

DIVINE SIMPLICITY AS *ACTUS PURUS*

A Thesis

by

ALLEN STANLEY GEHRING JR

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

August 2005

Major Subject: Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

Divine Simplicity as *Actus Purus*. (August 2005)

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This thesis presents a case for the traditional doctrine of divine simplicity by construing it along the lines that God exists as *actus purus*. My formulation of divine simplicity draws upon the medieval insight that God is what He is in virtue of what He does in one, eternal act of will with which He is identical.

In chapter I, I survey the contemporary literature on divine simplicity. In chapter II, I critique Alvin Plantinga's Platonic theory of the divine attributes as formulated in *Does God Have a Nature?* I contend it brings with it the cost of abandoning the doctrine of God's aseity, as well as a problematic understanding of the very notion of what it means to claim that God has a particular property. In chapter III, I provide rejoinders to all of Plantinga's defeaters against divine simplicity. I argue that by understanding the origin of God's attributes to be the result of what He does, Plantinga's two major criticisms against divine simplicity fail.

In chapter IV, I develop a viable theory of divine simplicity, given an *actus purus* conception of God, and I formulate a number of arguments supporting it. By drawing upon the resources of action theory, I clarify, in detail, what exactly it means to claim that God is identical with His act of will. And I demonstrate the fruitfulness of an *actus purus* construal of divine simplicity by showing how it solves a large number of problems that theists face.

In the last chapter, I note some of the difficulties with my position due to its commitment to an eternal God, and I suggest some of the ways that these problems can be overcome. However, in addition to showing the difficulties that face my position, I also demonstrate the rich number of implications that follow from it. As such, I seek to demonstrate that the traditional understanding of the divine essence is something that is worthy for theists to embrace and to explore, because it is full of truth and wisdom that deserves to be preserved for later generations to celebrate and enjoy.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Within contemporary, analytic philosophy, Alvin Plantinga's *Does God Have a Nature?* (DGHN) is the work that sets forth the problems that any account of divine simplicity needs to overcome. He levels two major objections against the traditional view which theists such as Aquinas developed, and the second has been taken to be the *coup de grace*: 1) if God is identical with His properties, then all of His properties are identical with each other, and He has only one property, and 2) if God is identical with His properties, then He is a property and not a person. Due to these problems, Plantinga rejects divine simplicity in favor of a Platonic understanding of the divine attributes. As such, he embraces the notion that God is not the creator of modality, and the view that He depends on the Platonic host of abstract objects to exist and to have the properties which He has.¹

Since the purpose of this thesis is to defend the doctrine of divine simplicity in the face of Plantinga's objections, before explaining how I propose to carry out that task, it will be helpful to survey some of the contemporary literature on the subject. Such a survey will serve to position my defense within the contemporary literature. William Mann provided one of the earliest attempts to respond to Plantinga's critique. Mann's thesis is that God is not identical with a property but rather a property instance. Mann

This thesis follows the style and format outlined in *The Chicago Manual of Style, 14th edition*.

¹ Alvin Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1980). Hereafter, all in-text page numbers in parentheses refer to the page numbers of this work.

agrees with Plantinga that it is absurd to contend that God is identical with the property of, for example, life or wisdom. But he argues, *prima facie*, it is not absurd to conceive of Him as identical with the property instance of a rich property, namely being a Godhead. Moreover, while he agrees that it is absurd to claim the property, for example, of goodness is identical with wisdom, it is not absurd to contend, for example, the property instance of the *life of God* is identical with the property instance of the *wisdom of God*.²

Mann's response, however, received harsh criticism from the philosophic community. Part of the theoretical motivation behind divine simplicity is to maintain the belief that God depends upon nothing other than Himself to exist. Thomas Morris points out, though, on Mann's view God is dependent on the Godhead property to exist, since He is only an instance of it. Moreover, Morris argues that Mann's theory is problematic, because it implies God cannot have any accidental properties, since He is identical with all of the properties of which He is a property instance. As such, one needs to claim it is essential to God that He create the world or call Abraham out of Ur, which, traditionally, theists have rejected.³ Nicholas Wolterstorff summarizes aptly the problems with Mann's theory when he claims it is too underdeveloped to be helpful in solving the original dilemmas Plantinga raised.⁴

A number of different philosophers have responded to Plantinga by arguing his criticisms against divine simplicity fail, because they attack a straw man, since he failed

² William Mann, "Divine Simplicity," *Religious Studies* 18 (1982): 451-471.

³ Thomas Morris, "On God and Mann: A View of Divine Simplicity," *Religious Studies* 21 (1985): 299-318.

⁴ Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Divine Simplicity," in *Our Knowledge of God: Essays on Natural and Philosophical Theology*, ed. Kelly Clark (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1992), 133-149.

to understand Aquinas properly. Lawrence Dewan, for example, claims Aquinas would agree with Plantinga that it is wrongheaded to assert God is identical with a property. For Dewan, however, Aquinas never taught such a notion, nor does anything he claimed need to be taken to imply it. According to Dewan, Aquinas's view of God, correctly understood, is that God is being itself subsisting.⁵ Katherin Rogers argues Plantinga's criticisms fail, because, historically, proponents of divine simplicity, such as Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas, never took talk about God's attributes to imply He has properties. In fact, Rogers contends, historically, theists conceived of Him having no properties at all. Instead, Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas understood Him to be one, simple act.⁶

While philosophers such as Mann, Dewan, and Rogers responded to Plantinga by defending the traditional view against the objections leveled against it, other philosophers responded by employing an offensive strategy, re-considering the theoretical motivation behind divine simplicity. In particular, Brian Leftow argues divine simplicity follows, deductively, from two beliefs theists should not abandon. On the one hand, it follows from the assumption that it is impossible for God to create His own nature. On the other hand, it follows from the ultimacy explanation, the belief no regress of explanations can go further than God. As for Plantinga's objection that if God is identical with a property He is not a person, Leftow questions whether it is problematic to conceive of Him in this manner. Abstract objects are taken to be timeless and eternal, so conceiving of Him as an abstract object accords well with beliefs theists

⁵ Lawrence Dewan, "Saint Thomas, Alvin Plantinga, and the Divine Simplicity," *The Modern Schoolman* 66 (1989): 141-151.

⁶ Katherin Rogers, *The Anselmian Approach to God and Creation* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellon Press, 1997), 29-60.

have traditionally held about Him.⁷

In addition to provoking philosophers to re-consider the viability of divine simplicity, Plantinga's critique of it caused philosophers to consider a number of related issues. In particular, God's relationship to modality and His freedom in creating the world. With respect to the first topic, Thomas Morris and Christopher Menzel argue universals can be understood to be divine ideas. In thinking of universals in this manner, theists can avoid Plantinga's contention that God is not the creator of abstract objects, since they can be understood to be the eternal thoughts in His mind.⁸

With respect to the second topic, philosophers have considered this to be a problem, because if God is identical with all of His attributes, they are all essential to Him and therefore for Him to have a different one implies He is a different being. As such, it seems divine simplicity implies it is essential that God create the world. Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann have offered the most important response to this dilemma. According to them, in the sense that God wills to create the world it is necessary that He create it, but there are other possible worlds where He may have not created this world or any at all.⁹

My response to Plantinga's attack on divine simplicity differs from the aforementioned ones, but it does have elements in common with them. Unlike Mann, I

⁷ Brian Leftow, "Is God an Abstract Object?," *Nous* 24 (1990): 581-598.

⁸ Thomas Morris and Christopher Menzel, "Absolute Creation," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 23 (1986): 353-362. See also Christopher Menzel, "Theism, Platonism, and the Metaphysics of Mathematics," *Faith and Philosophy* 4 (1987): 365-382.

⁹ Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, "Absolute Simplicity," *Faith and Philosophy* 2 (1985): 353-381. See also William Hasker, "Simplicity and Freedom: A Response to Stump and Kretzmann," *Faith and Philosophy* 3 (1986): 192-201; Timothy O'Connor "Simplicity and Creation," *Faith and Philosophy* 16 (1999): 405-412.

do not attempt to argue that God exists as identical with a property instance of a rich property. However, with Rogers, I draw upon the medieval notion that God exists as *actus purus*, but I develop this claim in more detail than she does, and I depart from her view in a significant way, since I maintain it is only God's act of will that confers existence on things. With Leftow I attempt to uphold the ultimacy explanation, but I depart from him, because I argue, in a sense, God does create His nature.

With Morris and Menzel, I invoke the idea that abstract objects can be considered to be divine ideas, but I work through the implications of God as the creator of the modal order in ways they have not done. And with Stump and Kretzmann I am concerned with preserving God's freedom in creating the world. But, unlike these thinkers, I argue that there is no inconsistency in maintaining that God can be free in creating the world—even though He must do it.

The exact position that I embrace and defend is developed throughout four chapters in this thesis. In chapter II, I seek to provide motivation to reconsider the doctrine of divine simplicity by critiquing Plantinga's Platonic understanding of the divine attributes. In order to accomplish this goal, I argue the grounds Plantinga provides in support of his Platonic theory of the divine attributes are wanting. In addition, I argue his theory faces several difficulties. First, I contend if one wants to be a realist, there is no need for traditional, natural theology to go to the extreme of embracing Platonism, since the doctrine of divine ideas has the resources to handle the theoretical motivations behind realism. Second, I maintain Plantinga's theory is too costly for traditional, natural theology to embrace, because it is inconsistent with

doctrines such as God's omnipotence, sovereignty, aseity, and creation *ex nihilo*. Third, I argue his theory implies God is not maximally trustworthy. Fourth, I contend all of the metaphysical options for understanding the claim *God exemplifies a property X* are not viable. And, fifth, I argue Plantinga's theory provides an unsatisfying account of the origins of the divine attributes.

By the end of chapter II one has reason to reconsider the viability of divine simplicity, but in order to open the door to exploring this view further, a person needs to overcome Plantinga's objections against it. In chapter III, I provide rejoinders to all of Plantinga's defeaters against divine simplicity: 1) it implies there cannot be multiple properties, 2) it implies God cannot have accidental properties, 3) it implies the false notion that He is eternal, 4) it implies He has only one property, and 5) it implies He is identical with a property and, thereby, is not a person.

To the first claim, I respond by contending it can be overcome by re-examining Aquinas's views on divine omniscience. As for the second defeater, I argue an *actus purus* conception of God enables one to understand how He can, in a sense, be understood to have accidental properties. In response to the third objection, I contend Plantinga provides insufficient grounds for rejecting belief in an eternal God. And, with respect to the fourth and fifth defeaters, I demonstrate they can be overcome by re-interpreting Aquinas as claiming God has the characteristics He has in virtue of what He does in one eternal act with which He is identical.

With motivation for reconsidering divine simplicity and rejoinders to all of Plantinga's defeaters, the door is open to explore in depth this doctrine. In chapter IV, I

develop and defend an *actus purus* construal of divine simplicity. First, I develop an argument demonstrating an *actus purus* conception of God can be taken to follow from the belief that He is the creator of all things, including, in a sense, the divine essence. To strengthen this argument, I contend there are serious problems with the alternative options for understanding the origin of the divine essence. Second, to clarify an *actus purus* conception of God, I draw upon the resources of contemporary action theory and event ontology. In particular, I use them to explain how God can be understood to be completely spontaneous, free, and non-arbitrary in willing what He does in the eternal act of will with which He is identical. And I use them to explain the contention that God is identical with His attributes.

To provide further motivation for my theory, I demonstrate the fruitfulness of it by showing how it is consistent with a large number of beliefs within traditional, natural theology: God's omnipotence, omniscience, sovereignty, aseity, the ultimacy explanation, creation *ex nihilo*, and divine sustenance. I demonstrate the fruitfulness of my theory further by showing how it suggests solutions to issues that complicate Plantinga's theory of the divine attributes. Moreover, I demonstrate one of the advantages of my formulation of divine simplicity is that it overcomes a number of the problems that have plagued this doctrine historically: 1) divine simplicity is inconsistent with affirming real distinctions between the divine attributes, and 2) divine simplicity is inconsistent with God's freedom in creation and His impassibility.

I argue for my theory further by contending if one abandons it, she faces two sets of problems. On the one hand, if a person contends God exists distinct from His act of

will, she must affirm He has either libertarian or compatibilist free will, both of which I argue are not viable. On the other hand, if a person rejects the understanding of universals which I develop, the only other viable options within Western Philosophy are nominalism or Platonism, both of which, I contend, are riddled with difficulties.

With the aforementioned foundation for embracing an *actus purus* construal of divine simplicity, in the final chapter of my thesis, the conclusion, I turn to explaining what areas of my theory still need to be developed, and I demonstrate the implications it has for contemporary philosophy of religion. The most pressing issue that needs to be explored and developed is my commitment to an eternal God. In terms of the implications of my view, they are both numerous and exciting. I argue it implies God is the creator of the modal order, and I suggest Leibniz can be taken to provide one viable way to develop such an idea. Moreover, I contend it provides the resources to reject William Rowe's evidential argument from evil. I also elucidate how it enables theists to solve the Euthyphro dilemma, and how Christians can understand my theory to be consistent with an orthodox understanding of the Trinity.

A number of contemporary philosophers view divine simplicity, and historic, natural theology in general, as merely the result of early theists being duped into accepting naively Greek philosophy. My hope is that this thesis serves as an impetus to help counter such an attitude by helping contemporary theists to reconsider the viability of the traditional doctrine of divine simplicity. In so doing, I hope that contemporary thinkers will see that the theistic tradition is something that is to be embraced and explored, because it is full of truth and wisdom that deserves to be preserved for later

generations to celebrate and enjoy.

CHAPTER II

A CRITIQUE OF PLANTINGA'S PLATONISM

In *Does God Have a Nature? (DGHN)*, Alvin Plantinga rejects the doctrine of divine simplicity and proposes an understanding of the divine attributes which, from the perspective of historic, natural theology is radical. Plantinga endorses Platonism, the theory that there exists a host of abstract objects which God does not create and control, and these entities are responsible for His properties. In this chapter, I want to reconstruct Plantinga's understanding of the divine attributes, and I want to clarify it further by contrasting it with traditional, natural theology. Following this, I will examine the positive reasons Plantinga provides for his theory, before I level a number of objections against it. At the end of this chapter, I hope to demonstrate there are a number of difficulties with his view. This, in turn, will provide motivation to reconsider the traditional view of the divine attributes, divine simplicity.

Plantinga on the Divine Attributes

Plantinga embraces the existence of abstract objects. Abstract objects are everlasting, so there is never a time when they have not existed (3-4). They have necessary existence as well, so it is impossible for them to fail to exist (4). As such, they are not created by God, and He does not control their character: "They do not owe their existence to Him; there is nothing he can do or could have done to prevent their existence or cause them to go out of existence" (77; c.f. 4-5, 7).

Within the realm of abstract objects, there are different types: properties, propositions, numbers, and states of affairs (4). With respect to properties, Plantinga elaborates in more detail their characteristics. They are not self-exemplifying (36), so the property of goodness, for example, is not good. They do not know anything, and they are not conscious, powerful, and capable of love (47). They are impersonal, and they are completely static, inactive, and thereby causally inert (57).¹⁰

According to Plantinga, God finds Himself having certain properties (8). Writing of God finding Himself to have certain properties is misleading, though, because it suggests there was a time when He did not have the properties theists affirm of Him. But Plantinga is clear that He has *always* had the properties that He has, characteristics such as omnipotence, justice, and wisdom (6).

Plantinga explains that God has the attributes He does by virtue of participating in certain abstract objects, which raises the question of how He participates in them. In one instance, Plantinga writes metaphorically of God having a certain connection with them (34-35). Elsewhere he employs a different metaphor: he writes of Him having a relationship with an abstract object (33). In *Alvin Plantinga*, he clarifies further these assertions: “Necessarily, for any property P, if P is had or exemplified, then there is something that has or exemplifies it.”¹¹ So for God to have a characteristic by virtue of an abstract object is for Him to *exemplify* it by virtue of participating in an abstract object.

¹⁰ For a more detailed analysis of how philosophers conceive of abstract objects see Gideon Rosen, “Abstract Objects,” [accessed 3 February 2005]; available from <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/abstract-objects/#1>.

¹¹ Alvin Plantinga, “Replies” in *Alvin Plantinga*, eds. James Tomberlin and Peter Van Inwagen (Boston: D. Reidel Publishing, 1985), 346.

In the *The Nature of Necessity*, Plantinga clarifies further what it is for something to have a property: “To say that Socrates has the property of being snubnosed in a world *W*, is to say that Socrates would have had the property of being snubnosed, had *W* been actual; it is to say that the state of affairs *W*’s being actual and Socrates’ not being snubnosed is impossible.”¹² For God to exemplify a property means, then, that in any possible world where He has a property, if the world were to be actualized, there would be a state of affairs where He has it.

In addition, however, to discussing the ordinary characteristics or properties theists affirm of God, Plantinga writes about His nature (140-146). A nature is a conjunctive property: it “is a property something has essentially that includes each property essential to a thing” (7). And to assert that a property is essential to something means that it has it in all possible worlds: “An object *x* has a property *P* essentially, then, if and only if *x* has *P* in every world in which *x* exists.”¹³ We can understand Plantinga’s view on natures or essences further by noting that he thinks a nature is something which individuates something from other things. Thus, the essence or nature of something is unique to it: “an essence of Socrates is a property (or a group of properties) that Socrates has essentially and that is unique to him.”¹⁴ Since God is omniscient, His essence includes in it properties such as *knowing that any necessary truth p is true*, and it also includes the traditional attributes theists ascribe to Him, such as omnipotence, omniscience, goodness, and justice (141).

¹² Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 47.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 60.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 70.

With respect to the abstract objects exemplified in God's nature, Plantinga notes there are two ways in which He depends on them. First, He depends on them in order to exist. Since it is essential to Him that He has certain properties, such as omnipotence and omniscience, if these abstract objects did not exist, He could not exist either (33). Second, He depends on them to have His character (33). Traditionally, God, for example, is wise, loving, just, omnipotent, omniscient, and, in Plantinga's theory, He has these characteristics by virtue of exemplifying the corresponding abstract objects.

Plantinga Compared to Classic, Natural Theology

Before considering the reasons Plantinga provides for his theory, I want to clarify his theory further by demonstrating how he has departed significantly from traditional natural theology. Not only will this serve to clarify his view, but it will simultaneously heighten one's sense of the need for him to provide strong reasons for it.

Traditionally, theists have held God creates *all* things distinct from Himself. Anselm, for example, claims He alone is self-existent, and He creates all other things *ex nihilo*.¹⁵ Aquinas writes, "It must be said that every being that is in any way is from God. . . . all beings apart from God are not their own being, but are beings by participation."¹⁶ More recently, Louis Berkhoff agrees the Christian doctrine of creation is that God is the creator of all things.¹⁷ Plantinga's theory, however, rejects this notion, since in his view God is not responsible for the existence of abstract objects.

¹⁵ *Saint Anselm: Basic Writings*, ed. S.N. Deane, *Proslogium* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1962), 10.

¹⁶ Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Father Laurence Shapcote (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1994), pt. 1, Q. XLIV, A. 1. Hereafter, following standard practice, I will refer to *Summa Theologica* by ST, and I will use the standard abbreviations for the questions and article numbers.

¹⁷ Louis Berkhoff, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 126.

Along with abandoning the traditional doctrine of creation, Plantinga gives up the doctrine of divine sustenance. Theists have taught not only does God create all things distinct from Himself, but “the things God creates have no more capacity to continue in existence than to bring themselves to be . . . God must not only create the universe, but also conserve it in existence at every point in time after it appears.”¹⁸

Hodge contends, “[e]verything outside of God is said to owe its existence to his will.”¹⁹

On Plantinga’s view, however, since abstract objects exist completely independent of God, He does not sustain them in existence.

Plantinga disposes of the traditional doctrine of God’s aseity as well. Berkhoff writes:

The idea of God’s self-existence was generally expressed by the term *aseitas*, meaning *self-originated*, but Reformed theologians quite generally substituted for it the word *independentia* (independence), as expressing, not merely that God is independent in His Being, but also that He is independent in everything else: His virtues, decrees, works, and so on.²⁰

The *Westminster Confession of Faith* reads, “He [God] is alone the fountain of all being, of whom, through whom, and to whom are all things.”²¹ And Anselm writes, “The supreme Substance, then, does not exist through any efficient agent, and does not derive existence from any matter, and was not aided in being brought into existence by any external causes. Nevertheless, it by no means exists through nothing, or derives

¹⁸ Jonathan Kvanvig and Hugh J. McCann, “Divine Conservation and the Persistence of the World,” in *Divine and Human Action*, ed. Thomas Morris (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 14-15.

¹⁹ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, *Theology* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), 559.

²⁰ Berkhoff, *Systematic Theology*, 58.

²¹ *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, Third Edition (Atlanta: The Committee for Christian Education and Publications, 1990): 10.

existence from nothing; since, though itself and from itself, it is whatever it is.”²²

The doctrine of God’s aseity affirms two truths. First, He is self-existent. Second, He is independent of all things external to Him in order to have His character. Plantinga abandons God’s aseity when he makes His existence dependent on the Platonic realm of abstract objects, and when he makes this realm responsible for His character. In Plantinga’s words, God finds Himself being related to certain abstract objects and thereby having certain characteristics, and He has to “put up” with these facts (33).

Along with abandoning the traditional doctrines of creation, sustenance, and aseity, Plantinga’s view modifies significantly the traditional understanding of God’s omnipotence and sovereignty. Berkhoff writes of God’s sovereignty: “Christian theology has always recognized the will of God as the ultimate cause of all things.”²³ In his section on God’s sovereignty, Calvin affirms God’s control over all things external to Himself:

For we do not with the Stoics imagine a necessity consisting of a perpetual chain of causes, and a kind of involved series contained in nature, but we hold that God is the disposer and ruler of all things,—that from the remotest eternity, according to his own wisdom, he decreed what he was to do, and now by his power executes what he decreed. Hence we maintain that, by his providence, not heaven and earth and inanimate creatures only, but also the counsels and wills of men are so governed as to move exactly in the course which he has destined.²⁴

Hodge describes God’s sovereignty as follows:

From these and similar passages it is plain, (1.) That the sovereignty of God is universal. It extends over all his creatures from the highest to the lowest. (2.)

