

Inquiring about God



Selected Essays, Volume I

NICHOLAS WOLTERSTORFF

Edited by Terence Cuneo

CAMBRIDGE

INQUIRING ABOUT GOD

Inquiring about God is the first of two volumes of Nicholas Wolterstorff's collected papers. This volume collects Wolterstorff's essays in the philosophy of religion written over the last thirty-five years. The essays, which span a range of topics including Kant's philosophy of religion, the medieval (or classical) conception of God, and the problem of evil, are unified by the conviction that some of the central claims made by the classical theistic tradition, such as the claims that God is timeless, simple, and impassible, should be rejected. Still, Wolterstorff contends, rejecting the classical conception of God does not imply that theists should accept the Kantian view, according to which God cannot be known. Of interest to both philosophers and theologians, *Inquiring about God* should give the reader a lively sense of the creative and powerful work done in contemporary philosophical theology by one of its foremost practitioners.

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore,
São Paulo, Delhi, Dubai, Tokyo

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521514651

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First published 2010

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Wolterstorff, Nicholas.

Inquiring about God : selected essays / Nicholas Wolterstorff, Terence Cuneo.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-521-51465-1 (hardback) 1. Philosophical theology.

2. Analysis (Philosophy) I. Cuneo, Terence, 1969– II. Title.

BT40.W65 2009

210—dc22 2009035032

ISBN 978-0-521-51465-1 Hardback

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Editor's introduction

Several years ago, I approached Nick Wolterstorff with the idea of publishing his papers in the philosophy of religion and epistemology. Lying behind the suggestion was the thought that it would be good for the philosophical community to have these essays, which lay scattered in various essay collections and journals, collected together. Nick liked the idea and, fortunately, so did Cambridge University Press. The result is two volumes of Nick's collected papers: *Inquiring about God* and *Practices of Belief*.

Nick and I chose to include the thirteen chapters that comprise this volume. Our primary principle of selection was to include self-standing essays that have minimal overlap with each other and the various books that Nick has published. With the exception of the Introduction and chapter 10, "Is God disturbed by what transpires in human affairs?", the essays that appear in this volume have all been previously published and are in more or less their original form. Editing has been done here and there to increase clarity, minimize overlap, and bring some language up to date.

For their help in seeing this project through, I would like to thank Sean Christy, Joyce Dunlap, and Donna Kruithof; they have provided much-appreciated assistance in preparing the book. I would also like to thank Jim Bratt at the Calvin Center for Christian Scholarship for providing a summer stipend, which helped underwrite copyediting assistance. Finally, I'd like to express a note of special thanks to Nick himself. Our mutual bafflement concerning the latest computer technologies notwithstanding, it has been a great pleasure to work on this project together.

TDC

Acknowledgments

“Analytic Philosophy of Religion: Retrospect and Prospect” (chapter 1) originally appeared in *Perspectives in Contemporary Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Tommi Lehtonen and Timo Koistinen (Helsinki: Luther-Agricola Society, 2000). Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

“Is It Possible and Desirable for Theologians to Recover from Kant?” (chapter 2) originally appeared in *Theology Today* 14, 1998: 1–18. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

“Conundrums in Kant’s Rational Religion” (chapter 3) originally appeared in *Kant’s Philosophy of Religion Reconsidered*, ed. P. Rossi and M. Wreen (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991), 40–53. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

“In Defense of Gaunilo’s Defense of the Fool” (chapter 4) originally appeared in *Christian Perspectives on Religious Knowledge*, ed. C. S. Evans and M. Westphal (© 1993, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan). Reprinted by permission of the publisher, all rights reserved.

“Divine Simplicity” (chapter 5) originally appeared in *Philosophical Perspectives*, 5, *Philosophy of Religion*, 1991, ed. James E. Tomberlin. Reprinted by permission of Ridgeview Publishing Company.

“Alston on Aquinas on Theological Predication” (chapter 6) originally appeared in *Perspectives on the Philosophy of William P. Alston*, ed. Heather Battaly and Michael P. Lynch, 2005. Reprinted by permission of Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group.

“God Everlasting” (chapter 7) originally appeared in *God and the Good*, ed. Cliff Orlebeke (© 1974, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan). Reprinted by permission of the publisher, all rights reserved.

“Unqualified Divine Temporality” (chapter 8) originally appeared in *God and Time: Four Views*, ed. Gregory Ganssle (© 2001 by Gregory

Ganssle). Reprinted and published by permission of InterVarsity Press. P.O. Box 1400 Downers Grove, IL 60505, USA. www.ivpress.com.

“Suffering Love” (chapter 9) originally appeared in *Philosophy and the Christian Faith*, ed. Thomas V. Morris, 1988. Reprinted by permission of the University of Notre Dame Press.

“Barth on Evil” (chapter 12) originally appeared in *Faith and Philosophy* 13, 1996: 584–608. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

“Tertullian’s Enduring Question” (chapter 13) originally appeared in *The Cresset*, 62, no. 7 (Trinity 1999): 5–16. Reprinted with the permission of the publisher.

The author, editor, and publisher would like to thank these publishers for permission to reproduce the essays in this volume.

Introduction

THE FLOURISHING OF ANALYTIC PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

The past several decades have seen an extraordinary flourishing of philosophy of religion within the analytic tradition of philosophy. The essays that follow, written over a span of thirty-five years, are located within that development. In the essay that opens the collection, “Analytic philosophy of religion: retrospect and prospect,” I offer a general characterization of the development, along with an account of the changes within the analytic tradition of philosophy that made analytic philosophy of religion possible in the form it has taken.

Most discussions from the Western philosophical tradition that we would classify as philosophy of religion fall under one or the other of three headings. Some are philosophical reflections on some aspect of the human phenomenon of religion: reflections on religious experience, on the nature of religious language, on liturgy and ritual, on the interpretation of sacred texts, on prayer, on the essence of religion, and so forth. Some are philosophical reflections on the epistemology of religious belief: reflections on the nature of religious belief, on what is required of a religious belief for it to count as knowledge and whether some religious beliefs do in fact count as knowledge, on what is required of a religious belief to be entitled and whether some religious beliefs are in fact entitled, on the probability that one and another religious belief is true, and so forth. And some are philosophical theology, that is, philosophical reflections on God and God’s relation to experience and reality: reflections on various of God’s attributes, on the relation of God to evil, on the relation of God to human freedom, on the relation of God to laws of nature, and so forth. Apart from the fact that analytic philosophers have displayed no interest in reflecting on the essence of religion, all the questions mentioned have been discussed over the past several decades, many at length.

At mid-twentieth century there were no intimations of this development. There were some discussions on various aspects of religion; observers might have expected those to continue, though not to flourish. But no philosophical theology was being done, not, at least, within mainline philosophy. Instead of talking about God, philosophers were debating whether it is possible to talk about God. Pervasive doubts on that score made reflections on the epistemology of beliefs about God irrelevant.

Why were philosophers not talking about God but debating whether it is possible to talk about God? Obviously some were not talking about God because they did not believe in God. But even those who counted themselves as theistic believers found themselves preoccupied with the meta-question of whether it is possible to speak about God. Why was that?

The immediate culprit was logical positivism, which at the time appeared to be in its prime but was in fact near death, as shortly became clear. The positivist criterion of meaning appeared to have the implication that theological sentences lack sense; the criterion had been formulated with that result in mind, among others. But preoccupation with the meta-question, whether it is possible to speak about God, did not begin with the positivists. It began with Kant.

A prominent theme in Kant's critical philosophy is that of the limits or boundaries of thought and knowledge. Confronted with the traditions of rational theology, rational psychology, and rational cosmology, Kant's critical philosophy led him to ask whether such enterprises represent attempts to transgress the boundaries of the knowable. Indeed, it became for Kant a serious question whether we can even have genuine *thoughts* about God – never mind whether any of those thoughts constitute knowledge. May it be that God is beyond the boundary of the thinkable? If so, then not even *theologia revelata* is possible.

The power of Kant's question has haunted and intimidated theology in the modern period, both theology as developed by theologians and theology as developed by philosophers. It has led theologians to preface whatever they have to say on theological matters with lengthy prolegomena; it led mainline philosophers to stay away from philosophical theology altogether, and to talk instead about religion and the possibility of theology. In the second essay in this collection, "Is it possible and desirable for theologians to recover from Kant?" I discuss in detail Kant's doctrine of limits and why this doctrine led him to regard it as a serious question whether God lies beyond the limits of the thinkable and

the knowable. I go on to argue that the assumptions underlying Kant's worry are mistaken.

In my own case, I felt I had to engage Kant. Most analytic philosophers who have engaged in philosophical theology in recent years have not felt they had to. They have forged ahead without worrying over questions concerning the possibility of the enterprise. The reason for their indifference lies in a rather surprising consequence of the demise of logical positivism. The topic of limits on thought, knowledge, and speech, prominent in modern thought since Kant, has lost all interest for philosophers in the analytic tradition (not so for philosophers in the continental tradition). Analytic philosophers do on occasion charge people with failing to think or speak sense. But it is now tacitly assumed that such claims have to be defended on an ad hoc basis; analytic philosophers are skeptical to the point of being indifferent to all grand limit proposals. Philosophical theology is no longer enervated by the Kantian anxiety.

KANT AND RATIONAL THEOLOGY

Kant did not draw from his critical philosophy the skeptical conclusions about theology in general that many have drawn and thought he drew. He did not even draw the skeptical conclusions about *rational* theology that many have drawn and thought he drew.

Kant did deny that we can have knowledge of God; many readers have run with this and interpreted him as denying the possibility of theology. But not so. Kant explained rational theology as differing from revelational theology in that the former is "based ... solely upon reason"; and it was his view that a rational theology is possible.¹ It is possible to arrive at well-grounded conclusions about God on the basis of reason alone. From the *Critique of Practical Reason* onward, a good deal of what Kant himself wrote would have been regarded by him as rational theology. He did not regard it as knowledge, however. To understand why not, one has to realize that "knowledge" (*Wissen*), as he used the term, was a term of art. On his usage, a judgment constitutes knowledge only if it is related to experience in a certain way; he was convinced that judgments about God cannot be related in that way to experience.

¹ *Critique of Pure Reason*, A631=B659. The passages I quote are all from *Critique of Pure Reason*, A631-2=B659-60. I use the Norman Kemp Smith translation (New York: Macmillan & Co., 1929).

Rational theology comes in two main forms, said Kant. In one form, “it thinks its object ... through pure reason, solely by means of transcendental concepts (*ens originarium*, *realissimum*, *ens entium*), in which case it is entitled *transcendental* theology.” In the other form, it thinks its object “through a concept borrowed from nature (from the nature of our soul) – a concept of the original being as a supreme intelligence – and it would then have to be called *natural* theology.” Those who engage in the former type of rational theology are called *deists*, says Kant; those who engage in the latter type are called *theists*.

[Deists] grant that we can know the existence of an original being solely through reason, but maintain that our concept of it is transcendental only, namely, the concept of a being which possesses all reality, but which we are unable to determine in any more specific fashion. [Theists] assert that reason is capable of determining its object more precisely through analogy with nature, namely, as a being which, through understanding and freedom, contains in itself the ultimate ground of everything else. Thus the deist represents this being merely as a *cause of the world* ... the theist as the *Author of the world*.

Transcendental theology, or deism, in turn comes in two forms. In one form, “it proposes to deduce the existence of the original being from an experience in general (without determining in any more specific fashion the nature of the world to which the experience belongs), and is then called *cosmo-theology*.” Aquinas’ argumentation for God’s existence and for God’s ontological attributes, in both his *Summa contra Gentiles* and his *Summa Theologiae*, is an example of what Kant has in mind by “cosmo-theology.” The other form of transcendental theology holds that one “can know the existence of such a being through mere concepts, without the help of any experience whatsoever, and is then entitled *onto-theology*.” Kant had in mind rational theology that begins with an ontological argument, such as Anselm’s.

Natural theology also comes in two forms. “*Natural theology* infers the properties and the existence of an Author of the world from the constitution, the order and unity, exhibited in the world – a world in which we have to recognize two kinds of causality with their rules, namely, nature and freedom. From this world natural theology ascends to a supreme intelligence, as the principle either of all natural or of all moral order and perfection. In the former case it is entitled *physico-theology*, in the latter, *moral theology*.”

