and all the stars” (Dante) can present itself as the ultimate end of rational creatures. Such at least is the claim of every religious tradition, and something which many rational creatures come to appreciate in their lifetime. In the Islamic tradition, al-Ghazali’s criticism of the writings of “the philosophers” came pointedly to this: that they (and especially Ibn Sina) offered a scheme culminating in a God whom one could not worship, for the One presented could not properly be called Creator or Lord.³⁹ Similarly, my concern in

³⁷ John of the Cross, *The Living Flame of Love*, Stanza 1, pars 9, 14; Stanza 4, par. 3; cf. *Collected Works*, trans. K. Kavanaugh and O. Rodriguez (Washington DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1979), pp. 582, 584, 643.

³⁸ See Bernard Lonergan, *Verbum* (note 27).

³⁹ al-Ghazali, *Tahāfūt*, pp. 148–9; van den Bergh, pp. 124ff, Marmura, pp. 65 ff (note 28).

this article has been to offer a sketch of a way in which philosophers treating of divinity might so distinguish God from the world as to assure that the One from whom all things come would also be the One to whom rational creatures could wholeheartedly respond.