²² *Saint Anselm: Basic Writings*, ed. S.N. Deane, *Monologium* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1962), 48-49.

²³ Berkhoff, *Systematic Theology*, 76.

²⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 179.

That it is absolute. There is no limit to be placed to his authority. He doeth his pleasure in the armies of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth. (3.) It is immutable. It can neither be ignored nor rejected. It binds all creatures, as inexorably as physical laws bind the material universe.²⁵

Traditionally, then, God's sovereignty involves the idea His will is the source of all things distinct from Himself, and all things distinct from Him fall within the scope of His governing power. His omnipotence is related closely to His sovereignty: "Power in God may be called the effective energy of His nature, or that perfection of His being by which He is the absolute and highest causality."²⁶ His power, then, extends to all things apart from Him, which is why He has been understood to be the cause of all things.

Plantinga's view, however, infringes seriously on the classical conception of God's sovereignty and omnipotence. The Platonic horde which is responsible for His characteristics does not exist due to His will. And He is unable to alter the characteristics of these entities, so He has no power or control over them. This is why Hendrick Hart, in critiquing a Platonic theory of the divine attributes, writes, "As far as I can see, a view that commits one to holding that God is subject to laws (exemplifies predicables) that are neither created by Him nor identical with Him, is a view which commits one to holding that God is neither sovereign nor omnipotent."²⁷

With this understanding of how radically Plantinga's theory of the divine attributes shifts from historic, natural theology, a person can sense the need for him to provide powerful reasons in favor of it. I want to turn now to examining the reasons he provides for his position. His reasons come in two types. On the one hand, he develops

²⁵ Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, 440.

²⁶ Berkhoff, *Systematic Theology*, 79.

²⁷ Hendrick Hart, "On the Distinction Between Creator and Creature: Discussion of a Central Theme in N.P. Wolterstorff's 'On Universals'," *Philosophia Reformata* (1979): 184.

a negative argument whereby he rules out all of the other options for understanding the divine attributes, and, on the other hand, he provides a number of positive motivations for his position.

Motivation for Plantinga's Position: A Negative Argument

Traditionally, Plantinga notes theists have embraced the sovereignty-aseity intuition. This intuition involves the idea that God is self-sufficient, and, thus, independent of all things. It also includes the notions that He has control over everything, and that He creates everything distinct from Himself (1-2). Prima facie, however, upholding the sovereignty-aseity intuition seems problematic when it comes to things such as numbers and God's own properties. It seems hard to conceive how numbers could depend on God to exist. And it seems that affirmations about God's properties, such as that He is good and all-knowing, commit one to the existence of abstract objects which He exemplifies in order to have the properties essential to Him. But before abandoning the sovereignty-aseity intuition in the wake of these considerations, Plantinga considers three options for thinking about the divine nature that are consistent with upholding it: divine simplicity, nominalism, and universal possibilism.

According to advocates of divine simplicity, God's properties are not the result of exemplifying abstract objects distinct from Him. Rather, God is identical with His properties. Such a move upholds the sovereignty aseity intuition, because there is no Platonic menagerie of abstract objects that exists independent of God. But Plantinga

rejects divine simplicity for two reasons: 1) if God is identical with His properties, then all of His properties are identical with each other, and He has only one property, and 2) if God is identical with His properties, He is a property and not a person (47).

Another way to uphold the sovereignty-aseity intuition is to embrace nominalism. Nominalism rejects the existence of a Platonic horde by affirming that there are no abstract objects (64-65). However, Plantinga contends nominalism fails to uphold the sovereignty-aseity intuition, because even for nominalists there are things over which He has no control—namely whether necessary truths are true or false (86; c.f. 92). The way to uphold the sovereignty-aseity intuition, argues Plantinga, is to become a universal possibilist, one who believes that God is able to make any proposition true or false (93). But Plantinga rejects this position on the grounds that it leads to strange conclusions, such as the idea that God could make it true that He both exist and not exist (127).

As Plantinga sees it, all of the options for upholding a robust affirmation of the sovereignty-aseity intuition fail. So he concludes God exists distinct from His nature and that He is not the creator of all things, since He does not create the abstract entities He exemplifies or necessary truths (140-142). To understand further if Plantinga's position is the best option for theists, one needs to examine if, in addition to the negative argument he provides for it, there are weighty, positive reasons in favor of it. If the reasons in favor of Plantinga's position are not satisfying, and if it can be demonstrated there are significant problems with his view, it may not be the best option for theists to embrace. With this in mind, I want to turn to assessing the positive reasons Plantinga provides for his theory.

Motivation for Plantinga's Position: A Positive Argument

While many philosophers have thought the sort of Platonic horde Plantinga claims to exist is beyond access of human cognition, his assertions about it raise the question as to why a person should believe in it. First, according to Plantinga, it is an obvious fact that the Platonic horde exists. He argues nominalists are “too heroic” in rejecting belief in abstracts objects, because “there clearly *are* such things as propositions and properties” (85).²⁸ Throughout *DGHN*, Plantinga appeals to various intuitions he has about abstract objects (60-61, 139), so another reason he has for believing in such entities is that he thinks belief in them is intuitive. Other times he will write about what simply *seems* to him to be the case with these entities (6; c.f. 47).

Plantinga's attitude as displayed in *DGHN* is not new. Chihara notes that throughout his career Plantinga has asserted abstract entities exist, but has provided no real argumentation as to why one should think they are real.²⁹ He explains Plantinga's “attitude toward the postulation of abstract entities is one of extreme tolerance. No Ockham's Razor here.”³⁰

Clearly, however, Plantinga's contention that it is obvious that there are abstract objects is too strong. The existence of these sorts of entities is not obvious. As to whether it is intuitive to believe in them, such a claim is suspect as well. Plantinga might find it intuitive to believe in them, but I, along with other philosophers, find it counter-intuitive. Chihara writes:

²⁸ By the word ‘property’ Plantinga means abstract object, because this is how he uses the word “property” throughout *DGHN*; see *DGHN* 4, 36-37, 47, 64.

²⁹ Charles Chihara, *The Worlds of Possibility* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 120-121.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 129.

So far as I can see, it is only philosophers who believe in such things, and this belief seems to arise primarily because of questionable philosophic considerations. My skepticism is partly a matter of being doubtful about a philosopher's postulation of strange entities—postulations that serve as part of the foundations of a highly theoretical and abstract ontological theory that is supposed to take in essentially everything that exists.³¹

A case can even be made that Plantinga is inconsistent with respect to the intuitiveness of believing in abstract entities. Writing of the existence of propositions, Plantinga states:

How could there be truths totally independent of minds or persons? Truths are the sort of things persons know; and the idea that there are or could be truths quite beyond the best methods of apprehension seems peculiar and *outré* and somehow outrageous. What would account for such truths? How would they get there? Where would they come from? How could the things that are in fact true or false—propositions, let's say—exist in serene and majestic independence of persons and their means of apprehension? How could there be propositions that no one has ever so much grasped or thought of? It can seem just crazy to suppose that propositions could exist quite independent of minds or persons or judging beings.³²

However, if he admits it is incredibly counter-intuitive to believe in a host of propositions, a type of abstract object, existing apart from any mind, I do not see how it is any less counter-intuitive to believe in a Platonic horde of things such as properties.

Even if one grants it is intuitive to believe in these entities, it is not clear what philosophic significance that would have. It is quite un-clear what grounds there are for thinking our metaphysical intuitions have any bearing on whether a metaphysical assertion is true. Thomas Morris writes:

As I have indicated earlier, I think it is our successful activity as speakers and thinkers which grounds our logical and linguistic intuitions. And it is our moral

³¹ Ibid., 121.

³² Alvin Plantinga, "How to be an Anti-Realist," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 56 (1982): 67-68.

activity that grounds at least some of our value intuitions. There are things about our lives which give us some reason to think our intuitions about such matters as these deserve a strong measure of trust. But what in the world could account for any alleged intuitions on most matters of metaphysical esoterica, I have no idea.³³

The upshot, I think, is that to overthrow the longstanding theistic tradition, that includes the aforementioned doctrines of creation, sustenance, aseity, omnipotence, and sovereignty, and that theists have held for numerous philosophic and Scriptural reasons, we need a lot more than Plantinga's intuitions.

In recent discussions with Chihara, Plantinga has responded to these criticisms by claiming he believes "it is rational to assert that there are such things [abstract objects], unless there is some difficulty in the hypothesis that such things exist."³⁴ It might be *rational* for Plantinga to believe in abstract objects if he sees no problem with their existence, but this is far a field from any sort of reason for thinking it is *true* there are such entities. Nowadays, a number of philosophers, including Plantinga, think rationality is person-specific. What it is rational for a person to believe depends on her other beliefs.³⁵

Given Plantinga's other beliefs, it might be rational for him to believe in abstract objects. But, given his other beliefs, it also might be rational for him to believe in Santa Claus or the Tooth Fairy. However, if it can be rational to believe such things, then to assert that one's belief is rational is far a field from anything that indicates whether it is true. And, again, I think to overthrow the long-standing theistic tradition, we need

³³ Thomas Morris, "The Necessity of God's Goodness," *The New Scholasticism* 59 (1985): 445-446.

³⁴ Chihara, *The Worlds of Possibility*, 129.

³⁵ Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Can Belief in God be Rational?," in *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, eds. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1983), 155.

something a lot stronger than the rationality of belief in abstract objects. We need powerful reasons for thinking it is true these things exist.

A detailed examination of *DGHN* reveals a small argument as to why a person might believe abstract objects exist. After ruling out divine simplicity, nominalism, and universal possibilism as options for understanding God's attributes, Plantinga claims that since God has necessary existence and thereby exists in all possible worlds, it follows that the issue of whether He has a nature is identical to the issue of whether there are necessary truths (140-141). He argues if there are necessary truths, since God is omniscient and knows all truths, He will have the property of knowing these truths are true: "for any true proposition p , God knows that p ; and this is so in every world in which he exists. But suppose he exists in every world; then each proposition p will be equivalent to the proposition that God knows that p , which is equivalent to God believes that p " (142).

In short, if there are necessary truths, God has the property of knowing these truths are true, and a part of His nature includes exemplifying such a property. There are two ways this argument can be taken as a proof for the existence of abstract objects. First, if there are necessary truths, since a necessary truth is a proposition, and a proposition is a type of abstract object (4), it would seem that there is evidence abstract objects exist. Second, if God has the property of knowing that a particular necessary truth is true, it would seem there is reason for believing in one additional type of abstract object: there must be the abstract objects of the sort *knowing that a particular necessary truth p is true*, so that God can exemplify them in order to have the corresponding

properties.

This argument for the existence of abstract objects is not satisfying. Even if it were to succeed, at most it would provide reason for believing in propositions and properties of the sort *knowing that a particular necessary truth p is true*. It would provide no reason for thinking there are abstract objects such as omnipotence, goodness, justice, wisdom, kindness, and mercy, which are other attributes theists affirm of God. And even if one grants that there are necessary truths, it is unclear why one needs to believe these propositions exist completely independent of God. Historically, theists have viewed necessary truths as ideas within His mind. Leibniz writes:

God's understanding is the realm of eternal truths, or of the ideas on which they depend, and without God there would be no reality among possibilities: not only would nothing exist, but nothing would be possible. Because it is clear that if there is any reality among essences or possibilities, or among eternal truths, that reality must be grounded in something actually existent; therefore it must be grounded in the existence of the necessary being, in whom essence includes existence, that is, for whom being possible is sufficient for being actual.³⁶

More recently, Christopher Menzel and Thomas Morris have argued that necessary truths can be conceived as ideas within God's mind.³⁷ In particular, on this model, what makes a truth necessary is how God conceives of its parts. Thus, it is due to how He conceives of "1" and "2" and "+" and "=" that $1 + 1 = 2$ is a necessary truth.³⁸ Plantinga notes this sort of understanding of propositions has roots going back to Saint Augustine, but, while raising it, he does not provide any argument against it (5).

Second, with respect to the claim that if God has the property of knowing a

³⁶ Gottfried Leibniz, *Leibniz: Philosophical Texts*, eds. R.S. Woolhouse and Richard Francks, *Monadology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 273.

³⁷ Morris and Menzel, "Absolute Creation," 353-362.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 356.

particular necessary truth is true, it would seem there is reason for believing abstract objects of the sort *knowing that a particular necessary truth p is true* exist, it is dubious whether this provides reason for believing in abstract objects of this kind. William Mann points out there are two ways a knower can know something: occurrently or dispositionally.³⁹ With respect to the latter Mann writes, “If *p* is an item of Jones’s dispositional or latent knowledge, then it is reasonable to say that Jones is in a certain cognitive state, the state of believing that *p*. It seems defensible, furthermore, to claim that cognitive states are properties, and so to conclude that believing that *p* is a property.”⁴⁰ However, with respect to something that a knower knows occurrently, which means she assents to it in the present, it is such that one need not identify her belief with a cognitive state and thereby a property.

Instead, along with many cognitive theorists, one might identify an occurrent belief in *p* as identical with the process of seeing that *p*. And, according to Mann, “only those caught in the grip of a theory will identify processes with properties.”⁴¹ The philosophic significance of these considerations for the present debate is that since, traditionally, God is viewed as knowing all things in the present, one need not think His knowing that *p* implies He has the property of knowing that *p* and thereby infer there exists the corresponding abstract object.⁴²

³⁹ William Mann, “Simplicity and Properties: A Reply to Morris,” *Religious Studies* 22 (1986): 350.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 351.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*,

⁴² Plantinga might rejoin that the process of seeing that *p* is simply an instance of the corresponding universal. One way to respond to this potential defeater is to note that God’s process of seeing that *p* can be understood to be a particular action, so there is no need to view it as an instance of something abstract, and Ockham’s razor favors viewing it this way until Plantinga can provide strong reasons for positing the

Although Plantinga provides no detailed argument, another reason he posits the existence of abstract objects is that he thinks that theists' talk of God's various attributes implies they exist. While critiquing divine simplicity, he writes, "God is alive, knowledgeable, capable of action, powerful, and good" (54). Given such a premise, however, he claims it follows that "there are such properties as life, knowledgeability, capability of action, power and goodness" (55).

If Plantinga thinks talk of God's attributes implies the existence of abstract objects, it is unclear why he thinks such is the case. Loux notes that historically, there have been three main reasons for positing the existence of universals. First, some philosophers have thought that positing their existence is needed to account for the truthfulness of propositions that include these terms. Second, other thinkers have claimed they must exist in order to be the referents of universal terms, whereas, third, others claim they must exist in order to provide the meaning of statements including these words.⁴³ Perhaps Plantinga believes that talk of God's attributes implies the existence of abstract entities for one of these historic reasons. If this is the case, then it is unclear as to why he embraces these considerations. Since to cover these issues would take another thesis, I will provide only preliminary responses to one potential line of argumentation he might develop.

First, if Plantinga thinks theists' talk of the divine attributes implies these are properties that God exemplifies, it is not obvious he has understood the theistic tradition

existence of abstract objects. As I have been pointing out, though, Plantinga fails to provide any powerful arguments demonstrating such entities exist.

⁴³ Michael Loux, *Metaphysics* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 25-34, 74.

accurately. Classically, theists have denied abstract objects exist independent of God and, instead, they have affirmed they are ideas within His mind.⁴⁴ Moreover, Katherin Rogers notes thinkers such as Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas can be interpreted as denying “that God has any properties at all. God is an act . . . an eternal, immutable, absolutely simple act.”⁴⁵ Charles Hodge concurs with Rogers. He claims God’s attributes are to be distinguished from “properties, which are technically the distinguishing characteristics of the several persons of the Trinity.”⁴⁶ Instead, Rogers notes theists have traditionally understood God’s attributes to be about what He does—how He acts.⁴⁷ Thus, if it is true that, historically, assertions about God’s attributes have been about how He acts, then for claims like “God is good” or “God is just” to be true, it just has to be the case that He acts in the ways that theists have claimed He does. And the predicates “good” and “just” in these assertions do not refer to abstract objects but, instead, describe an action, or a set of actions, He performs.

With respect to the potential contention that abstract objects are necessary to provide meaning to terms such as “good,” “just,” “omnipotent,” or “omniscient,” three responses can be made. First, it is very unclear what it means to assert that an abstract object is the meaning of such a term. Second, it is unclear how an abstract object could provide the meaning of a universal term. Historically, such entities have been taken to exist outside of space and time, so, *prima facie*, if they exist, it is difficult to understand how creatures, who are stuck in space and time, could relate to these entities in order to

⁴⁴ Aquinas, *ST*, pt. 1, Q. XV, A. 1.

⁴⁵ Rogers, *The Anselmian Approach to God and Creation*, 30.

⁴⁶ Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, 368.

⁴⁷ Rogers, *The Anselmian Approach to God and Creation*, 38.

use them as the meanings of terms.⁴⁸ Third, there is a plethora of psychological and linguistic evidence which suggests these sorts of terms derive their meanings from concepts.⁴⁹

The conclusion of these considerations is that the positive reasons Plantinga provides for his position are not satisfying. He does not provide detailed arguments or considerations which establish the conclusion that abstract objects exist, and that God has His attributes by exemplifying them. The core motivation for Plantinga's position is the aforementioned negative argument he develops for it. As such, to evaluate Plantinga's position, we need to consider whether it is the best option open to theists. If there are significant problems with his theory, a person will have motivation to re-examine the traditional doctrine of God's attributes, divine simplicity.

Reasons Against Plantinga's View of the Divine Attributes: Preliminaries

Before developing some detailed arguments against Plantinga's theory, I want to note two preliminary reasons for questioning it. First, it is questionable whether theists need to reject the classical understanding of God in order to be realists. Traditionally, the majority of theists have been realists. Since Augustine, a number of theists have affirmed abstract objects are Divine ideas. Aquinas's great achievement was to provide

⁴⁸ Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), 98-100.

⁴⁹ Gregory Murphy, *The Big Book of Concepts* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2002), 385-441. See also Paul Bloom, *How Children Learn the Meanings of Words* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2002). Following a standard view among philosophers, I take a concept to be a mental representation of something that is used to group and categorize things in the world. See Panayot Butchvarov, "Conceptualism," in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, 2nd ed., ed. Robert Audi (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 169-170. A concept is distinct from an abstract object, because abstract objects are taken to be an entity that exists outside of space and time and is capable of being exemplified by multiple particulars. Since concepts are taken to be formed by human minds, they do not need to be understood as dependent on abstract objects.

a synthesis of Plato and Aristotle. Aquinas taught, along with Aristotle, that objects are composed of matter and form, and the form a thing has, considered apart from how it is individuated by matter, is the universal element that a group of objects have in common.⁵⁰ However, Aquinas, like Plato, taught that a thing's form does exist apart from the object that has it; unlike Plato, Aquinas thought the form, considered in this way, exists as a Divine idea.⁵¹ It would seem, then, for Aquinas that an object's form is a particular instantiation of a Divine idea.

If a person wants to be a realist and a theist, it is unclear why it is unacceptable to embrace the sort of realism taught by thinkers such as Augustine and Aquinas. Plantinga is clearly aware of this theory, because he mentions it (5), but he never provides any detailed arguments against it. He does critique nominalism by contending it provides no foundation for the theorems of arithmetic (65). Perhaps he thinks that the doctrine of Divine ideas suffers from the same fate. If so, it is not obvious that he is correct. Christopher Menzel and Thomas Morris, as noted above, have provided an account of how necessary truth can be fleshed out in terms of the traditional theory of Divine ideas.⁵² And Menzel has extended this account into a theory in which he suggests a way that it can apply to mathematical objects such as numbers and sets.⁵³

Although not mentioned in *DGHN*, Nicholas Wolterstorff, another well-known theist, affirms a Platonic understanding of abstract objects. Plantinga helped Wolterstorff with his work on universals, and he has worked closely with him

⁵⁰ Aquinas, ST, pt. 1, Q. VII, A. 1.

⁵¹ Aquinas, ST, pt. 1, Q. XV, A. 1.

⁵² Morris and Menzel, "Absolute Creation," 353-361.

⁵³ Menzel, "Theism, Platonism, and The Metaphysics of Mathematics," 365-382.

throughout his career, so perhaps some of the unmentioned reasons Plantinga has for affirming a Platonic understanding of abstract objects are the same ones as Wolterstorff's.⁵⁴ Wolterstorff claims one reason for embracing Platonism is to account for similarity between objects. He writes:

To me it seems obviously true that if something is red, then it possesses the property of being red; and that if something possesses the property of being red, then there is such a thing as a property of being red, and then there is such a thing as being red. To me it seems plainly contradictory to allow that there are red barns and red stamps and red faces, and yet that there is no such thing as being red.⁵⁵

However, it is unclear why it is unacceptable to agree with Wolterstorff that things do have similar properties, but account for this similarity, as did Aquinas, in terms of things having the same form. And the form which things have in common is a Divine idea.

Another reason Wolterstorff provides for believing abstract objects exist is the ability to abstract universals from the particulars which exemplify them:

But if one can abstract predicable universals from the things which exemplify them, it would seem that the predicables are there, objectively, in the things. It would seem that the phenomenon of abstractive attention is good ground not only for the conclusion that there are predicables, but also that these predicables are 'in' the things of experience.⁵⁶

Again, though, it is unclear why a person cannot agree with Wolterstorff and assert things do have objectively real similarities in so far as they have the same form.

However, *contra* Wolterstorff, when a person performs an act of abstraction based on the similarities that exist between objects, the idea she attains is a copy of a Divine idea.

One can think of performing an act of abstraction as coming to have one's mind

⁵⁴ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *On Universals* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), xiv.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 123.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 142.

correspond with God's mind: humans come to think God's thoughts after Him.⁵⁷

My first reason against Plantinga's view of abstract objects is based on Ockham's Razor. From what Plantinga writes about abstract objects, and from considering other reasons he might have for being a Platonist, there is no reason to embrace the extreme view he does in order to be a realist. And, personally speaking, before I, in order to be a realist, abandon the long-standing theistic tradition which affirms doctrines such as creation *ex nihilo*, divine sustenance and aseity, along with robust versions of God's sovereignty and omnipotence, I want strong reasons for thinking the traditional doctrine of Divine ideas is unable to provide the basis for a version of realism. So far as I can tell, Plantinga has provided no arguments or reasons of this kind.