In the third and fourth essays in this collection I discuss and critically appraise two attempts at rational theology. In “Conundrums in Kant’s rational theology” I discuss Kant’s attempt at rational theology

of the moral theological type, as we find it in his *Religion within the Boundaries of Reason Alone*, coming to the conclusion that the attempt fails at crucial junctures. In the essay, "In defense of Gaunilo's defense of the fool," I discuss the opening argument in Anselm's attempt at rational theology of the onto-theological type, concluding that it too fails.

I approach Anselm's argument from a somewhat unusual angle. One consequence of the combination of the extreme brevity of Anselm's ontological argument for God's existence with its highly provocative character is that, over the centuries, many philosophers have tried to improve on his formulation of his argument. My own view is that most of these "improvements" are sufficiently different from Anselm's argument to make it best to view them as alternative ontological arguments. There is no such thing as *the* ontological argument; there is, instead, a large *family* of ontological arguments, Anselm's being the original member of the family.²

For a good many years, when teaching Anselm's argument, I too saw myself as improving on his formulation. The earliest written criticism of Anselm's argument that we possess was written by his contemporary, Gaunilo, and sent to Anselm for his response. I had my students read that part of Gaunilo's response in which Gaunilo claims that, by employing the principles to which Anselm appeals in his argument, one could reach the conclusion that there is a perfect island – which is absurd. I then undertook to explain to my students why Gaunilo's perfect island argument was not analogous to Anselm's argument.

But then one day it struck me that in his response to Gaunilo, Anselm did not explain why the perfect island argument is not an analogue to his argument for God's existence; instead, he blustered. That made me suspicious; so I undertook to study carefully the entire exchange. I was led to conclude that though Gaunilo was certainly not a first-rate philosophical mind and misunderstood Anselm on some points, nonetheless he discerned well enough what Anselm was actually arguing to put his finger on its fundamental flaw. The essay, "In defense of Gaunilo's defense of the fool," is thus a look at Anselm's argument through the lens of his exchange with Gaunilo.

² The best-known recent example of an ontological argument is that presented by Alvin Plantinga in *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1974). Plantinga makes a brief attempt to show that he is getting at what Anselm had in mind; I do not find the attempt convincing. My view is that Plantinga's argument is not a reformulation of Anselm's argument but a new ontological argument.

ANALYTIC PHILOSOPHICAL THEOLOGY NOT
KANT'S RATIONAL THEOLOGY

Kant would not regard the remainder of the essays in this collection as essays in rational theology,³ nor would he regard most of the writings I have been calling "analytic philosophical theology" as rational theology. For the same reason he would not regard them as philosophical theology. He might regard them as *theologia revelata* – I'm not sure.

Why would he not regard them as *rational* theology, and thus not as *philosophical* theology? Because he would not regard them as "theology based solely upon reason." Given what he meant by that, he would be right; they are not theology based solely upon reason.

Kant did not explain what he meant by "theology based solely upon reason." But from his differentiation of various types of theology that he regards as based solely upon reason, we can make a good inference. Theology is based solely upon reason, and is thus rational or philosophical theology, only if it is based solely on premises that all normal, adult, appropriately informed human beings would accept if those premises were presented to them and they understood them. Possibly Kant had in mind additional restrictions on the sort of premises that theology may employ if it is to be rational or philosophical theology; but at least this restriction holds.

Many analytic philosophers of religion, myself included, engage in the enterprise as religious believers without making or having made any attempt to base our religious convictions on premises that all normal, adult, appropriately informed human beings would accept if those premises were presented to them and they understood them. With respect to a good many of our religious convictions we do not make, and have not made, any attempt to base them on any premises whatsoever. So too, many analytic philosophers who work in philosophy of mind enter the discussion as committed physicalists without making or having made any attempt to base their physicalist convictions on premises that all normal, adult, appropriately informed human beings would accept if those premises were presented to them and they understood them.

This description of how analytic philosophers engage in philosophy raises the obvious question, are they entitled to employ their Christian convictions in this way, or their physicalist convictions, or whatever? Are they not defecting from the high calling of the philosopher to base

³ I myself do not regard the last, "Tertullian's enduring question," as philosophical theology.

philosophy solely upon reason? Kant would say they are defecting; present-day philosophers assume they are not. Why the change?

The change in view concerning what might be called *the epistemology of philosophy* reflects dramatic changes in epistemology generally over the past thirty years or so. Here is not the place to discuss those changes.⁴ Let me simply say that most analytic philosophers operate on the assumption that little of interest would emerge if philosophers did in fact confine themselves to premises that all normal, adult, appropriately informed human beings would accept if those premises were presented to them and they understood them. There is no serious alternative to engaging in philosophy employing considerations that one finds compelling but that some of one's fellow philosophers do not. Philosophy has become a pluralist enterprise. Or rather, in spite of the self-perception of many philosophers, it always has been that.

But then why talk about *philosophical* theology? The term implies a distinction between theology as developed by philosophers and theology as developed by theologians – between philosophical theology and theological theology. Kant was carrying on the tradition of distinguishing the two by saying that philosophers appeal solely to reason whereas theologians appeal also to revelation. The now-current view among analytic philosophers concerning the epistemology of philosophy makes that way of distinguishing no longer applicable. The fact that someone views certain of his religious convictions as having their source in revelation does not imply that appealing to those convictions in the course of his reflections about God establishes that he is not engaged in philosophy.

I see no structural difference between philosophical and theological theology. In the West there is a distinct tradition and practice of philosophy, and a distinct tradition and practice of theology. Though these two traditions and practices overlap, we are all able to pick out works that clearly belong to one or the other. Whitehead's writings about God belong to the tradition and practice of philosophy – though theologians not infrequently read and discuss them. John Calvin's and Karl Barth's writings belong to the tradition and practice of theology – though philosophers now and then read and discuss Calvin and Barth. Philosophical theology is what emerges when someone engaged in the practice of philosophy and carrying on its tradition turns his or her reflections to God. Anyone acquainted with the two traditions and practices, that of

⁴ I discuss them in several of the essays that will appear in another collection of mine, *Practices of Belief: Essays in Epistemology*, Terence Cuneo, ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2009).

philosophy and that of theology, will recognize that the essays in this collection are philosophical.

CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHICAL THEOLOGY AS A SPECIES OF
PHILOSOPHICAL THEOLOGY GENERALLY

With the exception of the last essay, “Tertullian’s enduring question,” all the essays, from the fifth on, are essays in which I deal directly with one or another of God’s attributes or with some aspect of God’s relation to the world. I do so by engaging, in a certain way, the tradition of Christian philosophical theology. Let me explain, beginning with an explanation of what I have in mind by *Christian* philosophical theology, and then explaining my particular mode of engagement with it. A happy consequence of overcoming the Kantian anxiety is that one can treat one’s pre-Kantian predecessors in philosophical theology as genuine dialogue partners.

A prominent feature of how those philosophers who are Christians have gone about developing philosophical theology is that they have required of their reflections that they cohere with what Christian Scripture claims and presupposes about God.

Sometimes their reflections have been directly on some aspect of what Scripture claims about God. In my book *Divine Discourse*, for example, I reflect philosophically on the claim, running throughout Hebrew and Christian Scripture, that God said so-and-so, and on the claim often made *about* Christian Scripture that it is the word of the Lord. I was aware that the biblical writers were not alone in claiming that God had spoken to them or to someone they knew; so I realized that my reflections had broader relevance than just to the claims of divine speech made within and about Scripture. But in any case, I was not led by philosophical arguments to conclude that God speaks. I found this claim already being made; and I decided to reflect on it philosophically. It is, after all, an intriguing and highly provocative claim.

By contrast, Aquinas arrived at the conclusion that God is ontologically immutable by employing what Kant would have classified as rational theology of the cosmo-theological sort. (I discuss Aquinas’ line of argument for God’s immutability in the essay, “God everlasting.”) Aquinas interpreted Scripture as claiming the very same thing, however; he held that philosophical reasoning and Scriptural claim converge on this point. So though it would be misleading to characterize Aquinas’ reflections on divine immutability as philosophical reflections on the biblical claim that

God is immutable, it would also not be correct to say that the role of Scripture in his reflections on immutability was merely to set boundaries to his conclusions. He had independent philosophical reasons for holding that God is immutable; but he would have insisted that his reflections do not merely cohere with Scripture but are a philosophical articulation of Scripture's claim that God is immutable. So when I say that those philosophers who are Christians have required of their philosophical theology that it cohere with what Scripture claims and presupposes about God, it should not be inferred that the actual relationship has been no more than coherence. Coherence is the minimum.

A fair number of philosophical theologians have felt no compunction whatsoever to have their conclusions cohere with what Christian Scripture claims and presupposes about God; Plotinus and Whitehead come to mind. Conversely, many of those who have interpreted Scripture to find out what it claims and presupposes about God have had no interest in reflecting philosophically about God; many are in fact downright hostile to philosophical theology. Christian philosophical theology is the challenging project of achieving an understanding of God that both coheres with Scripture and is philosophically cogent.

Determining what Christian Scripture claims or assumes about God is no simple task. Distinguish between how some passage of Scripture presents God, what the writer (editor) of that passage was claiming or presupposing about God in thus presenting God, and what Scripture claims and presupposes about God.⁵ What is directly before us when we read Scripture is the first; what we have to get to by interpretation is the last.

Some passages in Scripture present God as having wings; others present God as a rock. No interpreter believes that the writers (editors) of these passages were claiming or presupposing that God has wings or that God is a rock. A passage may present God as a rock without the writer claiming or presupposing that God is a rock; that will be the case if "is a rock" is being used metaphorically. Probably only completely dead metaphors can be fully parsed out into some literal equivalent. But when some biblical writer presents God as a rock, what he is claiming, at least, is that God is steadfast and reliable.

⁵ In my *Divine Discourse* (Cambridge University Press, 1995) I argue that it is not texts that claim things, but authors (or editors) who claim things by way of authorizing a text, those claims then having various presuppositions. I likewise hold that metaphor, hyperbole, etc., are not matters of meaning but of use; authors (editors) use words metaphorically, hyperbolically, ironically, etc. In apparent violation of these principles, I will speak of Scripture as claiming and presupposing things about God. I speak thus so as to leave open the question of who it might be that is claiming and presupposing these things by way of the text of Scripture.

How do we decide whether some passage is to be interpreted literally or metaphorically – or hyperbolically, ironically, and so forth for all the other literary tropes? In *Divine Discourse* I argued for a general principle: literal interpretation is always the default option. A writer or speaker is to be interpreted as speaking literally – as saying what his words mean – unless there is good reason to conclude otherwise. Knowing, as I do, that Michael is not hallucinatory, I know that when he assertively uttered “the guy is a wolf,” he was not saying (speaking literally now) that the man is a wolf; he was speaking metaphorically. So too, we all know that when some biblical writer said “God is a rock,” he was not saying (speaking literally now) that God is a rock. Though non-literal interpretation always carries the burden of proof, often that burden is borne successfully.

But what the writer (editor) of some biblical passage claimed or presupposed about God is not necessarily what Scripture claims or presupposes about God. Christians for the most part have insisted that in interpreting Christian Scripture, we must go beyond treating it as a collection of loosely strung-together pericopes, also go beyond treating it as an assemblage of some sixty-six separate books, and treat it as one work, highly varied in its contents.⁶ And for the most part they have insisted that in treating Christian Scripture as one work, we are to give priority to what the Gospels and the Pauline letters say God was doing in Jesus Christ. The combination of this principle of canonical unity with this principle of interpretive priority will sometimes lead to the conclusion that what the writer of some passage claimed or presupposed about God differs from what Scripture claims or presupposes about God – and that the latter differs even more from how the passage presents God. Some passages in the Old Testament present God as doing things (or as instructing human beings to do things) that all of us, along with most biblical writers, would regard as unjust. Yet all Christian interpreters interpret Scripture as teaching that God is just.

To get from how biblical passages present God to what Scripture claims and presupposes about God, one must subtly and judiciously employ complex interpretive strategies whose results often prove controversial. That might seem to take all bite out of even the minimal requirement of coherence cited above. If the philosophical theologian finds himself led by philosophical considerations to conclusions that conflict with how

⁶ In *Divine Discourse* I did not devote much attention to what goes into interpreting a body of writings as one work. I discuss the issues more fully in “The Unity Behind the Canon,” in Christine Helmer and Christof Landmesser, eds., *One Scripture or Many? Canon from Biblical, Theological, and Philosophical Perspectives* (Oxford University Press, 2004).

some biblical passages present God, he doesn't have to choose between surrendering his philosophically argued conclusions and tossing Scripture out the window; he can insist that Scripture does not actually claim or presuppose that God is the way those passages present God.