A second preliminary objection to Plantinga's theory is that the cost of accepting his view is too high. As noted earlier, one must abandon the doctrines of creation *ex nihilo*, divine sustenance and aseity, along with robust versions of God's sovereignty and omnipotence. In the West, God has been understood as maximally praiseworthy. He is that than which no greater can be conceived. However, Plantinga's view denigrates

⁵⁷ The account I have just given is similar to Aquinas's account. Wolterstorff criticizes Aquinas's account because he believes that Aquinas is committed to saying that the referents of the phrases 'the nature of Socrates' and 'the nature of Plato' are the same as the referent of the 'human nature.' As Wolterstorff sees it, the problem is that if human nature is the nature of Socrates and the nature of Plato, then the nature of Socrates is identical with the nature of Plato, which is clearly wrong. But, if the nature of Socrates and the nature of Plato refer to different things, then they cannot both have human nature, which is what they are supposed to have. Ibid., 146. It is not clear to me, however, that Aquinas has no response to this objection. I think that Aquinas could respond that it is wrong to say that the referents of the phrases 'the nature of Socrates' and 'the nature of Plato' is the same as the referent of the phrase 'human nature.' I think that Aquinas could say that the referent of the phrases 'the nature of Socrates' and 'the nature of Plato' refer to different things, namely the human nature that each one has which is different because it is individuated by different matter. However, the referent of the phrase 'human nature' refers to the nature that each has considered apart from how it is individuated by matter, which, ultimately, means that 'human nature' refers to the Divine Idea of human nature.

God's praiseworthiness, since He is not the creator of all things, not the sustainer of all things, and is dependent on things external to Him, which He did not create, in order to exist and have His character.

Another cost in accepting Plantinga's view is that one must abandon, in Leftow's words, the ultimacy explanation: "it is part of the ordinary theist's concept of God that no regress of true explanations can go past God's existence, i.e. that when one has traced some phenomenon back to the fact that God exists, one can go no further."⁵⁸ Since on Plantinga's view, things exist independent of God which are responsible for His character and over which He has no control, he cannot hold on to the ultimacy explanation, since God is not the stopping point for any regress of explanations. Moreover, for purposes of theory building, giving up the ultimacy explanation is unattractive. One of the benefits in holding on to it is that one can explain, in the final analysis, everything in the universe by means of appealing to God. This provides one, ultimate source from which we can explain everything else and thereby achieve a completely unified theory of all that is.

Another cost of Plantinga's view follows from his adherence to something close to a predicate-synonymy view of properties: "for every syntactically well-formed predicate expression there is a property, which is the meaning of that predicate, and that any two [non-synonymous predicates] *ipso facto* pick out distinct properties."⁵⁹ Given this understanding of properties, it is unclear how the doctrine of the Trinity is to be fleshed out. Christians affirm "God is Triune." Does this mean there is a property of

⁵⁸ Brian Leftow, "Is God an Abstract Object?," 584.

⁵⁹ William Mann, "Divine Simplicity," 462-463.

Triunity which God exemplifies? Is the Trinity or Triunity, then, an abstract object? Plantinga criticizes the doctrine of divine simplicity for implying God is an abstract object, but if the Trinity is an abstract object, then Plantinga's own view has a similar problem. Moreover, consider the syntactically well-formed sentences that use the word "God" as a predicate: "Jesus is God" and "The Father is God" and the "Holy Spirit is God." Does this imply there is an abstract object "God" which each of the members of the Trinity exemplifies? If there is, one might worry that this implies the consequent Plantinga uses to criticize the doctrine of divine simplicity: that God is an abstract object.

There are four other reasons why Plantinga's understanding of the divine attributes is too costly. As noted, on the one hand, a person must abandon the Christian doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*: the idea that God has created *all* things distinct from Himself out of nothing. One of the main reasons that Christians have affirmed this doctrine is for Scriptural considerations. And, *prima facie*, there are reasons for thinking the Bible does teach it. Paul writes, "For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him."⁶⁰ Revelation 4:11 reads, "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being."⁶¹ On the other hand, a person must abandon the Christian doctrine of divine sustenance: God sustains all things distinct from Himself in existence. Again, there are Scriptural reasons for affirming it:

⁶⁰ Colossians 1:16-17, NIV.

⁶¹ Revelation 4:11, NIV.

“The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word.”⁶²

More than likely, Plantinga would respond that it is naïve to use the Scripture in this manner. He would say it is naïve, because it is unlikely that biblical writers had in mind things such as abstract objects when they were writing. Wolterstorff, for example, responds this way to the contention there is biblical evidence against a Platonic understanding of abstract objects.⁶³ However, it is not altogether obvious that the biblical writers had no knowledge of Greek philosophy, and so could not have been thinking of Platonic entities in verses like Colossians 1:16-17. Paul, for example, seems to have been familiar with some Greek philosophy as evidenced by passages such as Acts 17. Hendrick Hart provides some historical reasons for thinking Paul might have been discussing universals in Colossians 1:16-17.⁶⁴ Third, as Menzel and Morris note, thinkers today have no problem extending these verses to the existence of atoms and DNA, even though it is unlikely the biblical writers were thinking of such entities when they wrote.⁶⁵

Fourth, and most importantly, the issue of whether biblical writers were consciously thinking of abstract objects when they wrote is irrelevant to the issue of whether there are Scriptural reasons for thinking Plantinga’s view of abstract objects is wrong. There are often times when people make assertions and, in light of those assertions, certain implications follow of which the person is not aware. Philosophers do

⁶² Hebrews 1:3, NIV.

⁶³ Wolterstorff, *On Universals*, 293.

⁶⁴ Hart, “On the Distinction Between Creator and Creature,” 192.

⁶⁵ Morris and Menzel, “Absolute Creation,” 354.

this all the time. They will formulate a philosophic theory without being aware of all its implications, and it takes the effort of later philosophers to figure them out.

Nevertheless, the implications follow from what the original philosopher claimed.

The same reasoning applies to the biblical writers. When they claimed God is the creator and sustainer of all things, they might not have been aware of all of the implications that follow from such an assertion, but, nonetheless, certain implications follow from it. As Hart notes, when the writers used the word “all” most likely they meant all things independent of God.⁶⁶ Whether the biblical writers realized it, this assertion implies that things such as DNA, brain neurons, cell nuclei, and abstracts objects cannot exist independent of God. One might see the task of philosophical theology, then, as being to construct a system that carries out the implications of these verses.

Another cost of accepting Plantinga’s view is that it raises problems with holding onto the notion that God is a creator. On Plantinga’s account, God does not create the world *ex nihilo*. Instead, He looks to the Platonic menagerie for the blueprints that He will use to construct it. The problem is that if He is not the creator of the blueprints along with the world, then it is unclear that He merits the title of being a creator. If someone found a set of blueprints lying around and then followed them to build a building, we would hardly be inclined to attribute to this person the title *creator*.⁶⁷

In addition to these problems, Plantinga’s view does not bode well for theists’ conceptions of ethics. His theory implies theists need to accept one horn of the

⁶⁶ Hart, “On the Distinction Between Creator and Creature,” 192.

⁶⁷ I am thankful to Hugh J. McCann for suggesting this criticism to me.

Euthyphro dilemma: namely that what is good, just, and so forth is what it is apart from God. One problem with this view is that it is unclear how to conceive of the notion that an inert and completely static abstract entity is that which determines what is good, just, and so forth. It seems it is *agents* that formulate and dictate what will be considered good and just. Moreover, if something other than God determines what is just and good, it seems something external to Him imposes duties and obligations on Him, which He needs to follow. But, traditionally, theists have asserted that He has no duties or obligations.⁶⁸

The last costly implication of Plantinga's view I want to consider is his rejection of the traditional doctrine of God's aseity. As indicated earlier, this doctrine has two components: 1) God depends on nothing external to Himself to exist, and 2) He depends on nothing external to Himself in order to have the characteristics that He has. With respect to (1) Ott writes:

The opinion best founded in Scripture and Tradition is that the metaphysical essence of God consists in this: that it is Subsistent Being (*ipsum esse subsistens*). As distinct from created things, which have received being . . . from another being . . . God has His being of Himself and through Himself by virtue of His own perfection of Essence. God is Being Itself, the Absolute Being, the Subsisting Being.⁶⁹

With respect to (2) Ott states, "*Ipsum Esse Subsistens* is the root from which all other Divine perfections may logically be derived. As God is the Absolute Being he must contain in Himself all the perfections of being."⁷⁰

Plantinga's understanding of the divine attributes rejects both of these

⁶⁸ Thomas Morris, "Duty and Divine Goodness," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 21 (1984): 266.

⁶⁹ Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, ed. James Canon Bastibe, trans. Patric Lynch (Ratford, IL: Tan Books, 1974), 25.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 26.

components. It rejects the second, obviously, because He has no control over the characteristics that He has by virtue of how He exemplifies abstract objects distinct from Himself. And he rejects the first in two ways. On the one hand, since God's attributes are essential to Him, without them He cannot exist, so He is dependent on the abstract objects which provide Him with His characteristics in order to exist. On the other hand, Plantinga believes that existence is a property and thus an abstract object (22, 23, 62). Thus, the source of God's own existence is not grounded in Himself but, instead, is to be found in some sort of relationship He has with the property of existence.

To embrace Plantinga's view of the divine attributes, then, one cannot hold on to the traditional doctrine of God's aseity. And the problem with abandoning it is that according to theists, this doctrine about Him is not up for grabs. Plantinga acknowledges this in *DGHN*. With respect to God's aseity he writes it is "non-negotiable from a theistic point of view" (60). The ironic thing is that while acknowledging this doctrine is non-negotiable, he simultaneously abandons it with his theory of the divine attributes.

Plantinga is a philosopher who takes intuitions seriously; he appeals to them throughout all of his writings in order to support various things. And if there is any doctrine about God that can rightly be proclaimed to have nearly *universal* intuitive support among theists, then I think the traditional doctrine of God's aseity is one of them. Of the pastors and lay Christians I have talked to about Plantinga's view, all of them have found it very troubling. Moreover, throughout the works of venerable saints like Augustine, John of Damascus, Bernard, and Aquinas one can find numerous

affirmations of robust proclamations about God's aseity.⁷¹ Given the evidence for the near universal consent among theists as to the traditional doctrine of God's aseity, I think that the cost of giving it up is to abandon the understanding of God held to by the vast majority of theists, which is a major problem for a *theistic* philosopher.

Reasons Against Plantinga's View of the Divine Attributes: Main Arguments

After a consideration of these preliminary reasons for rejecting Plantinga's theory, I want to turn now to developing a number of arguments against it. My first argument is that his theory implies an epistemological implication that is unacceptable to theists. Traditionally, theists have affirmed God as being maximally trustworthy, and this conception of Him is crucial to theists' *praxis*. Theists commit to God that which is of the most importance to them: the outcome of their eternal destiny. And day-to-day theists look to God to guide their paths, which is why prayer is a crucial practice in the theistic tradition.

However, Plantinga's view does not bode well for a person's ability to trust God.

Hendrick Hart writes:

a doctrine of entities which control God, over which He has no control, whose origin we do not know, whose nature is unknown to us, which do not tell us about themselves and gives us no grounds for their existence except themselves, such a doctrine does not augur well for rational man's belief in a sovereign God who can be trusted completely.⁷²

The exact reason why Plantinga's view poses a threat to God's maximal trustworthiness can be seen by considering the following analogy. Suppose an American is in Iraq,

⁷¹ Ibid.,

⁷² Hart, "On the Distinction Between the Creator and the Creature," 193.

under the threat of terrorist attack. And suppose she is worrying about whether she is safe, and a small child tells her not to worry. While the child's gesture may be cute, in this situation, the American cannot trust the child in order to soothe her fears, because this child has no *control* over the situation. What the American needs is for the general of the American forces to ensure her safety, because such a person's word means something, since he has control of the situation.

I think this analogy reveals that there is a conceptual connection between trust and control. However there is more involved in trusting someone than simply the control she has. Consider: if the general of the American forces has a bad track record, one full of deceit and maltreatment, for example, then despite the fact that he has control in Iraq, he would not merit a person's trust. For a being to be maximally trustworthy it needs to have total control over all things *and* a good track record. While Plantinga may be able to examine the record of divine action to provide evidence that God has a good track record, on his theory, God is not in total control of all things, and this implies He is not maximally trustworthy. And given the centrality of the ability to trust God in the theistic tradition for theists' *praxis*, this is a problem for Plantinga's theory.

Besides these sorts of epistemological problems with his theory, there are metaphysical problems with it. On Plantinga's construal of the divine attributes, he does not explain what it means to claim God *has* a characteristic by exemplifying an abstract object. The problem, as I see it, is that none of the options he has open to him are good. The first is to claim God *has* characteristics such as justice, goodness, or mercy solely by virtue of exemplifying abstract objects. In other words, God has such characteristics

apart from absolutely anything He *does*. The problem with this option, however, is that if He has characteristics such as justice, goodness, and mercy apart from anything that He does, it is not clear what it means to claim that He *has* these characteristics.

Consider, for example, a person who lived in a cell her entire life, never left it, and never had any serious interaction with anyone. Does any philosopher think it could be the case that this sort of person could become merciful and just simply by exemplifying the abstract objects of mercy and justness while, at the same time, doing nothing? It is because people *do* certain things that we come to apply such labels to them. For example, it is because Mother Theresa goes to India and spends her life ministering to the poor that we claim she is merciful and good.

To avoid this problem Plantinga might contend God *does* things as a result of exemplifying abstract objects. If this is what it means to claim He has certain characteristics, then I would like to know what it is He does as a result of exemplifying them. And my worry is that this construal denigrates His freedom and praiseworthiness. Consider: if He does things solely because He exemplifies certain abstract objects, then it seems as if He does not do them freely. And, if He does not do them freely, then He is not praiseworthy for what He does. Classically, theists, including Plantinga, have held God has libertarian free-will, so He is not forced to do anything.⁷³ But I cannot see how He can have libertarian freedom, if He does things because He exemplifies an abstract object.

Besides, think of the utterly outrageous consequences that could follow if this

⁷³ Alvin Plantinga, "Advice to Christian Philosophers," in *The Analytic Theist: an Alvin Plantinga Reader*, ed. James Sennett (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 310.

option is correct. If God does things by virtue of being related to abstract objects such as love and mercy, then maybe the reason why He saved us from our sins is not that He chose freely to do this. Maybe God acted this way, because the abstract objects of love and mercy He is hooked up to are responsible for Him doing it. If this is correct, maybe we should start composing some new hymns: *Amazing Abstract Object*, *A Mighty Fortress is Our Abstract Object*, and *What a Friend We Have in an Abstract Object* could become instant hits. Obviously, any view that implied these sorts of consequences is wrong.

The last option open is that exemplifying abstract objects gives God dispositions to act a certain way. If God has dispositions to act a certain way, then either He has genuine freedom in controlling the exercise of these dispositions or He does not. If He does not, then He is not free in what He does, and we are back to the sorts of outré consequences that were just rejected. If God is genuinely free in controlling the exercise of these dispositions, then He has the ability not to exercise them and thereby not to have such characteristics as being just, merciful, and good. But if He has the ability not to have the characteristics traditionally affirmed of Him, they are not essential to Him, and this contradicts what almost all theists affirm of Him as a perfect being. The upshot is that, on Plantinga's account, what it means to assert that God *has* a characteristic is very problematic.

A second metaphysical problem with Plantinga's understanding of the divine attributes may be put as follows. In Plantinga's position properties exist in hierarchies and thereby exemplify other ones (47). Moreover, they are not self-exemplifying (47).

And this seems the correct way to go, if we are going to grant the existence of abstract objects. It is strange to think of how an abstract object such as wisdom could exemplify itself. Wolterstorff writes:

It may be added that a characteristic feature of our contemporary way of practicing relation ontology which also plays a role in the discussions over simplicity is a clear-eyed denial of the Platonic thesis that properties are ideal example of themselves—that justice is the ideally just entity, etc. We hold in general that properties are not self-exemplifying. Essential in Plantinga’s argument is the assumption that knowledge does not know, that love does not love, that potency does not do anything, etc.⁷⁴

Plantinga, however, claims existence is a property (22-23, 62). But if existence is a property then since properties are not self-exemplifying, it cannot exemplify itself. So the property of existence cannot exist. So in what sense does it exist? It is hard to see in what sense it does, and this seems to be a serious issue, because how then can anything else?

One way out is to deny that existence is a property. Kant is taken to have done that. Plantinga does not agree with Kant, but maybe he would alter this view in the face of this dilemma. In denying that existence is a property, Plantinga would face several problems. On the one hand, it would seem he must move to the notion that all properties are self-existent. They all have the property of being the ground of their own being. But, then, they all have one property in common and thereby exemplify the property of self-existence. And so they are dependent on the property of self-existence. However, in what sense does self-existence exist? We have to postulate this property, but since it cannot exemplify itself, I do not see how it can exist either.

⁷⁴ Wolterstorff, “Divine Simplicity,” 146.

On the other hand, if Plantinga were to deny existence is a property, this would seem to be arbitrary, given that he embraces something close to the predicate synonymy theory of properties, which states that for “every syntactically well-formed predicate expression there is a property, which is the meaning of that predicate.”⁷⁵ Given the predicate synonymy theory of properties, sentences such as “God exists” and “Red exists” and “The number 7 exists” imply that each of these entities exemplifies the property of existence. If Plantinga is going to rule out the notion that existence is a property and maintain something close to the predicate synonymy theory of properties, he needs to explain how he is not arbitrarily ruling out its existence.

To get out of these dilemmas, Plantinga could admit that the abstract object of existence is self-exemplifying. As such, this abstract object is distinct from all others and thereby it plays a central role in his metaphysic, since it is the source of the existence of all things. But this entity needs to be more than simply self-exemplifying. Plantinga thinks abstract objects are completely inert and static. But if such were true of the abstract object of existence, then nothing else could come to exist, since it could not grant existence to anything. As such, this entity, unlike other abstract objects, needs to be understood as self-moving and an efficient cause. At this point, however, as I will explain in chapter IV, this abstract object of existence is suspiciously close to the *actus purus* conception of God, as formulated by medieval thinkers such as Aquinas. As for the implications of this observation, I will explain them in more detail later. At this point, I only want to note that Plantinga’s failure to tell us about the abstract object of

⁷⁵ Mann, “Divine Simplicity,” 462.

being in his system is a serious one, since a Platonic system such as Plantinga's is open to the charge that he is sneaking Aquinas' understanding of God in through the back door.

In Plantinga's view, God finds Himself being related to certain abstract objects and necessarily exemplifying them. This raises questions such as, "What is responsible for God having the properties He has?," and "If He is composed of parts, what is preventing them from breaking apart?" Someone might worry that it seems He does not necessarily exemplify these things, because something else external to Him, which does not depend on Him to exist, is responsible for His character and thereby could make Him different. These have been some of the major worries in embracing the sort of Platonism Plantinga advocates. Saint Augustine, for example, had this concern.⁷⁶ Saint Anselm writes that if God is not simple, then He is "in fact or in concept capable of dissolution."⁷⁷ And Keith Yandell provides evidence that a number of the early Church Fathers were influenced by the Greek idea that God must be simple in order to avoid losing His attributes.⁷⁸ I think that a person can take these intuitive worries behind the traditional understanding of God's attributes in order to construct an argument that all of the options Plantinga has open to him in order to account for the origins of the divine attributes are not satisfying.

First, Plantinga could claim that it is a brute fact that God has His character.⁷⁹

However, this position is not satisfying, since it is completely arbitrary. If a person

⁷⁶ Saint Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Marcus Dod (New York: The Modern Library, 1993), 354-355.

⁷⁷ Anselm, *Proslogium*, 24.

⁷⁸ Keith Yandell, "Divine Necessity and Divine Goodness," in *Divine and Human Action*, ed. Thomas Morris (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 318.

⁷⁹ I am using the notion of a brute fact as a fact for which there is no explanation.

asserts arbitrarily that it is a brute fact that God exemplifies certain properties essentially, it is unclear why a person could not assert the opposite: it is a brute fact that He exemplifies those same properties accidentally, or some other set of properties, including evil. Moreover, if there is no reason why God has His character, it seems it is a completely arbitrary accident that He exemplifies certain properties. And one might worry, further, that just as it is an arbitrary accident that He ends up with certain properties, so there could be a cosmic accident that makes Him lose them as well. In addition, if every property that God has is the result of a brute fact, it seems that we are piling up an excessively large amount of brute facts. And it is difficult to accept that for such a large amount of facts there is no explanation for why it is the way it is.

To avoid these problems, Plantinga might argue it is wrongheaded to inquire as to what is responsible for God having His character. To inquire about what is responsible for Him having His character suggests there was a moment when He did not have it. Since Plantinga thinks that God always exemplifies certain abstract objects, he might argue inquiring into the origins of the divine attributes is wrongheaded, because it presupposes a possibility that does not exist.

The problem with such a response is three-fold. First, again, Plantinga's response would be arbitrary. If God has a certain character arbitrarily, and it is wrongheaded to inquire about what is responsible for it, then a person can assert arbitrarily that God has a different character, and it will be wrongheaded to think about its origins. Second, it seems that if for all of God's properties it is simply a brute fact that He has it, then for each property we can conceive of Him having, we are simply

piling up brute fact after brute fact with respect to His character. And if His character is nothing more than a large pile of brute facts, it is difficult to accept that for such a large amount of facts there is no explanation for why it is the way it is. Moreover, it is difficult to see how on this option His character is not the result of one gigantic, cosmic accident.

Another option Plantinga has open to him in terms of explaining the origins of the divine attributes is to tell a story involving only the existence of abstract objects. It seems Plantinga has only two serious options to develop this position. First, it could be that the only things external to God that are responsible for His character are the abstract objects He exemplifies. For example, it is only the abstract object of justice that is responsible for God being just. Second, it could be there are other abstract objects, in addition to the ones that are His attributes, that are responsible for God's character. With either option, though, it seems that the best option Plantinga has going for him is to claim that some sort of abstract object is responsible for His character.

Abstract objects are taken to be completely unchanging and static. If there is some sort of abstract object that are responsible for His character, the theoretical payoff for Plantinga would be two-fold. First, he could claim God necessarily has all of the attributes that He has, because this abstract object, since it is unchanging, will always make God have the attributes that He has. Second, since abstract objects are unchanging and static, there is no need to worry about God losing one of His attributes, because this abstract object will not change.

The problem with this response, though, is that the motivation for embracing it is

also what makes it untenable. First, if Plantinga asserts an abstract object makes God exemplify a particular property necessarily, such an assertion is arbitrary, and a person could assert that the same abstract object only makes Him exemplify that property accidentally. Thus, this line of response provides no metaphysical ground for thinking God has all of His properties essentially. Second, since abstract objects are inert and unchanging, they are commonly taken by philosophers not to be able to *do* anything, which is why an abstract object alone cannot be that which is responsible for God's character.

Abstract objects, by themselves, cannot be that which makes God exemplify certain properties, because they cannot bring it about that He have a relationship with an abstract entity, since they cannot do anything. And once God is related to the abstract object, this entity alone cannot be that which is responsible for Him exemplifying it, since, again, it is completely inert and static and unable to do anything.⁸⁰ Granted, Plantinga could assert it is a brute fact that God exemplify certain abstract objects essentially, but again this claim involves a level of arbitrariness that is unsatisfying. Moreover, it involves positing such a large number of brute facts for God's character that it is difficult to be satisfied with the notion that there is no deeper explanation for God's character being what it is.

It seems that to make the notion that abstract objects are responsible for God's character satisfying, Plantinga needs to posit the existence of something that can viably

⁸⁰ Abstract objects are understood to be static, unable to do anything, and thereby completely causally inert. For a more detailed analysis of how philosophers conceive of abstract objects see Gideon Rosen, "Abstract Objects," [cited 3 February 2005]; available from <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/abstract-objects/#1>.

be thought of as self-moving and capable of being an efficient cause in order to account for God's character. I think Aquinas realized a position of Plantinga's sort implies one could be committed to embracing this sort of entity. One of the problems with rejecting divine simplicity, says Aquinas, is this: "every composite has a cause, for things in themselves different cannot unite unless something causes them to unite. But God is uncaused, as shown above, since He is the first efficient cause."⁸¹

At this point, it seems theists are not on good ground. Consider: there are only two options with respect to understanding this entity. Either it exists outside of time or in it. If the former, then it hardly seems that God is God. He is some sort of entity under the power and authority and control of another. The very reason why theists commit themselves to worshipping, loving, and serving God is that they believe He is the highest being; He is that than which no greater can be. This option turns God into a laughable joke; a mere cosmic wimp subject to the control of a being higher than Himself.

The latter option is even worse than the former. If it is something which exists in time that is responsible for God exemplifying the abstract objects which He does then, first, a person needs to provide an intelligible account of how such an entity works. Abstract objects are typically thought of as eternal, and it is not clear how an entity in time could alter that which is eternal. Second, since this entity exists in time it is subject to change, and thereby it could make God lose His attributes at any moment.

⁸¹ Aquinas, ST, pt. 1, Q. III, A.7.

Conclusion

Plantinga contends that God's character is the result of His exemplifying certain abstract objects, which He does not create or control. The positive reasons Plantinga provides in favor of his position are meager. He does not provide any weighty, positive arguments or considerations that lead one to conclude his theory is true. Instead, he provides only a negative argument for it: of the options he sees available, it is the only viable one. But there are significant difficulties with his theory.

It is unclear why theists need to abandon the traditional understanding of God and embrace Plantinga's Platonism, for reasons pertaining to realism, when it seems the doctrine of Divine ideas is able to handle all of the theoretical motivations behind it. It seems Plantinga's view is too costly for theists to embrace, since it forces them to abandon too much of what they want to affirm about God, especially pertaining to His aseity. His position suffers from a serious epistemological issue, since it undercuts theists' ability to view God as maximally trustworthy. Metaphysically, on his view, all of the options for clarifying the contention *God exemplifies a property X* are problematic. And, given Plantinga's failure to describe the abstract object of existence, it is open to question whether his view of this entity is merely the classical conception of God, which he rejects, in disguise. Last, when considering the options Plantinga has open to him to account for the origins of the divine attributes, all of them seem to be very unsatisfying.

For all of these reasons, theists have reason to think Plantinga's theory may not be the best option to embrace. Given the number of the problems confronting his theory, along with the fact that there are no positive reasons for accepting it, one has motivation

to reconsider the viability of the traditional doctrine of the divine attributes, divine simplicity. In the next chapter I want to reconsider its viability by examining all of the objections Plantinga levels against it. At the end of the chapter, I will hint towards how to construct a viable formulation of divine simplicity, for which I will argue and develop in more detail in chapter IV.

CHAPTER III

A DEFENSE OF AQUINAS ON DIVINE SIMPLICITY

The traditional doctrine of divine simplicity is one of the most enigmatic and controversial theories being debated by contemporary philosophers of religion. It has ancient roots, going back to at least to Saint Augustine, who espoused the notion that God is what He has in order to avoid the claim that He is composed of something, such as a part, which He could lose.⁸² Medieval thinkers continued Augustine's line of thought with respect to divine simplicity and developed it by formalizing the doctrine and working out its logical connections with other theistic beliefs, such as His self-existence.⁸³ Nowadays, though, within analytic philosophy, the doctrine of divine simplicity no longer commands the respect which it has traditionally had among theistic thinkers. The purpose of this chapter is to examine Plantinga's critique and to provide rejoinders to his defeaters. Throughout this chapter, I, along with Plantinga, will take Aquinas as a representative of those that adhere to divine simplicity.

Plantinga's Critique of Divine Simplicity and Possible Responses

According to the doctrine of divine simplicity, God has a nature, but He is identical with it. Plantinga argues that the fundamental reason why theists have adopted this view is to uphold the sovereignty-aseity intuition, because if God is not identical with His properties, then He is dependent on them to exist and to have His character (29-

⁸² Augustine, *The City of God*, 354-355.

⁸³ Anselm, *Monologium*, 67.

30). Plantinga levels three preliminary objections against divine simplicity before presenting what he considers to be the two criticisms which serve as the *coup de grace*. First, Plantinga interprets Aquinas as claiming that God is identical with His essence, and the Divine essence is identical with the Divine ideas, which include properties, kinds, and exemplars (37). However, if such is the case, then Plantinga objects that this conflicts “with the obvious fact that, for example, the property of being a horse is distinct from that of being a turkey and both are distinct from God and his essence” (38). His criticism, then, is two-fold: 1) if God is identical with His essence and His essence is identical with the Divine ideas, which include properties, then He is identical with the Divine ideas, and this eliminates the possibility for properties to be distinct from one another, and 2) if God is identical with His essence and His essence is identical with the Divine ideas, which include properties, then He is identical with all properties, so they are not distinct from Him.

For the proponent of divine simplicity, it is important to rejoin to Plantinga’s defeater, because the doctrine that God is identical with what He has makes it difficult to conceive how He could know many distinct things if He is absolutely simple. This raises a problem for God’s omniscience which involves the notion that He knows many different things. It is a further problem in making the Divine ideas universals, as advocates of simplicity have done. In response to Plantinga, I want to offer an interpretation of Aquinas which shows that neither of these criticisms are valid. With respect to the first claim, Plantinga does not clarify why he thinks Aquinas is unable to account for the distinctness of properties, but I see only two options with respect to how

to understand his objection: 1a) among the Divine ideas, there is only one idea of one property. Plantinga might think that this would follow on Aquinas's view, because if God is identical with His essence, then it seems if all of the *individual* Divine ideas are identical with God's essence, then they all *individually* are identical with each other, so there is only one Divine idea and thus only one mental concept of one property. The other option with respect to interpreting Plantinga is as follows: 1b) if God is identical with His essence, and the *individual* Divine ideas, which include properties, each are identical with God's essence, then each *individual* Divine idea is identical with God. But if each individual Divine idea is identical with God, and included among the Divine ideas are properties, then it would seem that in the physical world there are no distinct properties, and even no properties at all, since all properties are identical with God.

As far as (1a) is concerned, Aquinas responds to this contention directly in *Summa Theologica* by allowing, in a sense, for a multiplicity of ideas in God's mind.⁸⁴ Aquinas thinks that God, or in other words the Divine essence, is pure being.⁸⁵ For Aquinas, since God is pure being, then to the degree that any object has a particular type of being, to that extent it resembles God. According to Aquinas, the primary and principle object of God's intellect is Himself, the Divine essence—His pure being.⁸⁶ When God knows His essence, He *simultaneously* knows all the ways that things can resemble Him by having a particular type of being. As such, in understanding one thing,

⁸⁴ Aquinas, ST, pt. 1, Q. XV, A. 2.

⁸⁵ Aquinas, ST, pt. 1, Q. IV, A. 1.

⁸⁶ Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, vol. 1, *God*, trans. Anton Pegis (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1975), B. 1, C. XLIX. Hereafter, following standard practice, I will refer to *Summa Contra Gentiles* by SCG, and I will use the standard abbreviations for the book and chapter numbers.

Himself or His essence, God simultaneously understands many things.⁸⁷

On the interpretation of Plantinga's objection under consideration, the mistake he would be making is thinking that Aquinas's position hinges on positing *discrete, individual* ideas within the Godhead that individually are identical with the Divine essence. Rather, given the interpretation of Aquinas I have proposed, it seems Aquinas thought that there are not individual, discrete ideas in God at all. Instead, it is in knowing the Divine essence that God simultaneously, fully, and comprehensively understands many things. In other words, in knowing Himself, God has *one idea*, the content of which is incredibly rich and complex, and this idea enables Him to know many different things. As such, given the aforementioned conclusion, we can see the mistake Plantinga would be making if (1b) is his objection. Since it does not seem that Aquinas thinks the Divine ideas are individual discrete things in God, and since this objection includes as a premise this notion, Plantinga's argument fails. And since clarifying 2 will lead to the same options as clarifying 1, 2 fails as well.

The second preliminary objection Plantinga raises against Aquinas has to do with Aquinas's contention that there are no accidental properties in God, which implies all of His properties are essential to Him (39). According to Plantinga, an accidental property is something that God could have lacked (39), and it seems that God's properties such as *having created Adam* are accidental to Him (42-43). For ease of understanding Plantinga's argument, I offer the following interpretation of it:

- (1) Suppose God is identical with P and P is an accidental property.
- (2) It impossible for God to exist and be distinct from P (from 1 by definition of

⁸⁷ Aquinas, SCG, B.1, C. LIII.

identity with a property).

(3) God could have existed and not had P (from 1 by definition of an accidental property).

(4) It is impossible for God to exist and be distinct from P, and God could have existed and not had P (from 2 and 3 by conjunction).

Therefore, since (1) entails a contradiction it follows that:

(5) It is not the case that God is identical with P, and P is an accidental property (39-40).

Hence, if God has a property, it is not accidental to Him, so it must be essential.

Responding to this objection is important for the proponent of simplicity, because it does seem God could have lacked certain properties, such as *having created Adam*, while the doctrine of divine simplicity, *prima facie*, seems to undermine this contention. Although it sounds strange, I think Aquinas has the resources to respond to this argument by arguing that God's properties such as *having created Adam* or *having parted the Red Sea* are in different senses *both* accidental and essential to Him. In order to understand why I think Aquinas could have responded in this manner, I want to develop his understanding of God as pure act.

According to Aquinas, God is one, simple, pure act; God is pure actuality, and there is no potentiality in Him.⁸⁸ Later in this chapter, when I attempt to undercut Plantinga's two major objections against Aquinas, I will clarify this contention more. But, for purposes of responding to this criticism, it is enough to clarify it by noting with Rogers that, at the very least, what Aquinas means is "[n]ot only does God do things, but He just is what He does."⁸⁹ On the pure act understanding of God, He does things such

⁸⁸ Aquinas, ST, pt. 1, Q. III, A. 2.

⁸⁹ Katherin Rogers, *The Anselmian Approach to God and Creation*, 37.

as creating Adam and parting the Red Sea. And, indeed, as Rogers notes, God *is* what He does; He *is* an action. On the view under consideration, God *is* the very action of things such as creating Adam and parting the Red Sea.

In terms of God's freedom in acting, Aquinas is very clear that there is nothing that determines what God does.⁹⁰ There can be nothing that determines that He do certain things, because if this were the case something would have to exist before Him in order to determine what it is necessary that He do, and, for Aquinas, this is impossible, since He is the first and only necessary being.⁹¹ God has genuine libertarian freedom in doing all that He does.⁹² In another sense, though, for Aquinas, God can do no otherwise than what He does. As pure act, He contains no potentiality, and thereby He can do no different than what He does. If He could do otherwise, this would imply that there is some degree of potentiality in Him, since He would be able to change.⁹³

I think that this understanding of Aquinas's thought gives us the resources to understand how (2) and (3) are not necessarily contradictory. The claim in (2) that it is impossible that God *could* have lacked a property P, such as *having created Adam*, is such that what *could* refers to is the fact that in this pure act, God, there is no potentiality, and, thereby, it is impossible for Him to do otherwise than what He does. Indeed, the conclusion is even stronger: on the pure act view, God just is what He does, so He is the very act of such things as creating Adam and parting the Red Sea, and He can be no other, because to suggest otherwise is to allow some degree of potentiality or change in

⁹⁰ Aquinas, ST, pt. 1, Q. XIX, A. 4.

⁹¹ Aquinas, ST, pt. 1, Q. XIX, A. 4. See also Aquinas, ST, pt. 1, Q. III, A. 3, and Aquinas, SCG, B. 1, C. XLVIII.

⁹² Aquinas, ST, pt. 1, Q. SIX, A. 4, 5.

⁹³ Aquinas, ST, pt. 1, Q. XIX, A. 3.

Him. As such, it is essential to God that He have these properties in the sense that, since He lacks all potentiality, He can be no other than what He is by virtue of what He does. However, the assertion in (3) that God *could* have existed and not had an accidental property P, such as having parted the Red Sea, is such that what *could* refers to is the fact that God is not caused or determined by anything. He is genuinely free in all that He does and thereby is. There is no necessity in God that He be what He is by virtue of what He does.

To clarify, we could restate the same conclusion in a different way. God has accidental properties in the sense that there is nothing that determines what He does and thereby is; He is absolutely and genuinely free in everything He does and thus is. However, all that He does is necessary and essential to Him in virtue of the fact that He lacks all potentiality and thereby can be no different than what He does and thereby is. The claim that God has accidental properties refers to the fact that He is genuinely free; the claim that all His properties are essential to Him refers to the fact that He lacks all potentiality. To summarize, one might assert that the claims that God has accidental properties and that all His properties are essential to Him refer to *different* truths about the same action.

I think the third objection Plantinga levels against divine simplicity is his weakest, but, since he raises it, I want to respond to it, since he might use it against my response to his second criticism, which hinges on Aquinas's understanding of God as pure act. Plantinga objects that Aquinas is wrong to maintain that there is no potentiality in God, because it seems that He is in potentiality with respect to certain things, such as

having created people that do not yet exist (44). Plantinga admits that if God is eternal, then Aquinas would have a way out of this objection, since, in a sense, future people do exist as created by God in the one act whereby He wills to create the totality of the world (45). But Plantinga thinks that the notion that God is atemporal is an utter mistake. He claims, “There is *nothing* in Scripture or the essentials of the Christian message to support this utterly opaque addition, and much that seems *prima facie* to militate against it. God spoke to Abraham and did so, naturally enough, during the latter’s life time. God created Adam and Eve and did so well before he created, say, Bertrand Russell” (45-46, emphasis added).

I think the thing to notice about Plantinga’s remarks is that they are not arguments at all; they are merely bold and dogmatic assertions. As such, he does not come close to providing any sort of reasons why those that adhere to God as pure act and eternal should abandon their position. For example, he claims that nothing in the Bible supports the view that God is eternal. But, throughout Church history, numerous theologians have claimed otherwise, so Plantinga’s dogmatic assertion is surely too strong. Deuteronomy 33:27 reads, “The eternal God is your refuge”⁹⁴ The Psalmist writes, “For a thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by, or like a watch in the night.”⁹⁵ Elsewhere it says, “Your throne was established long ago; you are from all eternity.”⁹⁶ Paul writes, “Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen.”⁹⁷ It is verses like these that have

⁹⁴ Deuteronomy 33:27, NIV.

⁹⁵ Psalm 90:4, NIV.

⁹⁶ Psalm 93:2, NIV.

⁹⁷ I Timothy 1:17, NIV.

supported the idea that God is eternal. My point in raising them is not to argue the right way to interpret them is to read them as asserting He is eternal, but rather to show Plantinga has provided no reason for those that accept Aquinas's position about God based on these verses to abandon their views.

Plantinga might respond that the biblical writers had no concept of the Greek notion of eternity and thereby could not have meant it when they wrote these verses. I would respond that verses like Psalm 90:4 teach that God has a relation to time that is much different than that of humans, so even if they did not have the concept of eternity, perhaps the best concept to apply to interpret the truth expressed by this verse is the Greek concept of eternity. Moreover, even if the biblical writers did not have the concept of eternity, this, in itself, does not imply that they could not have expressed, with their own concepts that they inherited from their culture, truths that are best interpreted by us as expressing the concept of eternity we have.

In addition, if it is highly unlikely that the biblical writers had the Greek concept of eternity, then it is equally unlikely the biblical writers had the Greek concepts of *ousia* and *homoousios*. Yet the official, orthodox teaching of Western Christianity is that it is in using these Greek concepts that we can best understand the truth expressed in the Bible about the Trinity and the nature of Christ. Further, while Plantinga asserts dogmatically that God could not enter in time and relate to humans if He is eternal, he provides no argument for this claim, and philosophers have given plausible accounts of

how an eternal God can act in time.⁹⁸ The conclusion of this is that if there are reasons to abandon Aquinas's idea that God is pure act and eternal, none are provided by Plantinga.

With these responses to the preliminary objections that Plantinga levels against simplicity, I want to turn to considering his two monumental objections against it. The first objection, which I will refer to as Objection A, is as follows: "if God is identical with each of his properties, then each of his properties is identical with each of his properties, so that God has but one property" (47). However, this conclusion is inconsistent with what Plantinga claims is "the *obvious fact* that God has several properties; he has both power and mercifulness, say, neither of which is identical with each other" (47, emphasis added).

Plantinga's second objection, which I will refer to as Objection B, is that if God is identical with each of his properties, then, since each of his properties is a property, he is a property—a self-exemplifying property. Accordingly, God has just one property: himself." The problem with this conclusion, however, is that 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" (47). Plantinga formulates his argument against Aquinas as follows:

- (1) God is sovereign and exists *a se*
- (2) God is alive, knowledgeable, capable of action, powerful and good,
- (3) If (1), then (a) God has created everything distinct from himself, (b) everything distinct from God is dependent on him, (c) he is not dependent on anything distinct from himself, and (d) everything is within his control
- (4) If (2), then there are such properties as life, knowledgeability, capability of action, power and goodness; and God has these properties.

⁹⁸ Paul Helm, "Divine Timeless Eternity," in *God and Time: Four Views*, ed. Gregory Ganssle (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 28-91.

- (5) If God has properties distinct from him, then he is dependent on them.
- (6) God is a necessary being.
- (7) God is essentially alive, knowledgeable, capable of action, powerful and good.
- (8) If (7), then there are such properties as life, knowledge, capability of action, power and goodness, and God could not have failed to have them.
- (9) If (6) and God could not have failed to have these properties, then they could not have failed to exist, are necessary beings.
- (10) If God has some properties that exist necessarily and are distinct from him, then God is dependent on these properties and they are independent of him, uncreated by him and outside his control.
- (11) If there is a property with which God is identical, then God is a property.
- (12) No property is alive, knowledgeable, capable of action, powerful or good.

Plantinga notes that (1) through (5) entail God is identical with His properties and (1), (3), and (6) – (10) entail the same conclusion (56). However, (1) – (10) imply He is identical with His properties, but (2), (11), and (12) entail He is not identical with them (56). As such (1) – (12) are not all compatible. We must give up some of the premises. As for Plantinga, he opts to give up (3) and (5), (61). The set of premises Plantinga leaves himself with commits him to the view that God exists distinct from His properties, and that God is not the creator of all things, which includes abstract objects. However, by abandoning (3) and (5), he is able to avoid the conclusion that God is identical with such a type of entity.

Plantinga's criticisms against Aquinas hinge on the contention that God's attributes are properties. When Plantinga uses the word "property" in his critique, he means more than just a characteristic. The word "property" has ontological implications, because it denotes an abstract object.⁹⁹ Accordingly, throughout the remainder of this paper, I will mean by the word "property" an abstract object. Plantinga seems to think

⁹⁹ Plantinga is clear that by 'property' he means abstract object when he attacks Aquinas, because he states explicitly that if God is a property, "then he isn't a person but a mere *abstract object*" (47, emphasis added, c.f. 57).

Aquinas's talk of God's attributes implies the existence of abstract objects, because it is in virtue of exemplifying these things that He comes to have the characteristics He does (6; 33).

My methodology in showing that Plantinga's argument fails to give those that adhere to Aquinas's formulation of divine simplicity reason to abandon their position will be to offer an interpretation of Aquinas that shows his talk of God's attributes does not imply the existence of abstract objects. So he could reject premises (4) and (8) in the aforementioned argument. By rejecting (4) and (8), the remaining set of premises would allow Aquinas to retain the notion that God is identical with His properties, but he could interpret this claim in a way that avoids the conclusion that God is identical with an abstract object. And by retaining (3) and (5) Aquinas would be able to affirm a robust notion of God's sovereignty and aseity which is consistent with the claim that He is the creator and sustainer of all things independent of Him.