The situation is by no means as bleak as this abstract way of putting it might make it seem, however. There are pervasive patterns in how Scripture presents God. With respect to such patterns, it takes exceedingly powerful arguments to force one to conclude that this pattern of presentation is not what Scripture claims or presupposes about God. More about this shortly.

HOW THE TRADITION OF CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHICAL THEOLOGY IS ENGAGED

I have explained what I had in mind when I spoke of *Christian* philosophical theology. Let me now explain in what way I engage the tradition of Christian philosophical theology.

In the opening twenty or thirty questions of Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae*, Christian philosophical theology attained one of its classical formulations, both with respect to the attributes ascribed to God and with respect to the line of argumentation for those attributes. Aquinas begins the articulation of his philosophical theology in Question 2 of *Summa Theologiae* by arguing that reality is so structured that there has to be something on which everything not identical with itself is dependent – something such that the existence and properties of everything other than itself are dependent on it and such that its own existence and properties are not dependent on anything other than itself. (I am blending the conclusions of the first four of Aquinas' "five ways.") Everybody agrees that this being is God, says Aquinas. God uniquely possesses aseity.

In the same question in which he argues that reality is so structured that there has to be something that uniquely possesses aseity, Aquinas also argues that reality is so structured that there has to be "some intelligent being ... by whom all natural things are directed to their end."⁷ This too, he says, we all call God. But the claim that God uniquely possesses aseity proves sufficient, by itself, for Aquinas to draw a long string of conclusions concerning God's attributes. If God uniquely possesses aseity, then God is also simple, perfect, immutable, eternal, omnipotent, impassible,

⁷ I am using the translation of the English Dominican Fathers (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1947).

and so forth. My engagement with the tradition of Christian philosophical theology mainly takes the form of engaging various components of this classical formulation of philosophical theology, now and then bringing other figures into the picture in addition to Aquinas. (The essay on Anselm is different in that there I engage the opening argument in a formulation of Christian philosophical theology which yields the conclusion that God is that than which nothing more excellent is possible, rather than the conclusion that God uniquely possesses aseity.)

One can engage philosophical theology in one or another of its classical formulations in a variety of different ways. If one finds oneself in basic agreement with its line of argumentation and its conclusions, one can set oneself the project of giving a deeper and richer account than one's predecessors gave of one and another attribute, and of dealing with puzzles and objections better than they did. In contrast to engagement of this sort, mine is a critical engagement. I have serious questions about various parts of Christian philosophical theology in most of its classic formulations, including its classic Thomistic formulation; I do not believe that God is simple, ontologically immutable, eternal in the sense of being outside of time, or impassible.

My argument against Anselm's onto-theology is that the opening move does not work; Anselm's ontological argument is not sound. My argument against the classic Thomistic formulation of philosophical theology is different. I do not argue that Aquinas' line of argument is unacceptable simply *qua* rational theology of the cosmo-theological sort. To the contrary, in "Divine simplicity" I defend Aquinas' explanation of divine simplicity against a number of philosophical objections that have been lodged against it in recent years. And in the following essay, "Alston on Aquinas on theological predication," I argue that Aquinas' solution to the problem of how it can be that, if God is simple, our predications about God are not all synonymous, has been widely misunderstood. On Aquinas' view, the term "good" applies literally and univocally to both God and creatures, as do the terms "powerful," "knowledgeable," and so forth. Aquinas does have a doctrine of analogy, as all commentators agree; but that doctrine is not what it is commonly taken to be, namely, that such terms as "good" and "powerful" apply only analogously to both God and creatures.

My critical engagement takes the form of arguing that, on key points, Christian philosophical theology of this and most other classic formulations fails to meet the requirement that it be compatible with what Christian Scripture claims and presupposes about God. To those who

do not accept that requirement – Plotinians and Whiteheadians, for example – my arguments are irrelevant. But of course Aquinas did accept that requirement, as have most others in the West who have engaged in philosophical theology.

Many passages in Christian Scripture present God as the one who saves us; we human beings cannot save ourselves from what we need saving from. We can do a good deal, but not enough. More specifically, God is presented in many passages as saving us not only by how God wraps things up at the end, but also as saving us by acting salvifically in human history, centrally in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. For any philosophical theologian who identifies herself as Christian, the burden of proof will be on her if she finds herself inclined to believe that in thus presenting God, Scripture is not claiming and presupposing that God acts in history for our salvation but that the passages in question must be interpreted figuratively. That burden of proof will be unusually hard to bear, since Scripture's presentation of God as saving us by acting in history is not incidental but pervasive. It will be much harder to bear than is, for example, the burden of proof one takes onto oneself when one holds that the presentation of God in some passages as having wings must be interpreted figuratively.

Aquinas saw the problem and accepted the challenge, not by arguing that Scripture should be interpreted figuratively on these points, but by trying to explain God's relationship to human wrongdoing in such a way that God's being impassible is compatible with God's judgment that there is something we need saving from, and by trying to explain God's relationship to historical events in such a way that God's being eternal is compatible with God's acting in history for our salvation. In the essays "God everlasting" and "Unqualified divine temporality," I argue that Aquinas was unsuccessful in the latter attempt; in "Suffering love" and "Is God disturbed by what transpires in human affairs?" I argue that Aquinas, along with Augustine before him, was unsuccessful in the former attempt.

In "The silence of the God who speaks," I explain more amply than I do in either of the two preceding articles what it is, in the claims and presuppositions of Christian Scripture about God, that makes the problem of evil so difficult for Christian philosophers and theologians. And in the article, "Barth on evil," I discuss a fascinatingly different way of thinking of evil from that which Augustine and Aquinas adopted in their attempt to show the compatibility of divine impassibility with God's judgment that there is something we need saving from.

Barth identifies evil as what he calls *das Nichtige*. We human beings are dependent for our existence on God's creating and sustaining activity. Were we brought into existence and then left on our own, we would immediately slide out of existence. Non-existence is thus *das Nichtige*, that is, a menace that God must constantly oppose if we are to exist. Furthermore, once God has created us as the sort of creatures we are and established what God desires for us, then perforce God has also brought about the possibility of our *not* doing and undergoing what God desires for us. This possibility is also *das Nichtige*, also a menace to us. Not only are we menaced by this possibility; God permits us to fall prey to this menace, while yet doing battle against its incursion into our existence. God is not impassible.

My critique of Augustine and Aquinas on the issue of divine impassibility leaves open the possibility that someone else has been successful in showing coherence with Scripture where they were not. I know of none such. Nor do I know of anyone who, agreeing that eternity and impassibility are incompatible with Scripture's presentation of God as savior, has offered such compelling philosophical arguments against the existence of a God who judges that there is something we need saving from, and who acts in history to accomplish that salvation, that either we must interpret this feature of the biblical presentation as a figurative way of saying something else, or toss out this biblical presentation of God as irredeemably wrongheaded.

If Aquinas is right in his argument – and I think he is – that aseity implies simplicity, that simplicity implies immutability, and that immutability implies eternity and impassibility, then giving up eternity and impassibility implies giving up immutability, simplicity, and aseity. Likewise it implies that there is something mistaken in Aquinas' argument for God's aseity, and in all other arguments that philosophers have offered for the same conclusion. I have not myself written a critique of these arguments, however. They have been so extensively discussed and criticized over the centuries that I have found myself with nothing new to say.

NOT A COMPLETE PHILOSOPHICAL THEOLOGY

The reader who is looking for a fully developed philosophical theology will find this collection disappointing. I would very much like to have a fully developed philosophical theology, both for my own satisfaction and to offer to others for their consideration. But this collection is not

that, nor is it that when paired with my *Divine Discourse*. I say nothing about such important and much-discussed topics as the nature of God's knowledge and God's power; I do not discuss the Trinity. And my contribution to the topics I do discuss could rightly be described as piecemeal and mostly negative. I argue that God is not simple, not outside of time, not ontologically immutable, not impassible. We would like to hear something positive on these topics; and we would like to see those positive contributions assembled into a comprehensive understanding of God which is an alternative to that found in Aquinas' classic formulation, and indeed, an alternative to that found in all other classic formulations. This collection gives reasons for rejecting the classic formulations; in so doing, it gives some indication of what an alternative formulation would be like. But it scarcely goes beyond that.

I would guess that it is my purely negative treatment of the traditional doctrine of God's aseity that will leave readers most dissatisfied. If simplicity, eternity, ontological immutability, and impassibility all have to go, then aseity also has to go. But surely God is not a hapless victim. So what should replace aseity?

If God uniquely possessed aseity, then not only the existence but also the properties of everything other than God would be dependent on God, while the existence and properties of God would not be dependent on anything other than God. I agree that, in one way or another, the existence of everything other than God is dependent on God, whereas God is not dependent on anything other than Godself for God's existence. I likewise agree that, in one way or another, entities other than God having the properties they do have are dependent on God. My disagreement is with the claim that God's having the properties God does have is never dependent on anything other than God.

I hold, for example, that God has been wronged by us – that *being wronged by us* is one of the things that characterizes God. God has this property on account of our having wronged God; had we not wronged God, God would not have this property. Thus God's having that property is dependent on us. I likewise hold that God is disturbed by our wronging God, as God is disturbed by our wronging each other. God reacts negatively to such wrongings. Though someone might undertake to argue that *being wronged by me at a certain time* does not represent a genuine change in God from how God was before the wronging took place, no one will undertake to argue that *being disturbed by my wronging God* does not represent a change in God from how God was before God was disturbed. And as I argue in "God everlasting," no one *should* undertake

to argue that God's knowledge, that God is now being wronged by me, does not represent a genuine change in God from how God was before I wronged God.

Barth held that God *chooses* to let Godself be disturbed by our actions and *chooses* to save us from what we need saving from; God might have remained sovereignly aloof, says Barth. I am dubious. I think that once God made us as creatures who have the worth of bearing the image of God, then certain ways of treating us are required of God on pain of wronging us; God could not remain aloof. And I think that once God made us as creatures capable of wronging God and each other, and did not prevent us from doing exactly that, then too God could not remain aloof. The relevant choice goes farther back in the life of God. The situation is not that, having made us, God then faced the choice of whether or not to remain sovereignly aloof. God did not have to create us as the sort of creatures that we are and permit us to wrong God; that's where the choice lay. In creating us as the sort of creatures we are, creatures of great worth but capable of wronging God, and in permitting us to wrong God, God chose to be passible, thereby also choosing to give up aseity.

THE CONCLUDING ESSAY

The collection concludes with an essay of quite a different sort, "Tertullian's enduring question." A question raised by all the preceding essays is how we should deal with the texts of our predecessors. Tertullian, so I argue, represents one way; his near-contemporary, Clement of Alexandria, represents a very different way. The intellectual tradition of the West has been a never-ending contest between these two ways. I leave it to the reader to determine on whose side I come down.

Let me close on a personal note by offering my warm thanks to Terence Cuneo for the work he has put into editing this volume. He has been a superb editor. Indeed, without his prodding, this collection would probably never have come about.

CHAPTER I

Analytic philosophy of religion: retrospect and prospect

My project in this essay is to offer a broad characterization of recent philosophy of religion in the analytic tradition of contemporary philosophy, then to offer an account of how it got that way and, finally, to offer some proposals for the future. Not predictions, but proposals.

I will assume that the reader knows, well enough for the purposes at hand, what I am referring to when I speak of the *analytic tradition of contemporary philosophy*. In particular, I will assume that the reader has not fallen for that superficial but popular view that what defines the analytic tradition is the high priority given to rigor of thought and clarity of expression. Defenders of the analytic tradition often cite those priorities as among its glories; opponents cite the same priorities as making it trivial. And it's true that analytic philosophers have given an unusually high priority to rigor of thought and clarity of expression. But their reasons for doing so have not been reasons of taste but of philosophical conviction; those reasons are of more importance than the valuation itself.

My own view is that the identity of the analytic tradition is a narrative, rather than a purely systematic, identity. What makes a philosopher an analytic philosopher is that he places himself within a certain story line of philosophy in the twentieth century. Of course one may try, in one's own work, to amalgamate story lines. Among prominent philosophers, that's been especially true, I would say, of Paul Ricoeur and Jürgen Habermas. To what extent they have avoided mere eclecticism and achieved genuine amalgamation is a nice question. But be that as it may, the story line of analytic philosophy is full of fundamental controversy and innovation; that's why attempts to identify the tradition in a purely systematic way prove not illuminating. What makes a person an analytic philosopher is, in good measure, his or her ownership of a certain line of influence and controversy.