One of the foundations for understanding Aquinas's conception of God is to understand his proofs for God's existence. Three of them are relevant to my purposes. First, Aquinas contends that God is the first mover and thereby not moved by anything other than Himself.¹⁰⁰ Second, he argues there needs to be a first efficient cause, and that, of course, is God.¹⁰¹ Third, he argues "we must admit the existence of some being having of itself its own necessity and not receiving it from another . . . This all men speak of as God."¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ Aquinas, ST, pt. 1, Q. II, A. 3.

¹⁰¹ Aquinas, ST, pt. 1, Q. II, A. 3.

¹⁰² Aquinas, ST, pt. 1, Q. II, A. 3.

It is because of his proofs for God's existence that Aquinas is led to embrace the traditional doctrine of divine simplicity. He argues that it must be the case that God is identical with His essence. If He were not identical with His essence, then it would be the case that it is something else distinct from Him that causes Him to have the essence that He has; but, given that God is the first cause, this cannot be the case.¹⁰³ Likewise, not only is He identical with the Divine essence, He is identical with His own existence. Aquinas argues that if God were not identical with His existence, then something else would cause Him to exist, which, again, cannot be the case, since He is the first cause.¹⁰⁴ God must be absolutely simple as well. He cannot be composed of any parts, because if He were composed of parts in the way that, for example, water is composed of the parts hydrogen and oxygen, then those parts would need to exist before Him, so He could come to exist by being composed of them. Since He is the ground of His own existence, however, this cannot be the case.¹⁰⁵

For Aquinas, then, God is one, simple being whose essence is His existence. Aquinas claims that since He is identical with His existence, and thereby a necessary being, we have reason to hold He is pure act. Contingent beings, which do not exist necessarily, and thereby at some point do not exist, have causes distinct from themselves that actualize them. However, that which is a necessary being exists fully through itself. It does not depend on any cause external to it to be what it is, and it thereby lacks all potentiality.¹⁰⁶ Moreover, as noted earlier in this essay, in addition to meaning He is pure

¹⁰³ Aquinas, SCG, B. 1, C. XXI.

¹⁰⁴ Aquinas, ST, pt. 1, Q. III, A. 4.

¹⁰⁵ Aquinas, ST, pt. 1, Q. III, A. 7.

¹⁰⁶ Aquinas, SCG, B. 1, C. XVI.

actuality and lacking all potentiality, the claim He is pure act means He does things. In Rogers's words, "God just is what He does," so God *is* an action.¹⁰⁷

The question becomes, then, what does God do? And I think the answer, according to Aquinas, is that, primarily, He knows and wills Himself, the Divine Essence, His fully actualized being. I think Aquinas would say He primarily knows and wills Himself, because he is clear that there are two sorts of operations or actions that occur within the Godhead. There are those that occur within the Godhead and do not produce an effect external to Him, and those that proceed to produce an exterior effect.¹⁰⁸ However, as he makes clear elsewhere, God's activity of knowing and willing Himself is logically prior to that whereby He produces effects external to Himself, because it is precisely because He knows and wills Himself that He does produce external effects in order to replicate the Divine essence.¹⁰⁹

Admittedly, this is only a rough sketch of Aquinas's understanding of God, and it leaves much to be explored and developed. But understanding this much of his view is enough to see why I think one does not need to interpret his talk about God's attributes as committing him to an ontology that involves properties, where a property is a sort of Platonic, abstract object that is responsible for the characteristics that God has. I think Aquinas can be interpreted in such a manner that talk of God's attributes refers to different aspects of this one, simple, action. This action is not an abstract object. Instead, it is a particular action, and it is in virtue of being identical with this one, pure

¹⁰⁷ Rogers, *The Anselmian Approach to God and Creation*, 37.

¹⁰⁸ Aquinas, ST, pt. 1, Q. XIV, A. 1.

¹⁰⁹ Aquinas, SCG, B. 1, C. LXXV.

act that God has the characteristics that He does.

With respect to God's attribute of perfection, this refers to the fact that He is fully actualized being, since, according to Aquinas, to be fully actualized is to be perfect.¹¹⁰ Moreover, to claim God is good means He is the most desirable thing, and He is the most desirable thing, because He is fully actualized in His being.¹¹¹ Within the worldview with which Aquinas is working, perfect being is what is most desirable, because a thing can be desirable only to the extent that it exists. The thing that exists in the fullest possible way would be, then, the most desirable thing.¹¹² To assert God is infinite means He is not limited. What this means for Aquinas is that God does not contain anything, such as matter, which would limit Him to existing, for example, in one place.¹¹³ Since He is the ground of His own being and thus fully actualized, He cannot contain matter, since, in an Aristotelian worldview, matter contains the potentiality to become a multitude of things.¹¹⁴

For Aquinas, the claim that God is immutable means He is unable to change; He cannot change, because there is no potentiality in Him as pure act.¹¹⁵ Likewise, the claim that He is eternal refers to the fact that there is no succession of moments in Him. There cannot be any succession of moments in Him because, again, He is pure act and thereby has no potentiality and thereby no ability to change.¹¹⁶ Other assertions about God, such as that He is omniscient, refer to the fact that He knows things. God knows

¹¹⁰ Aquinas, ST, pt. 1, Q. IV, A. 1.

¹¹¹ Aquinas, ST, pt. 1, Q. VI, A. 2. See also Aquinas, ST, pt. 1, Q. VI, A. 3.

¹¹² Aquinas, ST, pt. 1, Q. V, A. 1.

¹¹³ Aquinas, ST, pt. 1, Q. VII, A. 1.

¹¹⁴ Aquinas, ST, pt. 1, Q. VII, A. 1.

¹¹⁵ Aquinas, ST, pt. 1, Q. IX, A. 1.

¹¹⁶ Aquinas, SCG, B. 1, C. XV.

all things by virtue of something He does—His activity of knowing the Divine essence. As explained earlier, the Divine essence is the likeness of all things, so God knows everything by knowing His essence.¹¹⁷

The claim that God is love refers to two things for Aquinas. First, it means the object of His will is Himself, since He is the most perfect good, because He is pure act. Aquinas, working within an Aristotelian worldview, thinks the will always seeks that which is good, which is to say that it loves the good.¹¹⁸ Second, it refers to the fact that He exercises His will in such a way as to give being to creatures.¹¹⁹ Again, He grants being to creatures in virtue of the fact that He knows and wills Himself and in so doing replicates the Divine essence in all the ways it can be produced which are similar to it.¹²⁰ God is love, then, in virtue of what He does—making Himself the object of His will and giving being to other creatures. The claim that God is just means that He exercises His will in such a manner as to rule the world according to the laws He establishes.¹²¹ Again, to tie this claim back to the notion that God is pure act, He is just in virtue of what He does, namely ruling the world according to the law that He establishes. And the claim that God is omnipotent, for Aquinas, refers to the fact that He is not limited by anything in doing what He does.¹²²

Given this evidence, I see no reason to interpret Aquinas's talk about God's

¹¹⁷ Aquinas, ST, pt. 1, Q. XIV, A. 5. I admit that Aquinas's understanding of God's omniscience is more complex than I have presented it here, but I am only going into the detail of Aquinas's theory that is necessary for me to accomplish my purpose in demonstrating that when Aquinas spoke of God's attributes, he did not commit himself to the existence of an ontology full of properties.

¹¹⁸ Aquinas, ST, pt. 1, Q. XX, A. 1.

¹¹⁹ Aquinas, ST, pt. 1, Q. XX, A. 2.

¹²⁰ Aquinas, SCG, B. 1, C. LXXV.

¹²¹ Aquinas, ST, pt. 1, Q. XXI, A. 2.

¹²² Aquinas, ST, pt. 1, Q. XXV, A. 2, 3.

attributes as committing him to an ontology involving properties, which are types of abstract objects. And Plantinga provides none either. In fact, Aquinas denies outright the existence of these sorts of entities.¹²³ It seems to me that for Aquinas, his talk of God's attributes can be understood solely as about this one, simple, pure action. If our talk about God's attributes such as omniscience, love, or justice implies anything for Aquinas, it implies things about *actions* that God does; He does things such as knowing Himself, giving being to others, and ruling the world by His law. On the interpretation I have offered of Aquinas, God's characteristics come about not by having a relationship to a Platonic, abstract object, *but rather by what He does*. It is by virtue of the fact that He is one, simple, fully-actualized action that He has such characteristics as being eternal, immutable, perfect, and good, and it is by what He does as this one act that He has such characteristics as omniscience, justice, and love. For Aquinas, God is what He is by virtue of what He does; in being one, pure, simple act—one fully actualized being lacking all potentiality—God creates all of the characteristics that He has.

As such, since Objections A and B hinge on the premise that God's attributes ought to be conceived as properties, where a property is a sort of abstract object that is responsible for the characteristics He has, and since Plantinga has given us no reason to think that Aquinas's talk of God's attributes ought to be understood in terms of properties in this sense, Plantinga has given us no reason to think that these objections apply to Aquinas's formulation of divine simplicity. Thus, in the above formalized argument, Aquinas could reject (4) and (8), the premises that talk of God's attributes

¹²³ Aquinas, ST, pt. 1, Q. XV, A. 1.

implies that there are certain properties, which are abstract objects, to avoid the inconstancy that one gets in holding (1) – (12). Moreover, *contra* Plantinga, on the interpretation offered here, Aquinas’s formulation of God as one, pure, simple act is able to account for Him being a person. According to Plantinga, a person is that which is able to know and to will (57), and since God knows and wills Himself on the interpretation I have offered of Aquinas’s view, it seems He more than meets the requirements for being a person.

Conclusion

In chapter II, I attempted to provide motivation to reconsider the doctrine of divine simplicity by critiquing Plantinga’s Platonic understanding of the divine attributes. In this chapter, I cleared away his objections against divine simplicity in order to open the door for reconsidering it. Plantinga’s two main critiques against Aquinas’s position hinge on the contention that God’s attributes ought to be conceived as properties. However, I argued that there is no reason to interpret Aquinas’s talk of God’s attributes as committing Him to an ontology of properties, where a property is an abstract object God exemplifies in order to have His character. Instead, I think that we can interpret Aquinas as claiming God has the characteristics He has in virtue of what He does. It is in being one, simple, eternal, fully-actualized action that God generates all of the characteristics He has. In other words, God has the attributes He has in virtue of what He does in one, simple, fully-actualized, eternal act with which He is identical. And, given the fruitfulness of a notion of divine simplicity given an *actus purus* understanding

of God, I suggest this understanding of the divine attributes deserves further attention. In chapter IV, I will develop an account of this theory in more detail by arguing for it and clarifying it further.

CHAPTER IV

FORMULATING DIVINE SIMPLICITY AS *ACTUS PURUS*

In the last chapter, I demonstrated the fruitfulness of a notion of divine simplicity given an *actus purus* understanding of God. In this chapter, I want to develop such a theory further. To that end, I will develop an argument for it by showing how it can be taken to follow from the belief that God is the creator of all things. I will clarify this account further by drawing upon the resources of action theory and event ontology. Once I develop my theory of divine simplicity, I want to argue for it further by showing how fruitful it is. I will then attempt to show how my theory solves a number of the problems leveled against simplicity, and I will show how it is consistent with many of the claims theists affirm about God. After putting forth a number of positive reasons for my position, I want to argue for it by showing the consequences a person faces if she rejects it. I will argue if a person rejects it, she is committed to an understanding of God's freedom whereby He either acts arbitrarily or deterministically. And I will argue there are problems with the only other viable understanding of abstract objects. With such an understanding of the positive reasons motivating my theory, the foundations for my position will be much stronger than Plantinga's.

An Argument for an *Actus Purus* Construal of Divine Simplicity

In reading through writings in the theistic tradition, it seems one of the major reasons why theists have embraced the doctrine of divine simplicity is that they believe

it follows from the notion that God is the creator of all things. Such reasons can be found within Augustine and Anselm's writings, but they are most explicit in Saint Thomas Aquinas's work. In question two of *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas establishes God as the absolute creator, and, immediately following it, in question three, he derives the conclusion He is simple.¹²⁴ Repeatedly, he reaches this result by demonstrating that if God is not simple, He cannot be "the first being."

Within the Christian tradition, part of the implication that God is the creator of all things has included the idea that He is the creator of His own nature or essence and, thereby, in a sense, self-creating. It is precisely this truth theists have affirmed about God when they have claimed that He is *a se*, from Himself. Paul Tillich writes, "He is *a se* (from himself) or absolute freedom. *Nothing is in him which is not by him.*"¹²⁵ Even more explicitly, Tillich contends, "His aseity implies that everything which he is he is through himself. *He eternally creates himself, a paradoxical phrase which states God's freedom.*"¹²⁶

In thinking through why someone might be led to the conclusion God generates His own essence, I want to begin by noting it seems that there are only two options: either He generates His essence or not. And if He does not, it is either a brute fact that He has the essence He does or something else, *other than Him*, must generate it.¹²⁷

If it is a brute fact that God has the essence He does, then there is no act of will whereby He generates it. He just finds Himself having a particular essence. If it is a

¹²⁴ Aquinas, ST, pt. 1, Q. II, A 2. C.f. Augustine, *The City of God*, 354-355, and Anselm, *Monologium*, 67.

¹²⁵ Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952), 152, emphasis added.

¹²⁶ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, *Reason and Revelation Being and God* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), 252, emphasis added.

¹²⁷ By brute fact I mean a fact for which there is no explanation.

brute fact that God has the essence He does, then He is either identical with His essence or not. If He is not identical with it, He is composite, and composition requires an efficient cause to bring together the pieces of that which is composite. Thus, it is difficult to see how it could be a brute fact that God have the essence He does on this option.

Whether God is identical with His essence or not, the assertion that it is a brute fact that God has the essence He does is *ad hoc*. If someone is going to embrace this position, she faces the problem that it is unclear why it is not equally acceptable to make the *ad hoc* assertion that God has an essence which includes evil. Moreover, this option denigrates God's freedom and total control over all things as the Creator, since there are things within Him to which His freedom and control do not extend. In addition, this option involves positing such a large number of brute facts for God's character that it is difficult to be satisfied with the notion that there is no deeper explanation for God's character being what it is.

Moreover, whether God is identical with His essence or not, the same three options that Plantinga faced in terms of clarifying his theory are the only three options for clarifying this position as well. Either (1) His essence makes Him do nothing, or (2) it makes Him do things, or (3) it provides Him with dispositions to act a certain way. If (1), then it is difficult to understand what it means to assert God has such attributes as goodness, mercy, and justice apart from anything He does. Besides, this is wrongheaded, because it is in virtue of what people do that they have such characteristics.

If (2), God is not free in what He does and thus is not praiseworthy. If (3), then

He has genuine freedom in exercising such dispositions, or He does not. If He does, then His attributes are not essential to Him, so it is not essential to Him that He be good and thereby He could become evil. If He does not have genuine freedom in exercising these dispositions, He is not free and thereby is not praiseworthy for what He does.

As for the option that something other than God provides Him with His essence, before developing some of the serious problems with this implication, I want to note some *prima facie* ones at the outset. First, if a person is willing to embrace this view, she cannot hold onto the notion God is *a se* and the creator of all things. Given the centrality of these ideas to the theistic tradition, such an implication is alone enough to question this option. Before a person gives up these traditional doctrines, I think that she owes the theistic community *powerful* reasons for abandoning them.

Second, if something other than God generates His essence, then this thing creates God Himself, for He cannot exist without His essence. And if this is the case, then His praiseworthiness is seriously denigrated, because it appears there is something higher than Him, with power and control over Him, which we ought to praise and adore. Moreover, if His essence is generated by something other than Himself, then it is hard to see how He is any different from a creature. If something other than God generates His essence, His essence cannot be identical with His existence, since, if it were, nothing would need to create it. By abandoning the notion that His essence is identical with His existence, it follows that they are distinct in Him, as they are in creatures. Thus, there is no ontological difference between the type of existence that He has and His creatures have, and this is clearly wrong.

If a person wants to embrace the option that something other than God creates His essence, then she needs to provide an account of what this thing is. As far as I can tell, there are only two options, and only one of them can be taken seriously. First, there might be, in Aquinas's terms, some first being or set of first beings other than God, that are self-moving and efficient causes, that do it. Since this option invokes belief in something akin to the Greek pantheon of gods, it is hardly a serious option for theists. Second, as Plantinga advocates, God might have the nature He does in virtue of exemplifying abstract objects which He does not create or control.¹²⁸

The problem with Plantinga's Platonic understanding of the divine attributes is two-fold. First, it simply cannot be the case that abstract objects *alone* are the entities that are responsible for creating the divine essence. Abstract objects are held to be completely static and inert, unable to *do* anything. Since abstract objects are taken to be completely inert, they cannot be self-moving, and they must lack the power to be efficient causes. As such, even if they were to exist independent of God, they could not *do* anything to make it such that He exemplify a particular essence.

And, second, as I have argued already, all of the options for understanding what it would be for God to have a property X by exemplifying an abstract object are problematic. In exemplifying them either (1) He does nothing, or (2) He does things, or (3) He receives dispositions to act a certain way. But I have already explained all of the problems with each of these three options.

¹²⁸ Someone might contend that a third option is that of an infinite regress of causes. If a person is going to embrace this option, then I think that she owes us an account of what these things are. As far as I can tell, the only serious metaphysical options are that of a infinite set of beings that are self-moving, or an infinite chain of Platonic entities, and I will demonstrate the problems with both of these options.

The conclusion, I think, is that it is wrongheaded to embrace the option that something other than God generates His essence. We are led, then, to embrace the conclusion that He must, in a sense, generate it. With respect to the option that He generates His own essence there are only two ways to understand this notion: either He generates His essence while existing in time or outside of it.

The first option, however, I think is problematic. Consider: if God generates His essence in time, it seems He is not the creator of time, since He depends on time's existence to generate His essence. But such a conclusion is inconsistent with the motivation for divine simplicity, which is that God is the creator of all things. Moreover, since creating something in time takes up time, if God creates His essence in time, it seems that He must exist prior to creating it, which is impossible.

One way out of this last objection might be to claim that God always generates His essence in time, so there is never a moment when He is not creating it. However, there are several immediate problems with this option. First, it is incredibly strange. The idea of God continually creating His essence seems to imply that He is continually creating new essences, which suggests He is becoming a new and different being with each act of creating His essence. Besides, if God is always creating His essence, and since creating something takes time, one might worry that this option implies the absurd consequence that there is a moment when God exists without an essence. Second, this option seems to allow for the absurd notion of divine suicide. If God is always generating His essence, it is difficult to see what could stop Him from not creating one or destroying the one He has. And if there is nothing to prevent God from stopping to

generate His essence, it would seem that He does not exist necessarily.

Third, Rogers summarizes another problem with the notion that God exists in time creating His essence. On the notion that God exists in time continually generating His essence, His nature would be constantly changing. At one moment His essence would be the act of creating the world, and at another moment His essence would be the act of ending the world. And the difficulty with these positions is that God's nature, and thus God Himself, is radically changing and is not unified in any way.¹²⁹

It seems then that the best option for conceiving of God generating His essence is to conceive of Him as doing it outside of time, in one timeless act. However, if He generates His essence in one timeless act, then the one, timeless act whereby He is what He is must be *identical* with the divine essence itself. For, if it were not, then there would be a moment when God exists distinct from His essence and creates it, and such a succession of moments is inconsistent with belief in an eternal being which cannot undergo any such change. It follows that God's essence is identical with the one, timeless act whereby He wills to be all that He is. In other words, an *actus purus* construal of divine simplicity is correct. For to affirm His essence is identical with the one, timeless act whereby He wills to be all that He is, is simply to affirm He is what He is in virtue of what He does in the one, timeless act with which He is identical.

Unlike the option that God is in time, an understanding of Him as generating His essence in one, timeless act does not imply that He creates Himself out of nothing. As

¹²⁹ Rogers, *The Anselmian Approach to God and Creation*, 44. Although I will not elaborate in detail, I also suspect that some of the objections I raise pertaining to divine freedom in pages 102-105 apply to this option as well.

an eternal being, there is no succession of moments whereby He could exist at one moment and then create Himself at another. He simply *is*. To assert *God generates His essence* means only that He is what He is in virtue of what He does in one, timeless act with which He is identical.

Clarifying an *Actus Purus* Account of Divine Simplicity: God as Pure Act

Thus far I have developed an argument for why someone might think God should be thought of as an *action*, and, *prima facie*, such a claim seems enigmatic and mysterious. It hardly seems to move beyond the objection that divine simplicity is unintelligible. Before dismissing this account, however, conceiving of Him as an action suggests we can make it intelligible by examining the nature of human action. Such an examination may prove helpful, because it may provide an *analog* for conceiving of God.

Katherin Rogers provides one account. She notes that we perceive directly our acts of choosing, or willing. And, as McCann notes, willing can be considered to be an action, since it displays the properties typically associated with actions, namely spontaneity or voluntariness and intrinsic intentionality.¹³⁰ As Hume points out, one aspect of what we experience directly via introspection is our acts of willing. We infer the need for the existence of some enduring substance that exists beneath them in order to unify them across time. The point remains, though, that “in terms of what we can know of ourselves through introspection, we are really rather more like actions than

¹³⁰ Hugh J. McCann, *The Works of Agency: on Human Action, Will, and Freedom* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 6, 91-93, 139-142.

not.”¹³¹

With respect to providing an analog for understanding God as an action, this account suggests that similarly to what we experience in introspection, He is one act of willing, but, since He is an eternal being, unlike us there is no succession of acts of willing in Him. Thus, there is no need to posit the existence of a substance that exists beneath His act of willing to unify Him across time. Rather, God just is identical with the one, eternal act whereby He wills all that He is.¹³² In fact, it seems that Aquinas wanted us to understand His *actus purus* construal of divine simplicity along these lines, because he claims that God’s being is identical with His act of thinking and willing: “as his understanding is his being, so is his willing.”¹³³

Besides providing an analogy for understanding God as pure act, Rogers’s insight has another important implication for this debate. Since one aspect of what persons experience of themselves via introspection is as an act of will, one of the facts that we know about people most directly is that they are acts of willing. To conceive of God, then, as identical with an act of will provides a way for conceiving of Him as a person, which provides a way to avoid one of Plantinga’s major objections to divine simplicity. On this model, however, there is an important difference to note between the Creator and the creature in terms of willing. Creatures experience a succession of acts of will, whereas the eternal Creator wills all that He does at once.¹³⁴

While Rogers’s account provides an analog for understanding an *actus purus*

¹³¹ Rogers, *The Anselmian Approach to God and Creation*, 37-38.