But enough said: as already mentioned, my judgment is that the reader will know, well enough for the purposes at hand, what is the analytic tradition within contemporary philosophy, and that no purpose would be served by taking the time to try to say anything beyond the generalizations already offered.

CHARACTERIZING RECENT ANALYTIC PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

On the American scene, analytic philosophy of religion occurs almost exclusively within philosophy departments. Since most religious studies departments also teach philosophy of religion, one would expect it to occur there as well. But not so. For the most part, those who practice philosophy of religion in religious studies departments do so within the contemporary continental tradition.

Let me now venture the guess that of all the aspects of analytic philosophy that those who work within the contemporary continental tradition of philosophy find baffling about such philosophy, it's analytic philosophy of *religion* that they find *most* baffling. One of my aims will be to reduce this sense of bafflement by bringing about some degree of comprehension.

Those who stand in the continental tradition of philosophy regularly highlight three things as baffling, even off-putting, about analytic philosophy of religion over the past quarter century. One of these is the fact that most analytic philosophers of religion simply take metaphysical realism for granted, including metaphysical realism concerning God; they appear, from the perspective of the continental philosopher, never to have reflected on the fact that our concepts reach all the way down. A second baffling and off-putting feature is their epistemological confidence concerning our ability to gain knowledge of God: these philosophers seem never to have read their Kant, so it is said – not, at least, with comprehension and empathy. And thirdly, what's baffling and off-putting about recent analytic philosophers of religion is that almost all of them appear to be theological conservatives. Not only are most of them quite obviously theists; they are also theists of a rather traditional sort. Suspicion and critique are almost entirely missing. Or more precisely: suspicion and critique are more often aimed at the critics of religion than at religion itself. To at least some who stand in the continental tradition of philosophy, it appears that the analytic philosophers of religion are failing in their high calling as philosophers to ask what reason has to say about religion, and

then to listen to reason's voice. Rather than being philosophers, they are, at bottom, defenders of the faith using the tools of philosophy!

These, I say, are the things that philosophers from the continental tradition regularly say about contemporary analytic philosophy of religion. It seems to me that in thus speaking, they have their eye on some of the most important features of this tradition in philosophy of religion. I would say, however, that with respect to the second and the third points, there's considerable distortion involved in their statement of the point. So let me formulate for myself these three features.

In the first place, most recent analytic philosophers of religion do indeed take metaphysical realism concerning the external world and the self for granted – and also realism concerning God. A corollary of this is that there has been a great flowering of philosophical theology – philosophical reflections about God – among these philosophers. Second, one of the major preoccupations of recent philosophy of religion in the analytic tradition has been epistemology. Even the much-discussed problem of evil, for example, has for the most part been treated as an epistemological issue. Epistemology has been hegemonic. Furthermore, part of what accounts for the impression the continental person has of epistemological confidence and theological conservatism is that the stand most analytic philosophers of religion take concerning the various doxastic merits – knowledge, warrant, entitlement, justification, rationality, etc. – is that a good many religious beliefs *as they come* possess these merits. They don't have to be supported, defended, stripped down, or whatever, in order to possess them. Thirdly, most analytic philosophers of religion over the past quarter century have been what I would call “perspectival particularists” in their understanding of how philosophy is to be practiced; they were of this conviction well before deconstructionism melodramatically came to the same conclusion on its own anti-realist grounds. The majority of recent analytic philosophers of religion have not supposed that one could or should practice philosophy as a generic human being, appealing solely to reason. They have regarded philosophy in general, not just philosophy of religion, as in good measure and in various ways an articulation of one's own particular perspective. That is why these philosophers have neither tried to shed nor to conceal the religious convictions that they bring to philosophy; and that is why they have not attempted to discover some perch above the fray from which they could, *qua* purely rational beings, practice suspicion and lodge critique. They have not only been willing to *describe* religion from within; they have *practiced philosophy of religion* from within.

HOW ANALYTIC PHILOSOPHY OF
RELIGION GOT THIS WAY

How did recent analytic philosophy of religion acquire these characteristics? That is the question I want now to address. I concede that analytic philosophy in general often wears a completely ahistorical face; I likewise concede that, until this same past quarter century, its interest in the history of philosophy and its competence at dealing with that history were minimal. But analytic philosophy came from somewhere; that is to say, from somewhere in history. It's not the product of a shaft of light darted unexpectedly into our existence by the keepers of the Platonic ideas. It has historical antecedents.

To the finding of historical antecedents there is, of course, no end: antecedents have antecedents, those have antecedents; and so forth. But I would say that the best place to begin the story that leads up to contemporary analytic philosophy of religion is with the philosophers of the latter third of the seventeenth century, and with their eighteenth-century successors. Among those philosophers there emerged an ideal that, in my judgment, sets the agenda for the next three centuries of philosophical reflections on religion. No doubt Maimonides was a great and influential philosopher of religion. But what he said is not part of the philosophical memory of the contemporary analytic philosopher of religion. Not so for Locke, Hume, and Kant, along with a number of lesser figures: Butler, Paley, and so forth.

When I say that what happened there set the agenda for the next three centuries, I do not mean that the history of the past three centuries is the history of agreement with those great predecessors; many of us disagree with them on fundamental issues. I mean that their basic questions remain for us live questions; and that their answers remain provocative and challenging. Either we try to answer their questions, whether in the way they themselves answered them or some other way; or we try to show that they're bad questions and should not be answered. We don't ignore them.

What is that ideal that emerged in the eighteenth century and the latter part of the seventeenth? The ideal of a *rationally grounded* religion. No doubt a similar ideal had arisen among the Greek philosophers of the classic period. But this ideal was something new in the Christian West. Among the medieval philosophers and theologians one finds the ideal of a *scientific theology* – that is, the ideal of a theology so constructed as to satisfy the criteria for a *scientia*. But when I say that in the late seventeenth

century and on into the eighteenth there emerged the ideal of a rationally grounded religion, I have something different in mind than the ideal of a scientific theology.

A rationally grounded religion was presented as an ideal for everyone, not just for professional theologians and philosophers. Furthermore, the ideal was not that of everyone becoming a theologian or philosopher, be it amateur or professional; it was the ideal of everyone becoming a rational religious believer. It was an ideal for everybody, not just for the intellectual elite; and it was an ideal concerning *religion*, not concerning the construction of theology.

The two great articulators of this new cultural ideal were Locke and Kant. My thesis will be that one of the reasons philosophers in the contemporary continental tradition find present-day analytic philosophy of religion so baffling and off-putting is that analytic philosophy of religion stands in the tradition shaped by Locke, rather than in the tradition shaped by Kant.

It was in the context of the intellectual crisis of the seventeenth century in England and central and northwest Europe that the ideal emerged of a rationally grounded religion. The texts handed down to the intellectuals of medieval Western Europe were, to our eyes, extraordinarily diverse in their contents: Christian Scripture, Greek and Latin church fathers, classic Greek antiquity, Greco-Roman late antiquity, including Stoic and neo-Platonic texts, and so forth. But for the most part, this diversity caused the high medievals no particular anxiety. Education, let us recall, was largely text-based. And rather than highlighting what to our eyes are ruptures and dissonances in their textual inheritance, the medieval philosophers and theologians, without denying the strains, typically treated their textual inheritance, with the exception of a few blatantly heretical texts, as all together embodying a vast system of highly articulated wisdom. Nobody supposed that this body of texts composed by human beings was infallible; the claim was only that it contained wisdom. The challenge of the interpreter was to extract the wisdom embedded in the textual tradition, and then to build upon it.

By the time of John Locke, in the mid-seventeenth century, few if any embraced any longer this picture of the textual inheritance. Few if any believed any longer that the textual heritage contained just a few heretical texts, these embraced only by marginal groups such as the Bogomils in the former Yugoslavia. Everybody now believed that the textual inheritance contained a vast number of heretical texts. Different people, however, had

distinctly different views as to which texts were heretical; one person's heresy was another's orthodoxy. And those who embraced what their own party regarded as heresy were not off somewhere at the margins of Europe; they were right there at the center, struggling with their own party for dominance, often with power at their disposal. Protestants had initially insisted that the way out of this morass was to take the biblical text alone as authoritative; already by the mid-sixteenth century, conflictual pluralism had erupted over interpretation of the biblical text. A battle of texts was taking place.

It was in this context that the ideal of a rationally grounded religion arose among John Locke and certain of his cohorts. To understand the ideal, one has to realize that in his mature thinking, Locke was always operating with the contrast between *tradition* and *nature*: *diverse human traditions* versus *shared human nature*. No matter how different the traditions of human thought that you and I represent – different authoritative texts, different religious and intellectual heroes, different conceptual frameworks, different religious practices – no matter how different, we remain human beings sharing a common human nature. Let us then, when it comes to matters of God, duty, and civic life, build on what we share in common *qua* human beings rather than on what divides us.

What might it be in human nature that is capable of providing us with the principles for shared convictions about God, duty, and civic life? Reason, said Locke; “listen to the voice of Reason.” What does that mean? In Locke's hands it meant formulating and defending a version of what has come to be called “classical foundationalism.” When considering whether to accept a certain proposition, one is first to collect a satisfactory body of evidence consisting of items that are certain for one; that done, one is to calculate the probability of the proposition on that evidence; then, finally, one is to believe or disbelieve with a firmness proportioned to that previously determined probability.¹

Locke's views on what constituted certainty were likewise important and influential. Locke was a representative of what Reid called “the Way of Ideas.” On this view, the only entities with which we have acquaintance – that is, the only entities that can be presented to us – are mental entities. There is in fact a vast range of reality outside the mind of each of us; in Locke, there is not so much as a whiff of metaphysical anti-realism concerning the external world. But our knowledge of external reality

¹ I explore Locke's views in detail in *John Locke and the Ethics of Belief* (Cambridge University Press, 1996).

can be gained only by way of inference. Locke himself was no skeptic concerning the possibility of gaining such knowledge. What's especially relevant to our purposes is that he was convinced that it is possible, by the construction of deductive arguments, to gain knowledge of God's existence, along with a fair amount of knowledge concerning God's nature and ways with humankind. Such arguments begin from each person's knowledge of his or her existence. They are, in that way, a species of cosmological arguments.

Kant shared with Locke the ideal of a rationally grounded religion – though what exactly, on Kant's view, should be the stance of the ordinary person toward that ideal, is less than clear. Locke held that everybody is under obligation to employ the practice he proposed when it comes to matters of religion; everybody is obligated to acquire a rational religion. Whether Kant was also of the view that *everybody* is under *obligation* to pursue the ideal of a rationally grounded religion is, as I say, not clear. Be that as it may, however, in Kant too one finds this ideal articulated.

Kant's version of that ideal was significantly different from Locke's, however. That difference was due, above all, to a difference over what I shall call, for want of a better word, "fundamental metaphysics." Deep and pervasive in Kant's thought is the image of a boundary. The boundary in question can be looked at from several different angles; perhaps the most important is that it is a boundary for knowledge.

Reality puts in its appearance to us in the form of the intuitional content of our minds. If it is to do so, the intuitions must be structured by us in various ways. For one thing, they must be subjected to the formal structure of space and time. Secondly, they must be conceptually structured. As to this latter, one of Kant's most imaginative moves was to argue that the very same intuitional content that can be structured with the conceptual scheme of subjectivity can also, in good part, be structured with the conceptual scheme of spatio-temporal objectivity. The reality of tables and chairs consists, at bottom, of our conceptualizing certain of our intuitions as perceptions of enduring tables and chairs. Kant was thus, in his own way, an anti-realist concerning the external spatio-temporal world but a realist concerning transcendent reality.

The boundary, of which I spoke, is for one thing the boundary between the intuitional content of the human mind and what lies beyond it. But since that intuitional content of the mind consists of how reality puts in its appearance to us, the boundary is also the boundary between transcendent reality and the appearance thereof. Likewise it is the boundary between that which is spatio-temporally structured and that which

is not. And since it is Kant's doctrine that the function of concepts is exclusively to conceptualize the manifold of intuitions, the boundary is also the boundary between that to which our concepts apply and that to which they do not.