¹³² *Ibid.*,

¹³³ Aquinas, ST, pt. 1, Q. XIX, A. 1.

¹³⁴ Rogers, *The Anselmian Approach to God and Creation*, 38-39.

construal of divine simplicity, it does only that. While there may be similarities between God and His creatures in terms of acting, there are important differences. Creatures often engage in a particular course of action after making a decision. Deciding can be understood as “a unique modality of thought in which *a possible* course of action is made the content of an intention.”¹³⁵ If, however, we choose to conceive of God as identical with the one, timeless act whereby He wills all that He is, it will be a mistake to conceive of God *deciding* anything.

The first reason is that this conception is inconsistent with the doctrine of divine simplicity. It posits a distinction in God where, at one moment, He decides between options, and at another where He wills the content of that which He previously decided. Related to this objection, God cannot decide, because the very notion of Him experiencing this sort of succession of moments is inconsistent with the notion of an eternal being which can undergo no such change.

Another reason it is a mistake to posit a sequence of decision and action in God is that, as we have seen, the motivation for conceiving of God as pure act follows from the belief that He is the creator of all things. To suggest He decides anything, however, is inconsistent with affirming He is the absolute *creator*. A necessary condition of deciding is that there exist *possible* courses of actions from which one can choose.¹³⁶ If God is the creator of all things, however, there can be no possible course of actions, from which He can choose to act, which exist apart from His act of creating all things.

On an *actus purus* construal of divine simplicity, then, God does not decide

¹³⁵ McCann, *The Works of Agency*, 136, emphasis added.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*,

anything. As an action, He exists as identical with His act of willing. And since to will something is to engage in bringing it about, the bringing about of the content of His will can be understood to be the creation of the world.¹³⁷ It follows that if God were to cease in His act of willing, there would be no world.¹³⁸ Actually—there would be *nothing*. On my account, God is *identical* with His act of willing and all that exists is what is brought about by His will. Without this act of willing there is no world, and there is no God. As one writer puts it: “What is more absurd than to say, that it is not because God wills, that a thing exists? Must we not say, on the contrary, that a thing exists because God wills it?”¹³⁹

Accepting this theory about God means we will have to abandon the notion that God exists as an agent that creates the world by deciding between various possibilities.¹⁴⁰ But that is not much of a loss. After reflecting on it, it will appear to be an unworthy way of thinking about the Lord of Hosts. It conjures up images of God being akin to an old grandfather, sitting in His armchair flipping through the latest Sears catalogue of possible worlds. After a lengthy period of contemplation, and perhaps discussion amongst the members of the Trinity, He finally decides which world to *order*. This view seems to imply that either God is determined to choose the world He does, or else does so arbitrarily. Moreover, it is inconsistent with thinking of Him as a maximally perfect being, because such a being would not need to engage in such a tiring

¹³⁷ Ibid., 89: “Volition *is* execution: to will the occurrence of a change is to enter upon the act of bringing it about.”

¹³⁸ See Ibid., 140 for a parallel with humans.

¹³⁹ Fr. Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *Predestination: the Meaning of Predestination in Scripture and the Church* (Rockford, IL: Tan Books, 1998), 81.

¹⁴⁰ See for example Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity*, 169.

act of contemplation.

The claim that God does not decide anything may raise worries as to whether He is genuinely free. It is taken to be a necessary condition of libertarian accounts of freedom that an agent be able to do otherwise.¹⁴¹ This potential defeater would weigh against my position if I held that God exists distinct from His action, for then He could not act otherwise and would not be free prior to acting. But the power of an *actus purus* construal of divine simplicity comes from precisely the notion that God is not *distinct* from His action but is *identical* with it, so there is no moment when He exists prior to that action that is God. In fact, conceptually speaking, within the model I have developed, there is *nothing* that exists *prior* to it.¹⁴² It is this one, eternal act that is responsible for all that is. And since there is absolutely nothing that *causes* this one act to be, there is no need to worry that it cannot be completely free and spontaneous.

Someone might object that while God can be genuinely free on my account, He is completely arbitrary in willing what He does. A common objection leveled against libertarian accounts of freedom is that they commit one to thinking agents are completely *arbitrary* in what they do.¹⁴³ Again, the power of an *actus purus* understanding of divine simplicity can be demonstrated in that it provides the resources to avoid this problem. And, as I will argue later, I think that one of the merits of my account is that it is *only if* a person abandons my view that she faces this defeater.

God could only be arbitrary in willing what He does if He existed prior to the one

¹⁴¹ McCann, *The Works of Agency*, 174.

¹⁴² I do not think there ever was a time when nothing existed. This is why I am claiming it is only conceptually speaking, within the model I have developed, that nothing exists prior to God act of will.

¹⁴³ For a discussion of the issues involved in this debate see McCann, *The Works of Agency*, 179-191.

act whereby He wills all things and chose from a set of available options—a Sears catalogue of possible worlds—as to what He would do. But this is precisely what my account of divine simplicity denies. God does not decide between options on my account. He exists as one, eternal act which is identical with willing a particular content. This act does not come to exist in an arbitrary way, for it does not come to exist at all. God exists eternally as His act of willing a particular content.

While this response solves a large portion of the arbitrariness objection, someone may object that it does not solve all of it. Someone may ask *why* God exists willing the particular content that He does, because it may seem arbitrary that He exists willing it. The problem with this objection is that, as stated, it is ambiguous. On the one hand, someone may be looking for some reason God has prior to His act of willing a particular content that determines or influences Him to will the one that He does. If this is how the objection is to be understood, then it fails against my position, because it presupposes that God exists prior to His act of willing a particular content, which I deny. On the other hand, in asking why God exists willing a particular content, someone may be looking for God's ultimate purpose in creation. If this is how the objection is to be taken, I, along with a large number of people within the theistic tradition, would contend that God's ultimate purpose in creation has to do with Him establishing loving relationships with His creatures.

But this teleological response to the objection may not completely remove the arbitrariness objection, because there still seems to be some sense of arbitrariness surrounding the notion that God exists eternally willing a particular content whereby He

establishes loving relationships with His creatures. There still seems to be some sense that it is arbitrary that God creates the story the way that He does. One way to respond to this nagging sense of arbitrariness would be to claim that the world God creates is the best. This would provide someone with the resources to claim that though God creates a particular story in one free act, and in that sense acts arbitrarily, since it is the best world, God is perfectly justified in creating the world He does.¹⁴⁴

Though this option may be a viable way out of the arbitrariness objection, given the understanding of universals that I will develop later in this essay, it is not clear to me that it fully removes the force surrounding the defeater. As I will explain later, on my understanding of the divine nature, God can be understood to be the creator of the modal order when He wills to create the content of the essences of things in His eternal act of will. As such, God determines the content of what is best when He wills its particular essence in His eternal act of will.

Once we understand the content of the best in this manner, it becomes unclear how satisfying the option under consideration is to the arbitrariness objection. Consider: in one eternal act of will God determines the content of what is best and simultaneously ensures that the world He creates conforms to it. While God may be justified in creating the world that He does in this spontaneous, and thereby in a sense arbitrary, act, it seems that God is justified in too easy of a manner. It seems His justification verges on being almost trivially true, since He simultaneously determines the content of what is best and ensures the world conforms to it. And in so far as one finds this justification for God's

¹⁴⁴ I am thankful to Hugh J. McCann for suggesting this option to me.

creation of the world to be almost trivially true, it seems that she needs some further response to remove the nagging sense of arbitrariness that surrounds my understanding of the divine nature.

I want to suggest that this remaining sense of arbitrariness that surrounds my view of the divine nature is not a strike against my theory but a merit of it. It is a merit, because it is the result of consistently thinking through the implications of the notion that God is the creator of all things. As I have already explained, since God is the creator of all things, there are no options that exist prior to His eternal act of will from which He can choose. So, as the absolute creator, God can only exist as one free act of willing a particular content. Once we identify the ultimate purpose of the eternal content of God's free act of will, in my position, there is nothing more to explain about God and *why* He wills the content that He does. And I do not see or sense the need to explain anything else. We have reached, as I see it, an explanatory stopping point. My suggestion is that the remaining sense of arbitrariness in my position is the result of sensing that one has reached a stopping point and realizing there is no going beyond it.

Once we realize that we have reached an explanatory stopping point, it seems to me that all that is left for us to do is to embrace and accept God as He is. God exists as identical with His free act of willing a particular content for a specific purpose. If, at this point, someone continues to press the arbitrariness objection, the only response I can think of providing is that it seems to me that she continues to press this objection to mask the fact that she is not willing to accept God as He is. Either she does not like the content of God's eternal, free act of will, or she does not like His purpose for creating

the world. But, as I see it, that is not God's problem. As the Creator He commands His creatures to bring their desires and passions in line with His—not vice versa.

Clarifying an *Actus Purus* Account of Divine Simplicity: God's Attributes

Thus far in my account of the divine attributes I have clarified what it means to assert that God is an action, and I have explained how there is no need to worry that this one, eternal act cannot be both free and non-arbitrary. What remains to be done is to provide an intelligible account of the claim that God is identical with His attributes. To make progress in this area, I want to begin by drawing upon a standard distinction employed by theologians: that between God's incommunicable and communicable attributes.¹⁴⁵ His incommunicable attributes are those that describe His being only and cannot be had by His creatures in any real sense—things such as His omnipotence, omniscience, eternality, and immutability. His communicable attributes can, in a sense, be shared with His creatures: these describe various aspects of His will, such as love, justice, wisdom, goodness, and mercy.

Given my *actus purus* understanding of divine simplicity, God exists as one, eternal act which is identical with His act of willing. As far as His incommunicable attributes of eternality and immutability are concerned, these terms only refer, respectively, to the facts that God *is* and, as pure act, contains no potentiality and is thereby unable to change. Likewise, as I conceive of Him, it is the bringing about of the content of His will that can be understood to be the creation of the world. And, as the

¹⁴⁵ Herman Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2003), 113.

Highest Being and the absolute Creator, there is absolutely nothing that exists which can thwart the bringing about of His will. All that ever exists, then, depends on God's creative will. Thus, we can understand our affirmation that *God is omniscient* simply to mean that that God knows all things, because He wills and thereby knows all that ever comes to be. And our assertion that *God is omnipotent* simply refers to fact that nothing thwarts Him in willing what He does and in its manifestation. Rogers makes the same point by saying, "'God is omniscient,' means just that God knows everything. Strictly speaking, God does not have the power to do things. God does things."¹⁴⁶

When it comes to understanding how God can be identical with His communicable attributes, *prima facie*, things seem more difficult. But I think Aquinas provides a hint at one way to proceed. He claims God is just because He rules the world according to the law He establishes.¹⁴⁷ One way to understand Aquinas's assertion is as an affirmation that God is just in virtue of bringing about a particular *event*, namely a just event, something such as *Thomas's receiving a punishment* or *Thomas's receiving a reward*. And, given Aquinas's Aristotelian understanding of universals, he could understand an event of the aforementioned sort to be an instance of justice. If we choose to think about God in this manner, we can conceive of Him having the aforementioned sorts of communicable attributes in virtue of being identical with the act of will that brings about particular events.¹⁴⁸

To clarify this understanding of God's communicable attributes, we can think of

¹⁴⁶ Rogers, *The Anselmian Approach to God*, 38.

¹⁴⁷ Aquinas, ST, pt. 1, Q. XXI, A. 2.

¹⁴⁸ I am thankful to Hugh J. McCann for suggesting this understanding of God's communicable attributes to me during discussions with him over the doctrine of divine simplicity.

an analog found in creatures. A judge who wills, and thereby brings about, the event of *Thomas's receiving a punishment* for breaking the law would be considered just.

Consider another example. According to the teachings Christianity, all of God's creatures have broken His law: "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). But, since the eleventh century, historic Christianity has taught that God provides a sacrifice to atone for His people's sins, so He can be both just and merciful. Insofar as God wills the event of *Christ dying on Calvary* to atone for His people's sin, He, like our judge, is just. And insofar as He wills events such as *Thomas's being forgiven of his sins*, He is merciful.

I think we can find confirmation that this is the right way to understand God's communicable attributes by reflecting, philosophically, on the way theists talk about Him. In my experience, it has been the case that when theists assert *God is good*, *God is just*, or *God is merciful*, although they use unsophisticated language, they are referring to events He wills.¹⁴⁹ And, clearly, one *desideratum* of any account of the divine attributes is that it accord with what theists mean when they talk about God. As evidence for this suggestion, we need only turn to examining some of the lyrics found in famous hymns. Consider, for example, that hymn which so many learn at their mother's knee: *God is So Good*. Why is God good according to this song? Because of something He does: "He cares for me." Think about the classic *Amazing Grace*. Why does Newton think that God is gracious and merciful? Because of something He does:

That saved a wretch like me!

¹⁴⁹ This is one of the insights that led me to think about how to construe an account of divine simplicity along the lines of God being pure act.

I once was lost, but now am found;
Was blind, but now I see.

As developed thus far, my account of the divine attributes may seem to commit me to the consequence that God is evil. I have argued that it is His will alone that is responsible for all that comes to be, and it is in virtue of willing certain events that He has characteristics such as justice, love, and mercy. With such a robust affirmation of God's sovereignty, my account commits me to the consequence that He wills the existence of particular evil events. And, if He is just because He wills a just event, then it would seem He is evil if He wills an evil one.

We can begin to develop a response to this defeater by clarifying further what it means to assert that God is an action, identical with His act of will. Since God is identical with His act of will, we can understand His act of will to be intrinsically intentional, which implies He intends all aspects of its content.¹⁵⁰ But while He intends all aspects of the content of His will, nothing with respect to my theory of God thus far implies He intends all the things in the content of His will in an *equal* manner and in the *same* way. Traditionally, in fact, God has been understood to will some things only as means to accomplish particular ends. Aquinas writes:

By one act God understands everything in his essence, and similarly by one act he wills everything in his goodness. Hence, just as in God the understanding of the cause is not the cause of his understanding the effect, though he understands effects in their cause, so his willing the end does not cause his willing things subordinate to it, *though he does will them to be ordered to that end. In other words, he wills this to be because of that, but he does not will this because he wills that.*¹⁵¹

¹⁵⁰ See McCann, *The Works of Agency*, 127-146 for a defense of the view that acts of willing are intrinsically intentional.

¹⁵¹ Aquinas, ST, pt. 1, Q. XIX, A. 5, emphasis added.

The cash-value of these distinctions for responding to the present defeater should now be obvious. We can conceive of God having the characteristics He has in virtue of what He wills as an end *in itself* rather than what He wills only as a *means* to an end. And as a perfect being, we can be confident He wills the existence of evil events only as a means to accomplishing another end, and, thereby, He is not evil.

Such a view of God again has its analogue in the realm of creatures. Consider, for example, a loving parent that punishes her child. Such a parent wills and thereby brings about the event of her child receiving a punishment. But simply because she wills this event which inflicts pain on her child, no one would claim that she is thereby evil. And the reason why no one would claim this is because we all know that she does not will this event as an end in itself. She wills it as a means to an end, her child's being virtuous. Precisely because we know this adult is willing the event of her child's being virtuous, even though we see the adult inflicting pain on the child, we still consider her good, because of what she wills as an end in itself.

Understanding the divine attributes in this manner raises the need to develop a theodicy, because we need a framework in which we can understand all that God wills intrinsically and what He wills only as a means to an end. And my contention that He wills evil as a means only to another end raises the issue as to what end, exactly, it serves as a means to. These considerations have landed us in murky waters, because we face a number of difficult issues at this point. Any attempt to develop a serious theodicy will need to take into account the record of divine action found in the Scriptures, since theists believe the record here reveals, in a unique way, the central plan God is at

working unfolding in the drama of human history.

Even from what has been said thus far things are complex. I have argued God is identical with His eternal act of will, and the bringing about of its content is the creation of the world. This implies that God does not decide between options as to what He will create. He simply exists willing a particular content which is incredibly rich and complex, because it contains the entire drama of history. Like a master playwright, God produces this play in one, eternal act. Conceiving of God as a master playwright suggests our chances of understanding exhaustively the intricacies of His plan are slim, because His thoughts are above our thoughts. And this means it would be foolish to think we could develop in minute detail a teleology that enabled us to explain exactly what everything serves as a means to.¹⁵²

While we have reason to be humble in terms of the extent to which we can devise a theodicy, this does not imply we should not attempt to develop a *partial* one. And I think the rich resources of the theistic tradition provide some suggestions for the way to proceed. Jonathan Edwards, for example, claims evil serves as a means for the manifestation of God's attributes:

it is necessary, that God's awful majesty, his authority and dreadful greatness, justice, and holiness, should be manifested. But this could not be, unless sin and punishment had been decreed; so that the shining forth of God's glory would be very imperfect, both because these parts of divine glory would not shine forth as others do, and also the glory of his goodness, love, and holiness would be faint

¹⁵² I am sympathetic with some of the skeptical concerns of contemporary philosophers with respect to our hopes at devising a full-blown theodicy explaining why evil exists. See Michael Tooley, "The Argument from Evil" in *Philosophical Perspectives*, vol. 5, *Philosophy Of Religion*, ed. James Tomberlin (Atascadero, CA: Ridgeview Publishing, 1991), 130. However, while I doubt that we can develop a full-blow theodicy explaining why evil exists, I am hopeful that we can devise a partial one, which provides at least some understanding of what God intends to accomplish by allowing evil events.

without them; nay, they could scarcely shine forth at all.¹⁵³

The idea, then, is that God values intrinsically the manifestation of His attributes such as justice, holiness, and mercy. And He allows evil events so that He can use them as a means for revealing these attributes. For example, He allows His creatures to reject Him and fall into the depths of sin so that He can demonstrate His mercy and love towards them.

Moreover, central to any theodicy will have to be the notion that since God is loving He intends as an end in itself the glorification of sinners. Long ago, Saint Paul wrote that God “chose us in him [Christ] before the creation of the world *to be holy and blameless in his sight.*”¹⁵⁴ We can conceive, then, of the drama of human history—creation, the Fall, and mankind’s redemption—as the great narrative of humans experiencing evil which serves as the means to their being saved from it for their ultimate glorification.

These are some suggestions as to the ends to which evil events can be understood to serve as a means so as to rebut the potential objection that God is evil on my account of the divine attributes. Of course there are those who will object that such ends do not *justify* God, because there are possible worlds where He could have achieved the same ends without these means.¹⁵⁵ For now, however, I want to forestall dealing with these objections, because they take us too far a field from the task at hand. I will deal with

¹⁵³ *The Works Of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 2, *Concerning The Divine Decrees* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2000), 528. For a further defense of this teleology see John Piper, *God’s Passion For His Glory* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1998).

¹⁵⁴ Ephesians 1:5, NIV, emphasis added.

¹⁵⁵ See, for example, Daniel Howard-Snyder, Michael Bergmann, and William Rowe, “An Exchange on the Problem of Evil,” in *God And The Problem Of Evil*, ed. William Rowe (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001), 126.

them in the next chapter when I turn to demonstrating the implications of an *actus purus* construal of divine simplicity for Rowe's evidential argument from evil.

Thus far, I have offered an intelligible way to understand the notion that God is an action, and I have explained how the idea that He is identical with His act of will does not imply He cannot be free and is arbitrary. Also I have developed an intelligible way to understand the claim that God is identical with His attributes. Conceiving of how this could be the case for God's incommunicable attributes was not very difficult, because these are simply different aspects of this one, eternal act of will. For His communicable attributes things are more difficult. But I have suggested that we can make even this notion intelligible by understanding these attributes as aspects of His willing certain events. God, then, can be understood to have all of the characteristics that He has in virtue of what He does in one eternal act with which He is identical, and, since He is identical with this act, all of the characteristics He has by virtue of it are essential to Him.

The Fruitfulness of an *Actus Purus* Construal of Divine Simplicity

Any person who has done philosophy for any length of time, especially in the analytic tradition, knows that part of the reason why she accepts a position is not *merely* for the arguments in favor of it. Arguments are important, but every good, analytic philosopher knows the analytic methodology is like a knife, and under close enough scrutiny any argument can be hacked to pieces. Essential to the persuasiveness of any position are the systematic implications that it has, for those theories are to be preferred which accord well with other beliefs we want to retain.

I have already argued that Plantinga's construal of the divine attributes is too costly, because it forces theists to abandon too much that they want to retain. It is inconsistent with robust accounts of God's omnipotence and sovereignty, creation *ex nihilo* and divine sustenance, and the important doctrine of His aseity. And it does not bode well for adhering to the ultimacy explanation, and the idea that God is a creator. But while accepting Plantinga's view brings with it the costly price of giving up *all* of these traditional beliefs, one of the merits of my account of the divine attributes is that it is consistent with them.

Unlike Plantinga, and contemporary Open Theists, in my account God has total power and total sovereignty and, thus, total control. He is identical with His act of will, and it is the bringing about of its content that is responsible for *all* that exists. And since His will is responsible for the being of all things, there is absolutely nothing that exists that can thwart it. This means God can be understood to create the world *ex nihilo*, for, conceptually speaking, in my model there is nothing that exists prior to His act of will, and it is His eternal act of will that sustains, directly, the world in existence.¹⁵⁶

God, in the fullest sense of the word, can be understood to be the *creator* of all things, because there is no Sears' catalogue of possible worlds that exists apart from Him that He flips through in order to decide which world He will create. And since He is identical with His act of will, He is completely *a se*, depending on nothing external to Himself to exist, and He is what He is, because of what He wills in one, eternal act.

¹⁵⁶ Aquinas had the insight that God sustains the world *directly* by His act of will, because He needs nothing else to do it: "The omnipotence of God, though, is displayed by his acting in everything *without intermediary*, for nothing is distant from him in the sense of God not being in it." See Aquinas, ST, pt. 1, Q. VIII, A. 1, emphasis added.

Prior to this act, conceptually speaking, within my model, absolutely *nothing* exists, so the ultimate explanation about anything pertaining to God or anything else is, “Because God wills it.” To seek any other ultimate explanation beyond this is to look for *something* where there is *nothing*.