And what then is to be said about that reality which puts in its appearance to us? The factuality of the empirical self and world gives us no ground for saying anything at all about the trans-empirical; strictly speaking, it does not even give us ground for saying that empirical reality consists of the appearance to us of trans-empirical reality. Morality and morality alone gives us a basis for speaking of what lies beyond the boundary with something more than ungrounded speculation or nonsense.

Specifically, all that can be said about the trans-empirical must be inferred from the fact that we human beings live under obligation – categorical obligation. The first and foremost thing to be inferred is that there is a self behind the empirical scene – a noumenal self, capable of free agency. Secondly, if anything is to be inferred about God, that inference will have to be mediated by conclusions drawn about the noumenal self. It would not be correct to say that Kant's philosophy of religion just is a branch of anthropology; what would be right to say is that it is all anthropologically based. And this remains an abiding feature of all Kantian approaches to philosophy of religion: everything to be said about God must be derived from reflections on the human self.

Kant's own argumentation went as follows: a rational religion will consist of rationally grounded beliefs starting from the fact that we must understand ourselves, in our trans-empirical reality, to be free agents under obligation. It must be conceded that such rationally grounded beliefs about the divine do not constitute knowledge; knowledge is limited to what is or could be an object of intuitional acquaintance. Nonetheless, it is possible to construct rationally compelling arguments about the divine, starting from data concerning our moral existence. God is a component of that ultimate reality that puts in its appearance to us. In the formulation of the conclusions to such arguments one makes use of a scheme of quasi-concepts. True concepts, as already mentioned, are confined in their function to unifying the manifold of intuitions. But from these true concepts we can derive quasi-concepts by abstracting from them everything having to do with space and time. What's left after this abstraction has taken place can then be used to think and speak of the transcendent.

I judge the situation in philosophy today to be that the deep and wide-ranging dispute over Kant's fundamental metaphysics has never been resolved to the satisfaction of both parties. Is there the boundary that

Kant claims there is? If there is, is it true that all rationally grounded beliefs about what lies over the boundary will have to start from something about the self we know? And is it furthermore true that the upshot of developing such rationally grounded beliefs is Kant's peculiar blend of anti-realism (idealism) concerning empirical reality, with realism concerning the transcendent self and God? By no means all philosophers after Kant accept his philosophy of the boundary. To say it again: the argument has never been settled to the satisfaction of both parties.

In the meanwhile, we live with self-serving caricatures by each party of the other: the boundary philosopher regards the non-boundary philosopher as naive; the latter regards the former as muddled. But let me speak for a moment as a non-boundary philosopher: the situation is not that we have failed to consider the Kantian alternative, and are consequently still wandering about in unenlightened naiveté; the situation is rather that we have considered the Kantian arguments and found them wanting. Kant is not some fact of nature with whom one has no choice but to cope.

A century ago, it would have appeared likely that idealism, of the Hegelian type, would be the dominating force in Anglo-American philosophy for a good time to come. Powerfully argued forms of idealism were rapidly replacing somewhat mindless versions of Scottish Common Sense philosophy. But due largely to the interventions of Moore and Russell, that's not how things turned out. Shortly after it gained ascendancy, idealism was beaten back in the English-speaking world; the metaphysical realism that had traditionally dominated anglophone philosophy recovered its composure. The origins of analytic philosophy lie in that realist intervention by Moore and Russell. By now, various philosophers located within the analytic tradition have espoused versions of idealism, and of Kantian-style blends of empirical idealism with trans-empirical realism – another illustration of the fact that the identity of the analytic tradition is a narrative rather than a systematic identity. Nonetheless, it remains the case that the analytic tradition, in its metaphysical orientation, is dominantly opposed to both of these. And that, then, is the main factor accounting for the thoroughgoing metaphysical realism of most recent analytic philosophers of religion. Such philosophers neither accept the Kantian boundary and its metaphysical implications nor do they accept the Hegelian argument that things are a certain way only relative to our conceptual schemes.

One might, however, be a metaphysical realist in one's orientation, accepting neither Hegelian idealism nor the Kantian blend of empirical idealism with trans-empirical realism concerning the self and God, while

yet adopting a theistically anti-realist construal of thought and speech about God. Of course, if one concedes that the thought and speech in question are really about God, one cannot then go on to adopt a theistically anti-realist construal of it. So let me put the point more felicitously: one might be a metaphysical realist in one's general orientation, while yet adopting a theistically anti-realist construal of God-thought and God-talk. How, then, did it come about that recent philosophy of religion in the analytic tradition is so dominantly realist in its construal of God-thought and God-talk?

That came about, I would say, as the aftermath of logical positivism and its collapse. The positivists, for the most part, were definitely metaphysical realists rather than idealists; it's not the case that things exist only relative to our conceptual schemes. When it came to God-talk, however, they were flamboyantly anti-realist. God-talk is cognitively meaningless talk. Whatever import it might have, it makes no factual claims – no claims on how things are. Wittgenstein exploited the opening offered by the positivists. While agreeing that religious language makes no factual claims, he insisted nonetheless that the beliefs to which such language gives expression go deep in human existence. Nothing so sparked Wittgenstein's anger as interpretations of religious belief that make it appear silly or primitive. If an interpretation of religious belief makes it appear thus, that, for Wittgenstein, was sufficient indication that the interpretation was mistaken.

By twenty-five years ago, logical positivism had collapsed from its own internal difficulties. A consequence of that collapse was that for most philosophers in the analytic tradition, and for all except the Wittgensteinians who practiced philosophy of religion within that tradition, there seemed no longer to be any reason to embrace a theistically anti-realist interpretation of God-thought and God-talk. It may be that religious beliefs are false – that is to say, that their propositional content is false. But they do have propositional content; few philosophers in the analytic tradition would any longer dispute that.

Another consequence of the collapse of positivism that is important for our purposes is that in recent years there has been a flowering of ontology and metaphysics within the analytic tradition. It's typical of those outside philosophy to have gotten the impression that contemporary philosophy in general, and analytic philosophy in particular, is hostile to ontology and metaphysics. Nothing could be farther from the truth when it comes to analytic philosophy. Logical positivism definitely cast a chill over the enterprise. But when positivism collapsed, the impulses toward ontology

and metaphysics that had been present in the analytic tradition from its very beginnings reasserted themselves. In this respect, the relative prominence of ontological and metaphysical concerns in recent analytic philosophy of religion – witness the prominence of ontological concerns in the philosophical theology being practiced – is a reflection of such concerns in analytic philosophy generally.

As I read the history of the matter, the disappearance of positivism from the scene not only goes a long way toward accounting for the theistically realist commitment of most recent analytic philosophy of religion, and a long way toward accounting for the interest in ontology and metaphysics which has gone along with that. It also goes a long way toward accounting for its deep preoccupation with epistemology – specifically, with the epistemology of religious belief. The Wittgensteinian, in his polemic with the positivists, held that what differentiates God-talk from other types of speech is not that it gives expression to beliefs about a transcendent realm of fact, but that it gives expression to a certain way of interpreting and valuing one's ordinary experience – the *religious* way. That interpretation meant, perforce, that if the Wittgensteinian was to talk about religious belief, he had to talk about the role of religious belief and speech in life; there was, on his view, nothing else for him to talk about. But when positivism collapsed, and philosophers of religion who were in general metaphysical realists found themselves with no good reason not to extend their realism to include God-thought and God-talk, they found themselves facing head-on an epistemological challenge to religious belief that for centuries had been a prominent component in the intellectual culture of the modern West, replaced there only for a short time by the rather different challenge to religious belief issued by logical positivism. I refer to the challenge issued by John Locke, to the effect that it's the obligation of everyone whatsoever to see to it that his or her religion is a rational religion – to see to it that whatever religious beliefs she may have are held on good evidence. In other words, I suggest that if we want to understand the preoccupation of recent analytic philosophy of religion with epistemology, we must look to intellectual culture, and to its embrace of that ideal of a rational religion of which I spoke earlier.

When faced with a challenge such as Locke's evidentialist challenge to religious belief, one can obviously either accept the challenge or reject it. If one accepts the challenge, one can then either try to meet it, or one can declare the challenge victorious and religious belief untenable. In turn, if one tries to meet the challenge, one can try to do so in either of two ways, or a combination thereof: one can try to assemble evidence for the

religious beliefs one does have, or one can trim one's beliefs until they do not go beyond the evidence one finds oneself to have.

I think it safe to say that almost no one who is today engaged in analytic philosophy of religion accepts the Lockean evidentialist challenge. Some would accept one or another severely qualified version of it; but almost no one would accept it in the unqualified form in which Locke issued it. Almost no one would hold that it is the obligation of everybody, if they are religious at all, to see to it that their religion is rational by virtue of being based on evidence consisting of certitudes. This new situation, beyond doubt, is mainly the result of so-called "Reformed epistemology."

What made the emergence of Reformed epistemology possible was the emergence, around the same time, of meta-epistemology, and the identification, which meta-epistemology in turn made possible, of classical foundationalism as one among many alternative accounts of the conditions under which our beliefs possess one or another such merit as warrant, entitlement, justification, and so forth. To speak autobiographically for a moment: it's clear to me now, in retrospect, that my own graduate school training in epistemology simply took classical foundationalism for granted, and worried over issues that arose within that particular theory. The fact that meta-epistemology had not yet emerged made it impossible to gain that degree of epistemological self-consciousness that now is common.

The relevance of meta-epistemology to the emergence of Reformed epistemology is this: the Reformed epistemologists discerned that Locke's issuance of his evidentialist challenge to religious belief depended essentially on his classical foundationalism. According to the classical foundationalist, religious beliefs, or more specifically, theistic beliefs, are not of the sort that can appear in the foundation; if they are to appear in a scheme of warranted beliefs, entitled beliefs, justified beliefs, or whatever, they will have to appear in the superstructure, not in the foundation – which is just to say that they will require the support of non-theistic beliefs that do qualify for the foundation. But if classical foundationalism proves unacceptable, then this whole way of looking at things shakes and topples – unless, of course, one can quickly replace it with some other epistemological structure that, *mirabile dictu*, does the same work.

The Reformed epistemologists were already dubious of the validity of Locke's evidentialist challenge to religious belief; it was their recognition that Locke's challenge depended essentially on his classical foundationalism that led them then to attack classical foundationalism, with devastating results. We are now a long way from those initial, almost

exclusively negative, polemical forays. William P. Alston has since published his *Perceiving God*, in which he argues that a good many beliefs about God are *rationally* held not because the person has Lockean-style arguments for the belief, but because the person holding the belief has experienced God.² Alvin Plantinga's *Warranted Christian Belief* has made its appearance; Plantinga argues that a good many beliefs about God have the status of *knowledge* even though the believer does not have Lockean-style arguments in favor of them.³ And in sections of my Gifford Lectures, I argue, similarly, that many beliefs about God for which one does not have Lockean-style arguments are nonetheless *entitled*.⁴ Using "rational" as a catch-all word for the various truth-relevant doxastic merits, one could say this: *religious beliefs can be rational without being rationally grounded*. The fundamental significance of Reformed epistemology is, thus, that it denies the fundamental premise of Enlightenment philosophy of religion, shared alike by Locke and those in his tradition, and by Kant and those in his.

It is partly these results that those who speak of the gullibility of analytic philosophers of religion have in mind; it is partly these results that lead them to accuse the analytic philosophers of religion of failure to be suspicious and to launch critique. But it's not the claim of the Reformed epistemologists that religious beliefs are impervious to critique. Quite to the contrary; they insist that a good many of the religious beliefs of a good many people are not justified, are not rational, are not entitled, are not warranted, and so forth. What they reject is classically foundationalist accounts of these merits. They reject the swashbuckling insistence that religious beliefs are lacking in doxastic merit if the believer does not hold those beliefs on the basis of yet other beliefs that provide evidence for the religious beliefs and are themselves certain. Why must they be held on the basis of *any other* beliefs, be those other beliefs certain or not?

Those who accuse the analytic philosophers of religion of epistemological gullibility probably have their eye on something more in this philosophical development than just the rejection of the ideal of a rationally grounded religion. They probably also have their eye on the obvious confidence, of the analytic philosophers of religion, that by argumentation we can learn something about God – that it is possible to engage in philosophical theology. The rejection of Kantianism is here at its most striking. In the analytic philosophers of religion there is nothing like that

² Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991. ³ Oxford University Press, 2000.

⁴ *Practices of Belief: Essays in Epistemology*, Terence Cuneo, ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2009).

powerful Kantian image of an epistemological boundary, and nothing like the metaphysical and epistemological conclusions drawn from it. The analytic philosopher of religion does indeed exclaim with Anselm, "I do not endeavor, Lord, to attain Your lofty heights, because my understanding is in no way equal to it. But I do desire to understand Your truth a little, that truth that my heart believes and loves."⁵ But it is the sublimity of God that limits our understanding, not some epistemological boundary between the phenomenal and the noumenal discovered by philosophical reflections on human nature and its powers.

The mention of Anselm leads me to observe that the flourishing of analytic philosophy of religion over the past quarter century has been accompanied by a comparable flourishing, during this same period, of studies in the medieval philosophers and theologians. That these developments should happen concurrently is, in my judgment, no accident. The analytic philosophers of religion have discovered, in the medieval philosophers and theologians, stimulating conversation partners. That discovery has stimulated the study of the medievals – and, in turn, the study of the medievals has remarkably deepened the reflections of our contemporary philosophers of religion.

The rejection of classical foundationalism has had recursive effects on the understanding of philosophy itself, not just on the philosopher's understanding of what is legitimate and what is illegitimate in religious belief. Just as Locke, Kant, and the bulk of their Enlightenment cohorts believed that religion should be rationally constructed on the basis of our shared human nature, rather than on the basis of our particular traditions, so too they believed that *Wissenschaft* should be a product of our shared human nature. In the construction of *Wissenschaft* we are to leave behind our parochial traditions and engage in the disciplines simply as generic human beings. Philosophy, along with all the other disciplines, is to be a product of our shared humanity – not of our German humanity, not of our Christian humanity, not of our female humanity, not of our African-American humanity, just of our generic humanity.

Without taking time here to trace out the paths and connections, let me observe that the same epistemological self-consciousness, made possible by the emergence of meta-epistemology, which resulted in doubt being cast on the evidentialist challenge to religious belief, also resulted in doubt being cast on the regnant understanding of the academic enterprise

⁵ Quoted from *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works*, translated and edited by Brian Davies and G. R. Evans (Oxford University Press, 1988), 87.

as requiring us to extricate ourselves from our particular traditions and frameworks of conviction so as to conduct ourselves as generic human beings. It is this new picture of the academic enterprise that in large measure accounts for the particularist character of so much analytic philosophy of religion. Those who engage in analytic philosophy of religion are for the most part adherents to some particular religion; that, I have no doubt, is why most of them find the topics absorbing. Most of them realize that such adherence shapes, in one way or another, what they do. They make no effort to conceal this fact about themselves. They regard something of the sort as inevitable for everyone. They no longer share the Enlightenment ideal of a *Wissenschaft* that is generically human. And to that rather sizable group of critics who hold that scholars who deal with religion ought to be neutral with respect to all particular religions, let me just observe that those who become philosophers of art typically have a love for art; we do not hold this against them.

WHERE FROM HERE?

My aim in the foregoing has been to enhance comprehension of contemporary philosophy of religion in the analytic tradition by offering a narrative account of how it got to be the way it is. I recognize, of course, that the character that philosophy assumes at any time and place is in good measure due to the turns taken by the intellectual imagination of those engaged in it at that time and place; and that for this there's no accounting. I have already cited the interventions of Moore and Russell as going a long way toward accounting for the rather sudden decline of idealism in the anglophone world; so too I have cited the interventions of the Reformed epistemologists as accounting for much of what is now salient in analytic philosophy of religion. Thus it is not at all my view that philosophical developments are a case of historical determinism. Nonetheless, the manifestations of philosophical imagination that are so crucial in accounting for the turns that philosophy takes do not occur in a vacuum. To cite the Reformed epistemologists one more time: their work occurred in the context of a pervasive cultural mentality concerning religion. They perceived that that mentality incorporated the ideal, handed down from the Enlightenment, of a rationally grounded religion. They attacked that ideal. The particular form that their polemic assumed proved enormously influential. But had there not been that cultural ideal, there could not have been that polemic. Other types of illustrations could be given of the same general point: the intellectual imagination that shapes the course of

philosophy is both formed and provoked by the philosophical, cultural, and social context within which the philosopher finds himself. The story of philosophy, as I said earlier, is not the story of historically irrelevant shafts of light darted into our existence at the good pleasure of the keepers of the Platonic ideas.

And now for the final, programmatic, part of my discussion: What do I propose for the future? Those who did not know in advance that I am myself a participant, and happily so, in the developments in philosophy of religion that I have been describing, will have come to that conclusion well before now on the basis of my remarks; I have made no attempt at concealment. One might try to enhance the comprehension of some historical philosopher – Avicenna, say – solely because one finds his thought interesting; one may not in the least be inclined to accept it. My motivation for trying to enhance comprehension of these recent developments in philosophy of religion is not so much because I find them interesting – though I do – but because this is where a good deal of my own work has been located. That motivation will discernibly have shaped what I said in the descriptive part of my discussion. It will very obviously shape what I now have to say in this, the programmatic part. Someone who found this entire development thoroughly distressing would say something quite different.

Let me organize what I have to say under five heads. First, I am of the view that the near-hegemonic role that epistemology has played in recent analytic philosophy of religion should, and will, diminish. I have tried to explain why epistemology has played such a salient role. I have suggested that we continue to do our philosophizing about religion in the light and shadow of the Enlightenment, and that Enlightenment philosophy of religion was little more than epistemology of religion. As long as it remains part of our cultural mentality that religion ought to be rationally grounded, the philosopher of religion will have no choice but to deal with issues of epistemology. Nonetheless, it is my guess that most of the things that ought to be said, and are worth being said, on this topic, have now been said, or will soon have been said. So I do not propose that epistemological concerns disappear; it does matter whether our religious beliefs are entitled, for example, or warranted. But I do propose that epistemological issues assume a less looming prominence. This would mean, for example, that evil and the silence of God would be treated less exclusively as epistemological issues – less exclusively, that is to say, as issues that raise the question whether one is justified, warranted, entitled, or whatever, in believing in God.

That leads, naturally, to my second point. So prominent has been our focus on epistemology that saying that evil and the silence of God should

be treated less exclusively as epistemological problems will raise the question in the minds of many: How else could they be treated if not as epistemological problems? My answer is that they could instead be treated as challenges to be faced by the person committed to leading a religious way of life. My second point then is this: I think that we who are analytic philosophers of religion should begin to devote more attention than we have to the role of religion in life. On this point, the Wittgensteinian philosophers of religion have something to teach us. Earlier I made the point that the Wittgensteinians, given their theistic anti-realism, had nothing else to discuss than the role of religion in life; philosophical reflection on God is not an option for the Wittgensteinian. But be that as it may: religion obviously does play a role in life. That calls for a great deal more philosophical reflection than those in the movement I have been describing have thus far devoted to it.

Furthermore, in reflecting on the role of religion in life, it's important not just to concentrate on private and exotic mystical experiences. For most believers, communal liturgical practices play a far more important role in their lives than private mystical experiences. Yet there have been remarkably few philosophical reflections on liturgy. Likewise there have been remarkably few reflections by analytic philosophers of religion on the role of religion in society.

A third suggestion I wish to make is really a special case of the second, but worth singling out for special attention. A prominent part in the lives of most religious believers is the reading and interpreting of canonical Scriptures. Yet there has been little attention paid by analytic philosophers to the important and fascinating problems of interpretation that this practice raises. The English tradition of philosophy, in contrast to the continental of the last century and more, has always paid far more attention to problems of perception than to problems of interpretation. Hence it is that one finds far more discussion of mystical experience than of Scriptural interpretation in the recent analytic tradition. On this point, we in the analytic tradition have much to learn from our continental fellows. I have practiced what I am now preaching with the publication of my *Divine Discourse*.⁶

Fourth, I think we can no longer ignore, to the extent we have, the problems posed by religious pluralism. I make no plea for the Schleiermachean scheme of religion as having an essence of which the many religions are manifestations. Likewise I make no plea for *Wissenschaft* as the product

⁶ Cambridge University Press, 1995.

solely of our generic humanity. But taking the fact of religious pluralism as an important topic for philosophical reflection does not require signing on to either of these pleas. Let me add that, in my judgment, a serious philosophical address to the problems raised by religious pluralism will require of us far more inter-religious philosophical dialogue than we have engaged in up to this point. There was considerably more of such dialogue among the medieval theologians and philosophers than there is among us.

Last, I fully endorse the continuation of work in the area of philosophical theology. This, in my judgment, is one of the most important – if not *the* most important – contributions by those who work within the movement of analytic philosophy of religion. Epistemology has been important, but mainly as a polemical operation. Or to change the metaphor, it has been important as a ground-clearing operation. Not so for the philosophical theology that has been produced. Of course it is this component of recent philosophy of religion in the analytic tradition that most annoys and unnerves those theologians and philosophers who identify with the Kantian positions on “fundamental metaphysics” and the boundary. Have you not learned your Kantian lessons? they exclaim.

I close then by returning to one of my basic themes: it’s not a matter of learning or not learning one’s Kantian lessons. We are dealing here with deep, unresolved issues within the modern philosophical tradition. Recent philosophy of religion in the analytic tradition represents one set of answers to those unresolved issues. It does so with a quite extraordinary blend of rigor and imagination. It is, in fact, one of the grand episodes in the history of philosophical reflections on religion.

CHAPTER 2

Is it possible and desirable for theologians to recover from Kant?

About nine months ago, a very gifted theology student came to my office, said that she had been reading my recently published *Divine Discourse*, and asked whether she could talk about it. The subtitle of *Divine Discourse* is: "Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks." That gives an indication of what the book is about.

Could we talk about it? Of course! What author doesn't like the flattery implicit in someone saying, "I've just read your just-published book and would like to talk about it"? She had many insightful things to say. Oddly, however, it is not her insightful comments that have stuck with me so much as two perplexing comments. "What I find so fascinating about your book," she said, "is that the book begins and you just start talking about God." I remember thinking to myself: I suppose so. But the project of the book was to reflect on whether God speaks; and that required talking about God. So what else might she have expected? Just then there was a knock at the door and I was distracted; when we got back to our conversation, I forgot to ask her what she meant.

The other perplexing thing she said was this: "What's forward for you is backward for me and what's backward for you is forward for me. There's only one chapter in the whole book that's forward to forward." I asked her what she meant. "Well," she said, "what you discuss last I would have discussed first; and what you discuss first I would have discussed last – if I had gotten around to it at all." My last chapter was on epistemology; so I knew, or thought I knew, what she meant. She would have put epistemology up front, and discussed substantive matters later – assuming the epistemological matters proved not to occupy the entire book. Of course, what she actually said was not just that the book as a whole was backward to forward, but that all the chapters except one were backward to forward and forward to backward. What she meant by that I did not understand, and still do not.

But I do now know what she meant by saying, "The book begins and you just start talking about God." Very recently this same student remarked to me, "What I find so frustrating about modern theologians is that they won't let me say the things about God that I want to say about God – or won't let me say them until I've shown that such things *can* be said about God." So that was it! What she saw in my book was someone who, if he wanted to say something about God, just went ahead and said it. Presumably, then, she would make the same remark about certain other books in philosophy of religion published recently by philosophers in the analytic tradition – for example, about William P. Alston's book, *Perceiving God*. The book begins and Alston just starts talking about God.

Her recent comment, if I had had nothing more to go on than the comment itself, might still have been perplexing. But the context of our discussion made clear what she meant. We and a few others had been talking about the influence of Immanuel Kant on modern theologians. That was the context in which she expressed her frustration. It was the Kantian influence, so she suggested, that led theologians to tell her that she should not say the things about God that she wanted to say without first showing that such things could be said about God – and that she should stop saying those things if she couldn't show that they could be said about God.

I could have replied that surely this was not true of *all* modern theologians; they didn't all say this. She really ought to watch her generalizations. I did not say that, because I knew which theologians she had in mind. Without now mentioning them, they constitute, all together, a large proportion of the modern theologians with whom she was interacting in her studies – a large proportion of the theologians constituting the modern component in the canon of the theological curriculum of her university-affiliated divinity school. It was *those* theologians who were telling her that she shouldn't say the things about God that she wanted to say without first showing that such things could be said about God.

I might also have insisted that she really ought to disambiguate her word "say." Tillich, to take but one example, was not really telling her to stop using the words, "God reveals." But the student I have in mind is philosophically quick and sharp; I know what she would have said in reply. "Yes, I know that," she would have said. "I know that he'll let me use the words. But he won't let me mean by those words what I want to mean by them unless I show that one *can* mean that."