My account extends into the beginnings of an account of divine omniscience as well. For since all things that exist are due to His one, eternal act of will, He knows all things *because* He wills them to be. One of the benefits of conceiving of His omniscience in this manner is that a person can avoid the notion that He knows all things *prior* to willing them. If God were to know all things prior to willing them, it would seem He would know what He would do prior to willing it, which seems suspect.

An *actus purus* understanding of God offers the beginning of an account as to how He can be sovereign while humans have genuine freedom.

Aquinas writes:

Now since it is God’s nature to exist, he it must be who properly causes existence in creatures, just as it is fire itself sets other things on fire. And God is causing this effect in things not just when they begin to exist, but all the time they are maintained in existence, just as the sun is lighting up the atmosphere all the time the atmosphere remains lit. During the whole period of a thing’s existence, therefore, God must be present to it, and present to it, and present in a way in keeping with the way in which the thing possesses its existence. Now existence is more intimately and profoundly interior to things than anything else, for everything as we said is potential when compared to existence.¹⁵⁷

It was an insight of the ancient Greeks that effects resemble their causes, and Aquinas draws upon this insight in order to reason that the effect mostly properly produced by the First Cause—that is, by Being Itself—must be existence. What this implies for the

¹⁵⁷ Aquinas, ST, pt. 1, Q. VIII, A. 1.

present inquiry is that we can understand what God wills in His eternal act of will as the *being* of things, and the manifestation of its content is that these things come to be.

Brian Davies summarizes how Aquinas worked out the implications of this insight for the debate over God's sovereignty and human freedom:

Aquinas therefore concludes that people acting freely fall under providence as free agents. But they are not free in the sense of being independent of God's causal operation, *for without this they would not exist and would not be acting*. They are free because God is making them free, because he has arranged that they function independently of the determining agency of other created things.¹⁵⁸

The upshot is that God is completely sovereign over all things, because it is only by His will that all things, including human actions, come to be. And, yet, creatures are completely free in all that they do, because God sustains them in existence acting freely. God is so powerful that He does not need to manipulate His creatures' beliefs and desires to move them to do anything. Rather He creates and sustains them in existence *freely doing* all He intends.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁸ Brian Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 176.

¹⁵⁹ For an introductory view of Aquinas's thought on divine sovereignty and human freedom see the relevant chapters in Brian Davies, *Aquinas* (New York: Continuum, 2002). For an argument that libertarian free will does not require the ability to confer existence on things see McCann, *The Works of Agency*, 186. For a contemporary, analytic defense of Aquinas's view see Hugh J. McCann, "Divine Sovereignty and the Freedom of the Will," *Faith and Philosophy* 12 (1995): 582-598. These ideas have implications for a major debate within contemporary philosophical theology which are beyond the scope of this essay, but I want to point to some of them briefly. One of the mistakes Calvinists make in arguing against libertarianism is that they assume that existence conferral is a necessary condition for libertarian free will. This can be seen by examining their arguments against Arminians. In arguing against them, for example, Charles Hodge contends that their view of free will must be wrong, because if it were correct then the future could not be certain and "[t]he future must be as dark to Him as to us; and He must every moment be receiving vast accessions of knowledge." See Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2., *Anthropology* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), 299. Hodges' argument seems to presuppose that libertarianism involves existence conferral, which is why he thinks that if we had it, the future would be dark and unknowable by God, since it would not exist. Because of this faulty assumption, Calvinists reject libertarianism and opt for compatibilism. The problems with such a view of free will, however, are well known, because it commits one to determinism, and so seems inconsistent with moral responsibility. Theologically, it seems that if all humans have had only compatibilist free will, then God would need to be the author of sin, because He would need to be the one to *make* Adam and Eve have evil desires, since

My account of the divine attributes overcomes the problems that I contended face Plantinga's theory. Unlike what is unclear in his account, the theory of the divine attributes constructed thus far retains the insight that God has His attributes such as justice, mercy, and love in virtue of what He does. The view I defend also provides a basis to avoid the skepticism concerning trusting God that plagues Plantinga's theory.

In chapter II, I argued that, since on Plantinga's view God has no control over abstract objects, God is not maximally trustworthy. I noted that there are two criteria a being must meet to be maximally trustworthy: it must have a good track record and total control. Since in my account God is the creator of all things, including His nature, He has total control. And since, historically, theists have conceived of God as having a good track record that demonstrates His love, goodness, and faithfulness, theists will have no problem finding God to be maximally trustworthy on my view.

In addition to having the resources to overcome this problem, the account of the divine attributes developed thus far has the resources to solve a problem taken to have been raised by medieval nominalists. Some theologians have taken the medieval nominalists to have denied our conceptions of the various divine attributes correspond to

they were created perfect. And, if humans only have compatibilist free will, then, given the Calvinistic notion of monergistic regeneration, it implies that post-regeneration all believers ought to be sinless. Reformed theologians have tried their best to solve some of these issues, but, in the end, no one is ever satisfied with what they come up with. Interestingly, after reading the writings of Open Theists, who react primarily to Calvinists, I have found that they accept, in a sense, the Calvinists' understanding of libertarian free will by simply granting what the Calvinists will not, namely that God does not know or control the future. Aquinas, I think, provides a way to transcend this debate by allowing for genuine freedom along with God's total sovereignty, and the key, I think, is his understanding of how God creates and sustains the world. Historically, I think that these problems emerged in Protestantism due to the anti-philosophic and, especially, anti-metaphysical, attitude of the Protestant Reformers, which led them to thrust aside the medieval tradition, particularly Aquinas's work. Hence Hans Holbein, during the Reformation, made a sketch of Luther slaying Aquinas and Aristotle. See Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand* (New York: Abingdon, 1950), 122. On one famous occasion Luther claimed that reason is the devil's whore. And anyone familiar with Calvin's *Institutes* will detect a similar attitude.

anything real in the divine essence. It seems some of them may have taken the doctrine of divine simplicity to imply this consequence, because, *prima facie*, it seems difficult to understand how there can be distinctions in an absolutely simple being. Ott explains:

According to the Nominalists the distinguishing of several qualities has no basis in the Divine Essence itself, but only in the various operations of God Against the acceptance of a mere logical distinction there is the fact that Holy Scripture refers to many attributes of God. To explain these away as mere synonyms is incompatible with the dignity of Holy Writ. Again, the perfections appearing in the works of God presuppose that God as their Originator Himself possesses them.¹⁶⁰

Historically, the problem with denying that human conceptions of the various divine attributes correspond to anything real in the divine essence is that this has been taken to imply creatures have no *true* knowledge of God. For example, Hodge writes, “To say, as the schoolmen, and so many even of Protestant theologians, ancient and modern, were accustomed to say, that the divine attributes differ only in name, or in our conceptions, or in their effects, is to destroy all true knowledge of God.”¹⁶¹

While numerous theologians have been zealous to deny this apparent aspect of nominalism, while simultaneously affirming divine simplicity, they have been unclear as to exactly *how* to overcome this problem. I have found such a criticism to apply particularly to the writings of the Reformed Scholastics. They affirm the theological maxim that distinction does not imply composition, but they fail to explain rigorously in what sense we can understand how our various concepts of the divine attributes corresponds to anything real in the divine essence.¹⁶²

¹⁶⁰ Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, 29.

¹⁶¹ Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, 371.

¹⁶² For example, Turretin affirms “distinction does not imply composition.” But he fails to explain rigorously how we can understand distinctions within a simple being. See Francis Turretin, *Institutes of*

In order to understand how an *actus purus* account of divine simplicity provides the resources to solve this problem, it will be helpful, again, to draw upon the distinction between God's incommunicable and communicable attributes. With respect to His attributes of eternity, immutability, omnipotence, and omniscience, our concepts of them can be understood as referring to different aspects of this one, simple act. Thus our concept that God is eternal refers to the fact that this pure act is, while our concept that He is immutable refers to the fact that He is unchanging due to lacking all potentiality. Our concepts of God's omnipotence and omniscience refer to the facts that He knows all things because He wills them to be, and nothing hinders Him in what He wills and in bringing it about.

In terms of solving this dilemma for God's communicable attributes, such as His love and mercy, things are trickier. Earlier I explained how, on an *actus purus* account, God can be understood as having these attributes in terms of events He wills in one eternal act of will. To solve the problem under consideration, I think the insight is that it is in one, eternal, act of will that God wills the being of a *multiplicity* of events. In so far as it is true that God really wills the occurrence of a multiplicity of events, our concepts of His justice, love, mercy and so forth can be understood as corresponding to something real in the divine essence. But since He wills all that He wills simultaneously, in one, eternal act of will, He is still simple.

Another problem an *actus purus* construal of divine simplicity has the resources

Elenctic Theology, ed. James Dennison, trans. George Giger (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1992), 191-194. See also Richard Mueller, *Post-Reformation Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy*, vol. 3, *The Divine Essence and Attributes* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003) for an overview of the Reformed Scholastics position on simplicity. However, in reading through Mueller's work, one will find that the Reformed Scholastics did little to address the problem I have pointed out.

to solve is understanding how a simple being can be free in creating the world.

Historically, theists have affirmed creation is a completely free and spontaneous act on God's part. And it seems they have affirmed this truth in order to avoid any suggestion that He somehow needed or depended on the world. Recently, though, within analytic circles, philosophers have wrestled with understanding exactly how such an affirmation is consistent with divine simplicity.¹⁶³ Rogers provides a concise formulation of the problem: "If God is eternally what He does, it seems that He could not do other than He does without being other than He is . . . that is, being other than God. It follows that God not only 'must' create, but 'must create' this world. And this seems to infringe upon God's freedom."¹⁶⁴

This dilemma arises from the erroneous supposition that the assertion that God must create the world is inconsistent with His complete freedom. And my understanding of Him as *actus purus* provides a way to see the error in this contention. I have already explained what it means to assert God is an action on my view: He is identical with His act of will. Conceptually speaking, within my model, prior to this act, nothing exists, so there is nothing that exists prior to God that causes Him to do anything. As such, His act of will, which is Himself, can be understood to be completely spontaneous and free. Yet since God is completely omnipotent nothing can thwart the bringing about of His will, and since He lacks all potentiality, He cannot do otherwise than what He wills. Thus, God can be understood to be completely free and spontaneous in willing the existence of

¹⁶³ See for example William Mann, "Simplicity and Immutability in God," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 23 (1983): 267-276, and Stump and Kretzmann, "Absolute Simplicity," 353-381.

¹⁶⁴ Rogers, *The Anselmian Approach to God*, 45.

the world and, yet the world must come about because nothing can thwart or alter His eternal act of will. As *actus purus*, freedom and necessity can be understood to co-exist together in God in perfect balance and harmony.

Another problem contemporary philosophers have taken simplicity to imply is that it commits one to the view that creatures determine aspects of God's nature. Rogers explains:

Suppose John and Mary, who are both married to other people, freely choose to commit a sin by having sex with each other. And suppose Jane is the result of this illicit union. Since Jane exists, God knows Jane and sustains her in being. God's eternal, immutable act includes knowing and sustaining Jane. But Jane would not exist if it were not for the choice of John and Mary. It is up to John and Mary which possible world will be actualized, and moreover their choice is partially constitutive of God's act which is His nature.¹⁶⁵

Ultimately she embraces this supposed consequence of divine simplicity, because she thinks it is inescapable. But she no longer views it as a problem: "it only means that God is stranger and better and greater than we might have thought at first."¹⁶⁶

Rogers does not elaborate exactly how this consequence makes God better and greater. But the fact is she seems to be wrong, because this outcome is clearly inconsistent with the traditional understanding of God's aseity, which implies that He is what He is due to Himself alone. Besides it is unclear how we ought to conceive of Roger's suggestion that creatures affect God's nature. She admits God is eternal, and, if such is the case, it is difficult to understand how creatures who exist acting in time could determine any aspect of the divine nature.

She thinks simplicity implies that creatures determine God's nature because,

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 48.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 56.

“Jane would not *exist* if it were not for the choice of John and Mary.”¹⁶⁷ Her error is in thinking that the advocate of divine simplicity must grant that John and Mary confer *existence* on Jane and thereby come to determine part of the divine nature. On the account of God developed here, creatures cannot confer existence on anything. Only the Creator and Sustainer of all things can do that, because it is His one, eternal act of will whereby He grants being to all things—even the free acts of His creatures. There is no need, then, to follow Rogers down the path of rejecting God’s aseity by thinking His nature is determined by any free acts performed by His creatures.

Consequences of Rejecting an *Actus Purus* Account of Divine Simplicity

One of the major theoretical benefits of conceiving of God as *actus purus* is that it provides a compelling account of His freedom. And, as I see it, if one rejects the account of the divine attributes developed here, all of the options for conceiving of His freedom are problematic. If such is the case, there is powerful theoretical motivation to adopt the account of the divine attributes developed thus far. The best way to further this argument is to begin by considering how this problem emerges at the level of creatures and then to move upwards to the Creator.

One of the standard criticisms of libertarian accounts of the will is that it commits a person to the consequence that agents act arbitrarily. Proponents of libertarianism can attempt to overcome this objection in various ways. One way is through devising teleological explanations of a creatures’ behavior based upon the

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 48, emphasis added.

attractiveness of perceived goods.¹⁶⁸ For example, then, we can explain why Aquinas writes the *Summa Theologica* in terms of how writing such a work served as a means to accomplishing a perceived good, the edification of the Christian Church.

While such teleological explanations do some work in rebutting the force of the arbitrariness objection, they do not dissolve it completely. As McCann explains, we still have not explained completely why a person chooses one good over another.¹⁶⁹ For example, teleological explanations seem to provide little help in explaining why Thomas chooses to go to Colorado for vacation as opposed to New York, both of which seem good.¹⁷⁰ McCann suggests one way out of this dilemma can be found by thinking through the implications of God's sovereignty. While appealing to things about Thomas may not explain fully why he opts for vacationing in Colorado as opposed to New York, one can provide a complete explanation by appealing to God:

He has a reason why I should decide to vacation in Colorado, and unlike mine His reason will be sufficient. For in contrast to me, God is fully aware of the ramifications of all the choices I might make, and His perfect goodness ensures that He will create only the best. So His reasons for having me decide as I do, whatever they are, will explain fully the occurrence of my decision, in terms of His perfect goodness.¹⁷¹

I think McCann's suggestion is a good one, because it seems, for those that are committed to believing in God's sovereignty, that such a belief ought to have implications in terms of explaining why a creature acts in a particular way. And I think the *actus purus* account of divine simplicity developed thus far has the resources to

¹⁶⁸ See McCann, *The Works of Agency, 179-191* for a fuller discussion of this position and the issues involved.

¹⁶⁹ McCann, "Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom," 585.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*,

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 587.

strengthen McCann's suggestion by developing it further.

Consider: someone might object that if God exists distinct from His act of willing a particular content, then it seems that He arbitrarily *decides* to grant existence to Thomas's free act of choosing to vacation in Colorado as opposed to New York, both of which are good. And if He is arbitrary in deciding what He does, appealing to Him will do no good to explain fully Thomas's action where teleological explanations fall short. The only way, then, it seems appealing to God can be helpful in overcoming the arbitrariness objection to libertarianism is if He exists not distinct from His act of will but identical with it. If He is identical with His act of will, He cannot be arbitrary in willing what He does, because there is no moment when He decides to will anything. He simply exists willing a particular content in one completely free and non-arbitrary act.¹⁷²

Besides facing problems overcoming the arbitrariness objection on libertarian accounts of the will, there are other problems a person faces if she rejects the *actus purus* account of divine simplicity devised thus far in this essay. Rejecting such an account implies that God exists as an agent distinct from His act of willing a particular content. But if God exists distinct from His action, then there are only two options for understanding the freedom that He has as an agent in deciding what particular content He will will: one can opt for a compatibilist account or a libertarian one. Suppose a person opts for a compatibilist account.¹⁷³ The problems with this are well-known and

¹⁷² See pages 80-84 of this chapter for a fuller explanation of how my position overcomes the arbitrariness objection.

¹⁷³ Jonathan Edwards seems to have thought that God has compatibilist free-will. See *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 1, *The Freedom Of The Will* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2000), 41.

numerous.

Prima facie, it seems repugnant, because God is something like a robot acting out His strongest beliefs or desires, and this seems to impugn seriously His praiseworthiness. If this is the sort of freedom He has, then He seems causally determined to create the world and thereby, *contra* historic, natural theology, is not free in doing so. And if He acts on His strongest beliefs and desires, then one needs to explain where He gets these mental states. God Himself cannot be the creator of them, since He would need to act prior to having such states, which on this option is impossible. So it seems that to understand the origins of God's beliefs and desires we have only two options. First we could appeal to something external to Him that places them in Him, which is hardly a serious option for any theist. Or, second, there could be some sort of infinite regress of causal states. But if there is an infinite regress of causal states that He has, it is difficult to see how He could begin to act in the first place, since there is no first mental state to get Him acting. Moreover, even if He did have an infinite set of mental states, this option poses the problem of understanding how He can go through an infinite set of mental states.

While compatibilist accounts of God's freedom seem plagued with problems, someone might assert a libertarian account fares better. But it is difficult to see how. If God exists as an agent distinct from His act of willing a particular content, the only way He can act is if there are possible options for acting that exist apart from His act of

willing all things from Him which He can choose.¹⁷⁴ Prima facie, such a consequence is immediately problematic for theists, because it is inconsistent with Him being the creator and sustainer of all things. And it is inconsistent with God's aseity, because He is dependent on these options for acting. It also raises problems with whether God is truly a creator, because it seems that He merely *orders* what He will do from a Sears' catalogue of possible options, rather than creating all things.

The real problem, however, is that it is difficult to see how one can avoid the consequence that on this option, whatever He chooses, He will be unable to avoid an element of arbitrariness. It seems difficult to explain why He chooses to act so as to bring about the creation of one good world over another. Prima facie, it seems that God will have many equally good options open to Him in creating a world, so it seems any choice between them will end up involving an amount of arbitrariness that is unsatisfying.

In addition to facing problems with respect to providing an account of divine freedom, if a person rejects the account of the divine attributes in this thesis, it is open to question whether she can avoid problems when it comes to the issue of realism, or the notion of universals. Thus far, I have argued one ought to conceive of there being nothing that exists prior to God's eternal act of will. This implies that modality does not exist prior to Him, and needs to be understood as the result of His act of will. In the conclusion, I will develop in more detail how one can conceive of God being the Creator

¹⁷⁴ I do not think it is an accident that Plantinga rejects divine simplicity and embraces Platonism. Consider: in rejecting simplicity, God cannot be identical with His act of will. But then it seems we need to posit a moment whereby God decides to will a particular content, and it seems the only way He can decide to will a particular content is if there exists options from which to choose, which exist apart from His act of will.

of modality by contending, with Leibniz, that He does it by creating the essences of things. At this point, however, I want to note that this understanding of modality can be dubbed the Aristotelian/Aquinas model, since there is an ultimate Creator, or Unmoved Mover, that is responsible for the existence of all things, and, as I will explain later, there are no universals that exist apart from particulars.

If a person rejects the Aristotelian/Aquinas model of modality, then, within Western Philosophy there are really only two other serious options that a person can embrace: nominalism or Platonism. Both of these options, however, are riddled with problems.

Consider the nominalist option. *Prima facie*, the massive amount of similarity between objects in the natural world suggests they have something in common which is responsible for their similarity, and the realist can account for this similarity by explaining that objects have the same essence. Likewise, *prima facie*, it seems some theists have a vested interest in retaining a realist view when it comes to the notion of essences. The orthodox understanding of the Trinity and the nature of Christ appeals to essences: God is one in essence and three in person, and Christ has two natures in one person. If one abandons essences completely, then it is unclear how she can develop orthodox views pertaining to the Trinity and nature of Christ. Moreover, all theists believe that different actions can be considered instances of sin, and without a doctrine of essences, it is hard to see how different actions can all be instances of it.

A major objection to nominalism is that if a person rejects the notion of essences completely, it is difficult to conceive how she can retain any viable position when it

comes to modality. It certainly seems there are some things that are possible and other things that are impossible. For example, it is impossible for a triangle to have more than three sides, whereas it is possible for a tree to have blue leaves. And it seems that to account for these facts one needs to appeal to essences. It is because of the essence of triangularity that a triangle must have three sides, whereas it is because of the essence of a tree that it can have blue leaves.

Moreover, nominalism is incredibly problematic when it comes to doing science. For the realist, empirically well-confirmed theories are getting at truth about the world. In other words, for the realist, empirically well-confirmed theories are getting at the way that the world *really is*. But, metaphysically, to get at the way that the world *really is* can be understood as getting at the natures or essences of the things that make up the world. By nature or essence I mean the set of properties that make a thing what it is and thereby give it certain causal properties. Since the time of the ancient Greeks, the natures or essences of things have been taken to be what remains unchanging in the midst of constant flux. Therefore, since the realist believes her theories about things in the world are getting at the nature or essences of things, and since she believes that essences and natures do not change, she has reason for thinking that her theories about the world will continue to work well at predicting things in the future.

Consider, however, the nominalist. For the nominalist, scientific theories do not get at the way the world is, the natures or essences of things in the world. The question the nominalist faces is this: on what grounds can she assert that she has reason to think that her scientific theories will continue to predict accurately that certain phenomena will

occur? The nominalist does not have open to her the realist response. But, without such a response, all it seems that the nominalist has to ground her belief that her theories will continue to predict accurately are the *past* and *present* observations that confirm the scientific theory in question.

The problem, however, is that the *past* and *present* observations that have confirmed scientific theories do absolutely nothing to give one any sort of basis for thinking that in the *future* her theories will continue to predict accurately phenomena in the world. And so it seems that every time a particular phenomena occurs that was predicted by a scientific theory, for the nominalist it turns out to be a complete *accident* that the phenomena in question was consistent with what the theory predicted. The problem with this consequence for the nominalist is two-fold. On the one hand, it seems to be a large bullet to bite that every time a particular phenomenon occurs that was predicted by a theory it is really nothing more than an accident. On the other hand, it is an incredibly *unpragmatic* consequence, and this is a major problem for the nominalist whose chief concerns tend to lie in the area of pragmatic success. Consider: what we want is a scientific position that gives us some basis for predicting how the world *will be*. We want this position, at the very least, for pragmatic reasons: so that we can do things such as landing men on the moon. And in order to do things such as this we need to be able to have some basis for thinking that the world will continue to be like our theories predict.