I submit that the crisp comment of this student is as good a formulation as we are going to get of a fundamental methodological theme in a good many modern theologians: we are not to say about God what we might want to say without first showing that such things *can* be said about God. And I submit that she was right in seeing Kant as the decisive influence here. Another methodological theme that is almost as pervasive among modern theologians, maybe in fact just as pervasive, is that we are not to say about God what we want to say without first establishing that we are *justified* in saying those things. In this essay, I want to neglect that theme and concentrate on the other, viz., on the theme that we are not to say about God what we want to say without first establishing that it's possible to say such things about God. This latter theme, obviously, has a certain priority over the other. If the things I want to say about God cannot really be said about God, then the question of whether I am *justified* in saying them, or *entitled* to say them, does not even arise.

THE SHADOW CAST ON TRADITIONAL THEOLOGY BY
THE DOCTRINE OF DIVINE SIMPLICITY

Take note of the structure of the student's thought. She *came* to theology wanting to say certain things about God. Possibly she also *emerged* from her study of theology wanting to say *new* things about God. But on this occasion, this last was not what she had her eye on.

How did she come by these things that she wanted to say about God? I did not ask her; but I feel confident in saying that she came by them through induction into, and participation within, such primary religious practices as reading sacred Scripture, participating in the liturgy of the church, and engaging in private devotions. Perhaps she also came by them through religious experiences that befell her. In short, it was her prior (and continuing) religious formation and practice which brought about that she wanted to say things about God – and no doubt, say things to God. The theology she studied frustrated her in this regard. Perhaps I should make clear that she is by no means someone who thinks that everything she has been taught in Sunday School or told by her pastor is correct. I would be surprised if frustration constituted the totality of her affective response to the theology she studied; I would guess that sometimes she has experienced a satisfying deepening of insight. But frustration was prominent. And she located the source of that frustration in the theologians' appropriation of the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. An interaction, thus, among three fundamental components of human life

and culture: philosophy, theology, and religious formation and practice, with theology mediating between the other two.

This particular pattern of interaction among these three components of life and culture is by no means peculiar to the particular case on which my student had her eye. To the contrary: the same pattern has been exemplified over and over in the history of the West. I think it will prove illuminating, before we analyze the example before us, to look briefly at one of the most important exemplifications of the pattern in the pre-modern world. I have in mind the role of the doctrine of divine simplicity in the formation of Christian theology – and in the formation of Jewish and Islamic theology as well. The doctrine was bequeathed to theologians by philosophers, Plotinus preeminent among them; and that it was a menace to the religious person saying about God what she wanted to say is obvious to anyone who reads around in the theology of late antiquity and the middle ages. I should add that the medieval theologians did undertake to diminish this menace – all the while, however, continuing their elaborate spinning out of the implications of the doctrine. For, with no exceptions of which I am aware, they found the doctrine utterly compelling.

Moses Maimonides, in his *Guide of the Perplexed*, written for the Jewish community in Spain in the thirteenth century, was more explicit than were most medieval theologians in his statement of the overall strategy and its motivations. Maimonides opens his Introduction by declaring that the primary purpose of his treatise “is to explain the meaning of certain terms occurring in books of prophecy” – that is, in the Law, the Torah.¹ We are led to expect an exegetical commentary. But as Maimonides makes clear at once, that is not what we will get. “My speech,” he says, is directed “to one who has philosophized and has knowledge of the true sciences, but believes at the same time in the matters pertaining to the Law and is perplexed as to their meaning because of the uncertain terms and the parables” (*Guide*, 6a). In other words, Maimonides is addressing the person who, on the one hand, is “a religious man for whom the validity of our Law has become established in his soul and has become actual in his belief,” and who, on the other hand, has “studied the sciences of the philosophers” (*Guide*, 3a). Such a person is perplexed as to what to do with these two sides of his life. One option is to “follow his intellect,” stick with what he learned in the philosophy classroom, renounce what he

¹ I quote from the version translated by Shlomo Pines with an introduction by Leo Strauss (University of Chicago Press, 1963). References to this book will be given parenthetically in the text.

thought he knew all along about the meaning of terms in the prophets, and “consider that he has renounced the foundations of the Law” (*Guide*, 3a). Alternatively, he could “hold fast to his [prior] understanding of these terms and not let himself be drawn on [by] his intellect” and by what he has learned in the philosophy classroom, instead, “turning his back on it and moving away from it” (*Guide*, 3b). To his description of this latter option Maimonides at once adds that such a person, having learned what he did in the philosophy classroom, will perceive that his renunciation of this learning has “brought loss to himself and harm to his religion. He would be left with those imaginary beliefs to which he owes his fear and difficulty and would not cease to suffer from heartache and great perplexity” (*Guide*, 3b). From this it is obvious that repudiation of philosophy is not the option that Maimonides recommends; he does not think the student of philosophy could do that with a clear conscience. But neither does he recommend the first option, that of renouncing Torah in favor of philosophy. We are instead to go between the horns of the dilemma. Rather than seeing philosophy as in conflict with Torah, we should see it as opening up to us the true meaning of Torah. The project Maimonides sets himself in his *Guide* is to work this strategy out in detail. He takes passages from the Torah which appear to contradict what is learned in the philosophy classroom, and offers interpretations in which all appearance of conflict is removed. The student of philosophy can remain a faithful member of the synagogue.

There are many things that the philosophy student learns in the classroom with which Torah gives the appearance of being in conflict. But as one reads along in Maimonides, one becomes aware of the fact that there is one source of apparent conflict looming high above all others. It’s something that the philosophy student learns about God; namely, that God is simple. It looms above all others in two ways. The doctrine of divine simplicity has a truly extraordinary number of implications for our understanding of God; that is to say, it proves extraordinarily fecund for discussions on philosophical theology taking place within the philosophy classroom. And interpreting Scripture so as to make the results compatible with the doctrine of simplicity and its implications proves to require extraordinary exegetical ingenuity at an extraordinary number of points.

Since the doctrine has almost entirely disappeared from theological consciousness, I had better explain what it is; one can read vast stretches of contemporary theology and never come across it. To understand the doctrine, we must realize that it was formulated in the context of Aristotelian ontology. The fundamental strategy of Aristotelian ontology is to analyze

entities into their components: form, matter, essence, existence, properties, qualities, definitions, accidents, and so forth. The doctrine of divine simplicity is the doctrine that God is devoid of ontological components; God has no constituents, none at all. In God there is no distinction between God and God's essence, nor any between God's essence and God's existence, nor any between God's essence and God's properties – and so forth, for whatever ontological distinctions there might be.

Why would anyone ever embrace and propound so arcane a doctrine as this? If one already embraces the doctrine, then it will be utterly compelling to interpret the *shema* – “I, the Lord thy God, am one God” – as expressing the doctrine. But regarded from the opposite angle, the doctrine seems a flamboyant over-interpretation of the *shema*. And in fact the doctrine was not the product of scrupulous biblical interpretation.

It was philosophical considerations that led everybody at the time to find the doctrine utterly compelling. Everybody at the time found themselves compelled to believe that the structure of reality must include something which is the ultimate condition of everything not identical with itself, and which is, accordingly, itself unconditioned by anything. This we may call God. Now suppose this unconditioned condition of everything other than itself had components, distinct from itself. Then in one way or another – the precise way depending on the nature of the components – its existence and/or character would be conditional on those components. And that, of course, is incompatible with being the *unconditioned* condition.

So suppose we concede that God is simple. One of the next issues to consider, in the class on philosophical theology, is whether God changes. The answer is that of course God does not change. For suppose God did change. Then one could distinguish between God before the change and God after the change. But if God is utterly simple, then no such distinction can be made. In turn, if God cannot change, then God cannot in any way be different from how God is; God has no unfulfilled potentialities. And God cannot be thought of as being in time; for what else is it to be in time, than that there are elements of one's life and existence which stand in temporal succession relations to each other? But since in God there aren't any components, perforce there aren't any components that stand in temporal succession relations to each other.

I could go on in this vein for quite some time, as did the medievals; but I trust I have said enough to give the reader some glimmer of how fecund this doctrine of simplicity proved to be – and how fecund the doctrine that lies behind it, the doctrine of divine aseity, proved to be. Grant these

doctrines, and one has to grant an astonishing list of other things about God.

Now recall the situation: the student learning all these things in the class on philosophical theology came to the class as a faithful member of the synagogue, the church, or the mosque. He will, accordingly, be perplexed by what he has been hearing. The picture of God that he acquired from Scripture and liturgy is the picture of a God who acts in history, who does one thing after another, who has options available, and so forth. He has now been taught by his philosophy professor that this picture is radically mistaken; accordingly, he will have to reinterpret systematically all the language from Scripture and liturgy that conveyed to him his earlier picture of God – either that, or just scrap that language.

Up to this point, everything has proceeded very smoothly within the philosophy classroom itself. Now things begin to get sticky. The philosopher teaching the class offers arguments for the love and the knowledge of God, these arguments resting heavily on those prior commitments to the aseity and simplicity of God. He argues that God knows all things and loves all things. Our student is surprised. He is not surprised to hear someone claiming that God knows and loves all things; he himself already believed this, on the basis of Scripture and liturgy. What surprises him is that his philosophy teacher believes this, and that his philosophy teacher is trying to argue for it philosophically. For the claim appears to him, the student, to be in conflict with the prior commitment to divine simplicity. Is it not the case that acts of knowledge are differentiated by diversity of objects of knowledge? Perhaps by other features as well; but at least by that. My knowledge of A is distinct from my knowledge of B if A is distinct from B. So how can a simple God know many things?

There are more such surprises in store. The teacher goes on to argue that God wills – wills many things. This too is surprising. Once again, it's not surprising that someone should believe that God wills. This is also something that the student came to the classroom believing; he picked it up from Scripture and liturgy. The surprise lies in hearing his teacher of philosophical theology affirming this, and arguing for it philosophically. Earlier his teacher observed that simplicity implies that God is devoid of potentialities; God is pure actuality. But if in God there are no potentialities, no options, what could possibly be meant by the attribution of will to God?

And somewhere along the way it occurs to the student to suspect that his teacher has inadvertently fallen into incoherence. God is simple, so the teacher argued; and from this he extracted a long list of additional things

to be said about God. But if God is simple, how can there be “additional” things to be said about God? To say additional things about ordinary things is to single out additional features of the thing. But in the simple God, there are no distinct features to be singled out; all God’s features are identical with each other. Yet surely we are not just repeating ourselves when we say that God is eternal, immutable, knowledgeable, and so forth.

Come to think of it, how can we say even *one* thing about God? To say something about some ordinary thing is to pick out some feature of that thing and attribute that feature to that thing. But in God, there is no feature to pick out, for there is no distinction between God and God’s features. Given the theistic ontology that has been developed, it seems impossible to predicate anything of God. Yet we have to have been doing exactly that in developing our theistic ontology. Or so it certainly seems.

Lastly, somewhere along the line the Christian student in the classroom is going to raise his hand and ask: How is simplicity compatible with trinity? Doesn’t the person who believes that God is triune thereby, and perforce, believe that God is *not* simple?

I trust that my main point is abundantly clear. It’s not a new thing for the theologian to say to the religious person that she cannot just say and mean about God what her religious formation and practice have taught her to want to say and mean about God; nor is it a new thing for that prohibition to have philosophical roots. The roots and consequences of the prohibition in modern theology are different, however, from those in medieval theology; I will draw the contrast later.

KANT’S EMPLOYMENT OF THE METAPHOR OF A BOUNDARY

The student who expressed to me her frustration with modern theology is thoroughly acquainted with medieval theology; she’s knowledgeable in both the medieval and the modern periods. She knows that the doctrine of divine simplicity conflicts at many points with the picture of God that one picks up from reading Scripture and participating in the liturgy; she knows that it also created immense difficulties within the philosophical classroom itself. She knows, in short, about the dark menacing shadow cast by the doctrine of divine simplicity over both religious life and theology. Yet her frustration is with modern theology. She does not by any means accept everything the medieval theologians say; she argues with them. She’s not a theological throwback. But the medieval theologians

don't frustrate her in the way the modern theologians do. They might bore her sometimes – whom don't they bore sometimes! – but they don't frustrate her. She thinks the clue to why the modern theologians frustrate her is to be found in the influence of Immanuel Kant on modern theology. Let's pursue that clue.