I want to clarify this problem is not simply a Humean one. Both the realist and the nominalist have only the current and past observational evidence to confirm theories.

The problem is not this. Rather, it concerns what one thinks this evidence demonstrates. Since the realist can take such evidence to demonstrate a theory is approximating the truth about how the world is, this provides her with a basis for thinking that her theories will continue to have predictive power, since she can believe that the essences and natures of things are unchanging. However, because the nominalist does not think that she is getting at how the world is, her philosophic position leaves her in the position that it is completely arbitrary any future phenomena occurs as predicted by her theory.¹⁷⁵

There are good reasons, then, to abandon nominalism. But this leaves a person with the Platonic option. Prima facie, Platonism is plagued with a set of standard problems. Where did these Platonic entities come from? Where do they exist? How can we know anything about them? How do entities participate in them? Besides the un-intuitiveness of Platonism, however, it is open to question whether it is a consistent position. I want to argue that it is not, because it presupposes the Aristotelian/Aquinas model. I will take as a representative of the Platonic position Plantinga's theory of abstract objects.

Plantinga asserts that abstract objects are not self-exemplifying (36), and his contention is a standard view among Platonists.¹⁷⁶ On the other hand, however, he asserts that abstract objects do exist in relations whereby they exemplify *other* abstract

¹⁷⁵ The nominalist might respond to my argument by claiming that she can have a basis for thinking that her theories will continue to predict well by assuming the principle of induction. The problem with this potential rejoinder, however, is that it misses the point at issue. Obviously the principle of induction works well at giving one a basis for predicting the future. But since the realist can believe that the current and past observations that confirm theories get one at the essence of things, the realist has an explanation as to *why* induction works well. I have argued, however, that the anti-realist cannot explain why induction works well and, thereby, she is open to the charge that it is a complete accident that all future phenomena that occur are consistent with her theories.

¹⁷⁶ See Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Divine Simplicity," 146.

objects (36). Now Plantinga contends that existence or being is an abstract object (22-23, 62), so it would seem that the one abstract object that all others need to exemplify is that of existence or being, because, if they did not, they would not exist. But what about the abstract object of existence—is it self-exemplifying? It has to be, because if it were not, it would not exist. So the abstract object of existence or being, as explained in chapter II, on Plantinga's account, has to be an exception to his principle that abstract objects are not self-exemplifying.

Plantinga fails to analyze the abstract object of being or existence, but, since it is an exception to the metaphysical principle that abstract objects are not self-exemplifying, clearly this abstract objects plays a unique and crucial role in his system, and, thereby, it merits further investigation. One question we might ask of it is this: is it *simple*? All of the other abstract objects in Plantinga's system cannot be simple, since they exemplify the abstract object of existence and thereby can be understood as composite. The abstract object of being, however, cannot be composed of any parts, because, if it were, those parts would need to exist prior to it, which is impossible, since the parts could not be since being does not yet exist.

Since the abstract object of being must be absolutely simple, it cannot depend on anything else to exist. As such, it is self-existent and, thus, has *aseity*. And this abstract object needs to be understood as *infinite* as well. Since it is self-existent it cannot be limited by anything on which it depends to exist, and it cannot limit itself either. If it were to limit itself, since it is being-itself, it could only limit itself in terms of its existence, but then it would not be self-existent and thereby could not exist. Since this

abstract object of being has aseity, it seems that it needs to be conceived of as being *eternal*. If it existed in time, it would depend on time to exist. Moreover, if this entity is infinite, it must be eternal, since if it existed in time, its being would be limited to existing one moment at a time. The abstract object of being, then, has its being all at once and thereby simply *is*.

Plantinga takes abstract objects to be completely inert and static—unable to do anything (57). This raises the question: is the abstract object of being completely inert and static? It cannot be. If it were, then nothing else could exist, since nothing else could come to have being. As such, the abstract object of being must be *self-moving* and have *efficient causality*. And if the abstract object needs to be understood as self-moving and having efficient causality so that it can grant being to other things, then it can be understood as *sovereign* as well. It is sovereign because it is what controls all that comes to exist.

Once we realize that the abstract object of being is sovereign, this raises the question of how exactly it grants being to things, and it seems that there are only two options. Either it does it by a free act of will, or some state inside of it causes it to do so. If the second, then this state exists prior to this abstract object's act of granting being to other things. But such a conclusion is inconsistent with the earlier one that this abstract object is eternal, which means it cannot undergo a succession of moments whereby at one moment there is one state and at another this state causes it to do something else. And if the state that causes this object to grant being to other things exists distinct from its act of doing so, then this entity is not simple either. Thus, this entity must cause other

things to have being by a free act of will.

But the abstract object of being must be identical with the free act whereby it bestows being on other things, since, if it were not, it would not be simple, and it would undergo a succession of moments unbefitting to something eternal. Now, however, this abstract object of being is suspiciously close to the *actus purus* construal of divine simplicity that I developed. On that account God is identical with His act of will, and this act of will can be understood as willing being to things, just as Plantinga's abstract object is an act of will whereby it wills being to things. The conclusion is that Plantinga's failure to tell us about the abstract object of being in his system is a serious one, since a Platonic system such as Plantinga's is open to the charge that it is an unstable half-way house between pure nominalism and an Aristotelian/Aquinas view of God. And this implies that it seems that while Plantinga rejects an *actus purus* account of divine simplicity in favor of Platonism, he is open to the charge that he is sneaking such a view in through the back door.

Conclusion

I have developed an argument for why one might be led to embrace an *actus purus* understanding of divine simplicity, and I have clarified and developed this view by drawing the resources of contemporary action theory. I have contended that this theory of the divine attributes is incredibly fruitful, because it is consistent with a large number of beliefs theists affirm about God, and it overcomes a number of the problems leveled, historically, against divine simplicity. And I have argued that if a person rejects

my understanding of the divine nature, then she faces several pressing problems. With this foundation for my theory, in the next and final chapter of this thesis, I want to turn to pointing out the areas of my theory that stand in need of further development. And I also want to demonstrate the rich number of implications that follow from my theory for contemporary, analytic, philosophers of religion.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

During the summer between my sophomore and junior years in college, I read Plantinga's *Does God Have a Nature*, and his Platonism troubled me, because I thought it to be incompatible with God's majesty as traditionally understood. This thesis has been an attempt to remedy that problem by developing an alternative model of God for contemporary, analytic, philosophers of religion. In chapter II, I argued Plantinga provides insufficient reasons in favor of his Platonic construal of the divine attributes, and I contended there are significant problems with it. Given the problems with his theory, a person has motivation to re-consider the viability of the doctrine of divine simplicity. In order to embrace such a doctrine, however, a person needs to overcome the now classic defeaters which Plantinga has leveled against it. Chapter III provided rejoinders to all of those defeaters, and it opened the door towards seeing the fruitfulness of an *actus purus* construal of divine simplicity. In chapter IV, I developed a number of arguments for such a view, and, at this point, I think it is evident there are strong reasons for adopting it.

The most pressing area of my theory that needs to be explored and developed is my commitment to an eternal God. This is a thesis which is highly controversial among contemporary theists for various reasons. Some of them argue that a timeless God would be lacking in omniscience, because He could not know propositions that pertain to what occurs now. Others contend that the biblical record of God indicates that He

changes and interacts with creatures in time, which it would be impossible for a timeless being to do. While abandoning God's eternity, however, contemporary thinkers still want to maintain some element of immutability in Him, especially when it comes to His character.¹⁷⁷

Prima facie, it is not clear that these sorts of objections are problematic for the notion of God's eternity. As for God's inability to know what occurs now if He is eternal, even if such a claim were true, it is not clear how problematic it is for theists. D.H. Mellor, for example, has argued that there is no changing flow of time that exists and that now beliefs are simply a psychological crutch that creatures need to act in the world.¹⁷⁸ For an eternal God that knows all things and acts in one eternal act of will, He would not need such a psychological crutch to act. So the fact that He lacks such knowledge would demonstrate a perfection in Him—not a defect. And as for the notion that the Bible indicates that God exists in time as a changing being, it is equally true that the Bible asserts, "For a thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by, or like a watch in the night."¹⁷⁹ These verses suggest that God bears a relationship to time much different than that of creatures, which may be taken as biblical evidence in favor of the eternal position.

Besides, prima facie, it is not clear to me that if we embrace the idea that God exists in time we can guarantee His character is immutable, as proponents of the idea that God is temporal seek to do. Consider: if God exists in time, then all aspects of His

¹⁷⁷ For a nice overview of some of the concerns surrounding God as eternal see Nicholas Wolterstorff, "God is Everlasting," in *Philosophy of Religion*, eds. Michael Peterson and others (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 125-134.

¹⁷⁸ D.H. Mellor, *Real Time II* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 64-69.

¹⁷⁹ Psalm 90:4, NIV.

being, including His character, are subject to change. It is true that God may be maximally good and maximally loving and so these aspects of His character may prevent Him from ever ceasing to be good or loving. But it is not clear to me that even this will ensure the immutability of God's character. After thousands of years of rejection, scorn and disobedience by the majority of His creatures, it seems conceivable that at some point God may cease to be patient and loving towards His creatures. Some theists, for example, claim that there was a point in history when God regretted that He created the human race and so He destroyed most of it by a world-wide flood.

So, *prima facie*, it is not clear that these potential objections against divine eternity pose any threat to its viability. And some have argued that theists have strong reasons for embracing the notion of an eternal God. Paul Helm, for example, argues that it is only an eternal God that will be able to be completely omniscient.¹⁸⁰ My purpose for raising this sort of argument is not to examine it in detail, but simply to note that these kinds of arguments exist, and they may provide a source of motivation in support of divine eternity. Determining the viability of an eternal God is outside of the scope of this essay. My purpose in raising the issues surrounding this notion has been simply to show that there is no *prima facie* absurdity to it, and there may be reasons to embrace it.

In addition to raising the viability of divine eternity, if one chooses to accept the view of God and the divine attributes developed in this thesis, she will need to rethink the viability of a number of the aspects that pervade contemporary analytic

¹⁸⁰ Paul Helm, *Eternal God* (New York: Clarendon Press, 1988), 73-94.

philosophy of religion. I want to turn to completing my development of an *actus purus* construal of divine simplicity by considering some of its implications. Every one of these topics, I think, deserves its own research program, and much more could be written about it than what I will write here. At best, these considerations ought to be taken as providing a sort of *prolegomena* for future research topics for philosophers doing philosophy of religion.

If we accept the *actus purus* understanding of God devised here, it will affect, radically, a person's understanding of modality. God does not decide between possible options on my account, since He does not decide at all. He exists, eternally, willing a particular content, and it is this act of will that is responsible for the existence of all things, including what is possible and necessary.

Leibniz, I think, can be taken to provide one way to proceed in understanding how God is the creator of modality: "God is the source not only of existences, but also of essences, in so far as they are real; he is the sources of what reality there is among possibilities."¹⁸¹ We can conceive of God determining what is possible and necessary, then, when He wills to create the essences of things. So, for example, it is because of what He wills the essence of a triangle to be that it is impossible that it have more than three-sides, whereas it is because of what He wills the essence of a tree to be that it is possible for it to have blue leaves.

As for the potential objection that the view under consideration is merely a version of Descartes's universal possibilism, such an objection would be misguided.

¹⁸¹ Leibniz, *Monadology*, 273.

Clearly universal possibilism is wrong. It is impossible for a square to have more than three-sides or for two plus two to equal six, and God *could not* and *cannot* make such propositions true, and nothing in the view of modality under consideration asserts anything to the contrary. As for exactly how the present view is different, again, I think we can take another hint from Leibniz: “without God there would be no reality among the possibles; not only would nothing exist, but nothing would even be possible.”¹⁸²

Leibniz’s hint, then, is that the error of universal possibilism, ironically, is that while trying to salvage God’s power it undercuts it. It undercuts it, because to suggest that God *could* have made something such as two plus two equal six is to presuppose a Sears catalogue of possible options that exists prior to God’s act of will from which He can choose. But if such a catalogue of options exists prior to God’s act of will, then He did not create it. Universal possibilism is wrongheaded, because it does not carry through consistently the insight that God has power over *all* things. It sneaks Platonism in through the back door.

Rather, Leibniz’s hint reveals that God could not, for example, have made two plus two equal six, because, prior to His one eternal act of will whereby He wills the essences of things, conceptually speaking, within my model, *nothing*, including modality and, even, God Himself, exists. And once God wills the essences of all things in His one, eternal act with which He is identical, He determines all that is possible and necessary. And what is possible and necessary cannot change once He wills it, because the one, eternal act that determines modality is *actus purus* and thereby eternal and completely

¹⁸² Ibid., For a similar line of argumentation against universal possibilism see Morris and Menzel, “Absolute Creation,” 353-362.

immutable.

In terms of the essences that God wills, we, like Aristotle, can conceive of them as existing only in particulars so as to avoid any sort of Platonic understanding of them. As for possible worlds, then, they do not actually exist anywhere. All that exists is what God wills to be, the particulars that come to be in this world. Possible worlds can be understood to be merely pieces of conceptual apparatus that creatures devise for various purposes. As creatures we live and interact in the day to day world of tables and chairs and rocks and trees. Through experiencing such objects we are able to abstract from them their essences. Once we come to an understanding of their essences, we are able to conceive, conceptually, of what is possible and necessary for them. And it is these conceptions that turn out to be fragments of possible worlds.¹⁸³

Given the aforementioned understanding of modality, we will need to be careful how we understand God's necessary existence. All theists believe God *cannot* fail to exist. He exists necessarily. Such affirmations, however, are inherently ambiguous and open to different interpretations. One popular way to cash out this notion is to claim God's necessary existence implies He exists in every possible world.¹⁸⁴ If, however, what has been said thus far about modality is correct, then we will need to abandon this view, since God is the creator of modality, so it does not apply to Him. But, I do not think that doing so is much of a loss. In fact, to be honest, from the first time I heard this assertion, I have always thought that it was a foolish way to conceive of the Lord of

¹⁸³ I am thankful to Hugh J. McCann for helping me to develop these insights pertaining to modality during discussions with him over the doctrine of divine simplicity.

¹⁸⁴ See for example Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity*, 61.

Hosts. It conjures up images of possible worlds being some sort of jack-in-the-box, which, whenever we crank them up enough to see what they contain, out pops God.

Rather, as I take it, an affirmation that God exists necessarily means He is self-existent, the ground of His own being. He is the ground of His own being due to the fact that He is identical with the act of will that makes Him all that He is. As I understand it, the only meaningful way to interpret the *ambiguous* claim that *God cannot fail to exist* is that He cannot fail to exist, because He exists in one, eternal, immutable, act which is the ground of its own being. God *cannot* fail to exist, because, unlike us, He does not go through time and need to worry about failing to exist in the future. He is, as Moses pointed out so long ago, the great I AM.

The implications that an *actus purus* account of God has for our understanding of modality will, in turn, have implications for the contemporary debate over the problem of evil. Nowadays the main argument under consideration in this debate is Rowe's version of the evidential argument from evil:

1. There exist horrendous evils that an all-powerful, all-knowing, perfectly good being would have no justifying reason to permit.
2. An all-powerful, all-knowing, perfectly good being would not permit an evil unless he had a justifying reason to permit it., therefore
3. God does not exist.¹⁸⁵

By the phrase *justifying reason* Rowe means "either some outweighing good that, all things considered, he wishes to realize and *cannot* realize without permitting that evil, or some equal or worse evil that, all things considered, he wishes to prevent and *cannot*

¹⁸⁵ Snyder, Bergmann, and Rowe, "An Exchange on the Problem of Evil," 126, emphasis added.

realize without permitting that evil.”¹⁸⁶ The power of Rowe’s argument comes from the fact that any theodicy a person develops in response to it falls prey to the objection that God could have constructed a world whereby He achieved the same good without evil and, thereby, He is not justified in permitting evil to accomplish such a purpose.

I have already discussed the beginnings of a theodicy, and the theodicy I developed is subject to Rowe’s criticism. The problem with his criticism, however, is that when he objects that God *could* have achieved the same goods without using evil, he is presupposing there is a set of possible options for creation, from which He could choose, prior to His eternal act of will. On the understanding of modality developed here, however, there are no set of options that God could have chosen from prior to His eternal act of will, so it is wrongheaded to object that He *could* have achieved the same goods without using evil. Admittedly, we can *conceive* of possible worlds whereby God achieved the same goods without using evil to accomplish them, but the fact that we can *conceive* of them does not imply that they were *available* prior to His eternal act of willing all things.

My account provides the resources for theists to respond to Rowe by rejecting his notion of a *justifying reason* on the grounds that it is too strong. Since the possible worlds which we can conceive were not available to God prior to His eternal act of willing all things, it is wrongheaded to object He is not justified in bringing about a particular good by means of some evil solely because we can conceive of a world where He could have accomplished the same end without evil. Premise two of Rowe’s

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.,

argument, then, is wrong, because it is inherently inconsistent. An all-powerful being is the creator of the modal order, but, if He is its creator, then possible worlds do not exist prior to His act of will. Thus, He cannot be subject to Rowe's notion of a justifying reason, which presupposes He does not create modality.¹⁸⁷

Another implication of an *actus purus* account of divine simplicity I want to explore pertains to divine command theory. The classic objection to a divine command theory of ethics is the Euthyphro dilemma: does God command what He does because it is good, or does what He command determine what is good? The problem with the first option is that it seems to presuppose that what is good exists independent of God, whereas the problem with the second is that it seems to commit one to the idea that He determines arbitrarily what is good.

The *actus purus* account of divine simplicity devised thus far provides the resources for responding to this dilemma by upholding *both* horns of it. It provides a way to conceive of the objectivity of goodness, while at the same time making God the determiner of it in a non-arbitrary way. We can conceive of Him being the determiner of what is good when He wills to bring about good events in His one, eternal act of will. And all of the divine commands can, thereby, be understood as commands that, when obeyed, bring about objectively good events. Yet God is not arbitrary in willing what He does. He exists as identical with the one, eternal act whereby He wills to bring about

¹⁸⁷ I have already explained how God is not evil on my model. With this response to Rowe's argument, it seems to me the most pressing issue remaining, in terms of the problem of evil, is the issue of whether God does anything *wrong* in willing certain evil events as a means to other ones. In response to this objection, within the model of God I have developed, since He is the absolute creator of all things, His actions are not subject to moral evaluation, because there is no standard that exists higher than Him to which He is subject.

good events, and it is in this one eternal act that He simultaneously decrees all of the divine commands to instruct His creatures in how to bring about that which is objectively good. The upshot is that the Euthyphro dilemma was only a problem for the Greeks, because their gods were too weak. The true God is *actus purus* and thereby able to overcome the problems that plagued the pantheon of Greek idols.

One of the major objections leveled against divine simplicity is that Christian theists cannot embrace it, because it is inconsistent with their understanding of the Trinity.¹⁸⁸ While developing a full-blown response to this defeater is beyond the scope of this essay, the *actus purus* construal of God devised thus far at least hints towards one way in conceiving of the Trinity within the model of Him proposed here.

Historically, when it comes to the Trinity, Christians have asserted God is one in essence and three in persons. The mystery of the Trinity involves understanding how there can be distinction between the members of the Godhead even though they are identical with the divine essence. Since Augustine's *On the Trinity*, the dominant model of the Trinity in Western Christianity has been the psychological model, whereby the Son is considered to be the Father's knowledge of Himself, whereas the Spirit is considered to be the Father's self-love or will.

I think a person can draw upon the psychological model of the Trinity to explain how an *actus purus* construal of divine simplicity is consistent with the Christian understanding of the Trinity. In the model of God proposed in this essay, the Triune God can be understood to be the *actus purus*. Within this *actus purus*, however, the

¹⁸⁸ See for example Christopher Hughes, *On a Complex Theory of a Simple God* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989).

members of the Trinity can be considered to be distinct by virtue of their relations to one another. The Father can be understood as the content of the *actus purus*. Whereas the Son is the self-knowledge within the *actus purus*; the reflexive act of the Father understanding Himself, the content. And the Spirit can be taken to be the Father's loving and willing of that content.

Within this model, the Father, Son, and Spirit are identical with the divine essence, the *actus purus*, but they are distinct in virtue of different relations to each other. Moreover, within this model, one can understand how the members of the Trinity exist eternally along side each other while remaining distinct. There can be no willing without a content to the will, and something cannot be willed apart from being known, and there can be no willing or knowing without a content being willed and known.¹⁸⁹

In closing, while there may be areas of my *actus purus* construal of divine simplicity that need to be explored and developed, I hope it is equally obvious that this understanding of the divine attributes provides the resources for several new research programs. And I hope that the sheer amount of implications that follow from re-examining the traditional doctrine of divine simplicity demonstrates that the theistic tradition is something that is rich, deep and worthy of being embraced and explored. Far from being the result of naively accepting Greek philosophy, it seems to me that early theistic thinkers passionately lived out the motto of *fides quare intellectum*. And in thinking this way, they were blessed with discovering a large amount of truth and wisdom that deserves to be preserved and developed for later generations. Rather than

¹⁸⁹ See Joseph Bobik, *Veritas Divina: Aquinas on Divine Truth* (South Bend: Saint Augustine's Press, 2001), 71-87 for a more detailed discussion of these issues.

scorning traditional theology, I suggest we humbly accept and develop its insights. For it seems to me that by embracing this tradition, we will once again be able to have a philosophy of religion that is consonant with the Scriptures:

*You are worthy, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honor and power,
for you created all things,
and by your will they were created
and have their being.¹⁹⁰*

¹⁹⁰ Revelation 4:11, NIV. I want to thank Hugh J. McCann for his encouragement and help in writing this thesis. I would also like thank the Melbern G. Glasscock Center for Humanities Research for providing me with a fellowship to fund research on this thesis.

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