No matter which part of Kant's thought one picks up, the project of elucidating that part accurately and briefly has no more than a marginal chance of success. Nonetheless, let me try. My interpretation will be relatively traditional. I have doubts whether this relatively traditional interpretation is correct;² more relevant to the purposes at hand, however, is the fact that the traditional interpretation is the one that influenced the theological tradition.

Fundamental to Kant's thought on the matter at hand is the metaphor of a boundary. If we can discern how he uses that metaphor, we will have in hand what is necessary for our purposes here. One of the passages in which the metaphor is most prominent is the Conclusion to the *Prolegomena to any Future Metaphysics*. And let me note, by the way, that, contrary to what one might have expected, Kant's *Prolegomena* appears to have had far more influence on modern theology than his *Religion within the Bounds of Reason Alone*. My guess is that, had the latter been the more influential, Kant's influence on theology would have been quite different – all in all, less productive of skepticism concerning our ability to speak about God. Kant titles the Conclusion of the *Prolegomena*, "On the Determination of the Bounds of Pure Reason"; and at the beginning of the third section of the Conclusion he makes clear that his use of the metaphor of a boundary is by no means incidental: "At the beginning of this note," he says, "I made use of the metaphor of a boundary, in order to establish the limits of reason in regard to its suitable use" (*Prolegomena*, §59).³

One of the most fundamental themes in Kant's thought is that reality puts in its appearance to us, and that it does so in the form of representations – mental representations. Mental representations just are episodes of reality's putting in its appearance to us. These representations are for

² See the discussion of Kant in "Does the role of concepts make experiential access to ready-made reality impossible?" in my *Practices of Belief*, Terence Cuneo, ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2009), ch. 2.

³ I quote from the version edited by Lewis White Beck (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1950). Quotations from the *Critique of Pure Reason* are from the version edited by Norman Kemp Smith (New York: Macmillan, 1929). References to these books are given parenthetically in the text.

us items or episodes of intuition, of awareness, of *Anschauung*. The occurrence of episodes of awareness is thus a mark of receptivity to reality on our part. If reality did not act upon us in the manner of putting in its appearance to us, our mental life would have no intuitional content. Things may well be different for other beings. There may be beings who have it in their power to *bring about* intuitional representations of entities. Not so for us who are human beings. We have intuitions “only so far as the object is given to us,” in distinction from being brought about by us. And this, in turn, is only possible for human beings “in so far as the mind is affected in a certain way” (*Critique of Pure Reason*, A19). An awareness of dizziness, an awareness of some patch of color, an awareness of something textured, take what example of awareness you will, all are inputs from reality; none is an output of oneself.

A fundamental structural feature of our human intuitions is that all of them occur in time, and many occur in space. Thus temporality and spatiality are related to our sensuous intuitions as form is related to matter. Time and space are forms of intuition. That’s all they are: structural features of how reality appears to us. They are not features of the reality putting in the appearance. It’s no accident that these are forms of intuition; it could not be otherwise, not for us, anyway. For it is of the essence of the human being to be so constituted that reality can put in its appearance to us only if the intuitions which constitute that appearance occur within time and space. There may be, for all we know, beings for whom this is not true, beings whose intuitions are not spatial and temporal – as indeed there may be beings other than human beings for whom time and space are forms of intuition.

One of Kant’s most important doctrines about intuitions is that in the absence of intuition, there is no knowledge. The point is not that our knowledge of things is confined to those things of which we have awareness; one can have knowledge of people one has never met. The point is rather that all our knowledge of entities is either awareness of those entities or ultimately grounded in awareness of some entities or other. Though I can have knowledge of people I have never met, I couldn’t have such knowledge if I were totally devoid of sensory input. To put the point in Kant’s own words: “in whatever manner and by whatever means a mode of knowledge may relate to objects, *intuition* is that through which it is in immediate relation to them, and to which all thought as a means is directed” (*Critique of Pure Reason*, A19). Kant adds to this the further strong claim that our knowledge of objects is limited to what we could in principle experience.

But though all knowledge of objects has either an intuitional component or basis, intuition is not sufficient for knowledge. Knowledge is always conceptual; knowledge always incorporates concepts. Accordingly, our intuitions, if they are to play a role in our cognitive life, must somehow gain entry into our conceptual space. Such entry occurs by virtue of the fact that human awareness is always awareness under concepts. I don't just hear something, I hear it as middle C; I don't just see something, I see it as a dog; I don't just have sensations, I experience my sensation as dizziness; and so forth. The British empiricists thought that we extract concepts *from* the intuitions given to us, and compare intuitions with concepts that we already possess so as to judge whether the concept fits the intuition. Either way, concepts are always Johnny-come-latelys on the empiricist view – first the intuition, then the concept. Kant insists, to the contrary, that awareness is always awareness *under concepts*; the intuitional given is always *already* conceptualized, always *already* conceptually interpreted. This is the fundamental role of concepts, on which all else rests: to serve as modes of interpretation of intuitions. It's true that concepts also function as the predicates of our judgments. But if we did not conceptualize our intuitions, if we did not interpret them conceptually, if our intuitions were not intuitions under concepts, we could never connect intuitions with judgments.

It is one's own understanding that provides and applies concepts. Intuitions "are *thought* through the understanding, and from the understanding arise *concepts*" (ibid.). Conceptualizing is thus a mark of mental *activity*, in contrast to intuitions, which are a mark of mental receptivity. It follows that all knowledge, based as it is on conceptualized intuitions, represents a blend of receptivity and activity.

The fundamental role of concepts, to say it again, is to interpret our intuitions. Concepts are rules for interpreting the manifold of intuitions. I interpret my sensory intuitions as, say, my experience of an elephant. But I could also interpret those very same intuitions as sensory states of myself; in fact, anything that can be interpreted as an experience of a spatio-temporal object can also be interpreted as a sensory state of the percipient. Thus it was Kant's view that we should reject the picture, developed by Descartes and Locke, of there being spatio-temporal objects *in addition* to our mental representations. External spatio-temporal objects are not *in addition* to representations. The situation is rather that the manifold of intuitions can (in good measure) be conceptually interpreted not just as states of self *but also* as experience of external objects. Objectivity is the product of conceptual interpretation of intuitions – as

indeed is subjectivity. It is “the activity of our understanding,” says Kant, “to compare ... representations, and, by combining or separating them, work up the raw material of the sensible impressions into that knowledge of objects which is entitled experience” (*Critique of Pure Reason*, B1).

When one surveys the entire array of human concepts, one sees that they fall into certain ultimate types – twelve, to be exact. Call those ultimate types, *categories*. Kant believed that exactly these twelve categories belong to the native and essential furniture of the human mind. Falling under the category of substance are such concepts as dog, table, and mountain. The human mind is not stocked, natively and essentially, with those particular concepts; some human beings have surely never had the concept of a mountain. But we can be assured, said Kant, that there never has been and never could be a human being who possessed no concepts whatsoever falling under the category of substance. And so also for the other eleven categories.

I submit that for anyone who thinks along these lines, the metaphor of a *bound* is irresistible. There are bounds to the functioning of our categories and of the concepts belonging to those categories; and those bounds constitute the bounds of human knowledge. For the categories just are the ultimate concept-types of the human understanding; we can neither fail to have concepts of these types nor can we have concepts of other types. And the basic function of the concepts belonging to these types is to interpret the manifold of intuitions given us, thereby “working up” that manifold into knowledge and the basis of knowledge. To make the underlying thought explicit, we might speak not just of bounds to the employment of the categories but of bounds to the *intuitional* employment of the categories: the bounds to the intuitional employment of the categories constitute the bounds of human knowledge. Since it belongs to the essence of our intuitions that they occur within time, we might also say that time is what determines those bounds. Let me quote Kant, from the opening to the Conclusion of the *Prolegomena*:

Having adduced the clearest arguments, it would be absurd for us to hope that we can know more of any object than belongs to the possible experience of it or lay claim to the least knowledge of anything not assumed to be an object of possible experience which would determine it according to the constitution it has in itself. For how could we determine anything in this way, since time, space, and all the [categories], and still more all the concepts formed by empirical intuition (perception) in the sensible world, have and can have no other use than to make experience possible? And if this condition is omitted from the [categories], they do not determine any object and have no meaning whatever. (*Prolegomena*, §57)

Immediately after enunciating the above, Kant issues a warning. Do not jump to the conclusion that the bounds of the intuitional employment of the categories constitute the bounds of all that is, nor that they constitute the bounds of knowledge in general, non-human as well as human. Over and over, hundreds if not thousands of times, Kant reminds us of his fundamental picture: "The world of sense contains merely appearances, which are not things in themselves; but the understanding, because it recognizes that the objects of experience are mere appearances, must assume that there are things in themselves, namely, *noumena*" (*Prolegomena*, Conclusion, §59). Given this picture, it would be a "still greater absurdity" than the absurdity mentioned above

if we conceded no things in themselves or set up our experience as the only possible mode of knowing things, our intuition of them in space and in time for the only possible intuition and our discursive understanding for the archetype of every possible understanding; for this would be to wish to have the principles of the possibility of experience considered universal conditions of things in themselves. (*Prolegomena*, §57)

The boundary of a field is not just the *bounds* of the field, but the line dividing that field from other fields. Unlike bounds, boundaries are always *between* things. Kant had that in mind when he used the metaphor of a *boundary*. A boundary, he says, "is something positive, which belongs to that which lies within as well as to the space that lies without the given content" (*Prolegomena*, Conclusion, §59). The intuitional employment of the categories determines the *boundary* between the humanly knowable and the humanly unknowable, between the phenomenal and the noumenal, between reality as it puts in its appearance to us and reality as it is in itself. It is the calling of the philosopher to discuss the role of reason, such as it is, on both sides of the boundary. "In our reason both are comprehended, and the question is, How does reason proceed to set boundaries to the understanding as regards both these fields?" (*ibid.*)

This last point requires brief elaboration. Knowledge of the transcendent, Kant has been saying, is unavailable to us, since the bounds of the intuitional employment of the categories define the bounds of human knowledge, and those bounds coincide with the bounds of time. But do not infer, he insists, that because the transcendent is closed to *knowledge*, it is closed to every form of intellectual access whatsoever. In a famous passage from the preface to the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant remarks that he "found it necessary to deny *knowledge*, in order to make room for *faith*." Though the

transcendent is closed to knowledge, it is not closed to faith. What Kant means, in speaking of making room for faith, is making room for convictions about God that do not amount to knowledge. Not indeed room for any old convictions about God; it was by no means Kant's intent to make room for any faith you please. *Rational* faith is what he had in mind. It was for rationally grounded convictions concerning God, and the transcendent in general, that he wished to make room. He himself was convinced that practical reason furnishes such grounding – and *only* practical reason.

THE SHADOW CAST BY KANT'S THOUGHT ON MODERN THEOLOGY

Now, at last, we are in the position of being able to pinpoint precisely the source of the agony Kant has caused theologians. A presupposition of the claim that practical reason provides the materials for arriving at rationally grounded convictions about God is that we can form convictions about God. And a condition, in turn, of being able to form convictions concerning God, is that, on the one hand, we can somehow get God in mind well enough for our convictions to be convictions *about* God rather than about something else or nothing at all, and, on the other hand, that *what* we believe *about* God, once we have God in mind, is something that, so far as we know, might well be true of God. Kant is well aware of these assumptions; he puts the point by saying that we must be able to *think* God and the transcendent.

But on the Kantian line of thought that I have laid out, it is problematic, to put it mildly, that these conditions can be met. Often what brings it about that we have something in mind well enough to be able to form beliefs and make assertions about it is that we have experienced it. But God, in the Kantian scheme, cannot be an object of experience. Definite descriptions provide another way of getting things in mind; I can pick someone out as the thirty-seventh president of the United States, and then proceed to make claims about him. But definite descriptions express concepts; and Kant has already argued that it is the function of human concepts to interpret intuitions. How then could I possibly, by assembling concepts into definite descriptions, use those descriptions to get in mind what lies beyond the boundary? Consider, said the medievals, the unconditioned condition of everything not identical with itself. But *condition*, on Kant's doctrine, is a concept whose function, like that of every other concept, is to interpret the manifold of intuitions. How then can we use it to pick out something on the other side of the boundary?

Indeed, isn't the metaphor of a boundary itself deeply problematic? A *bound* there may be; but a *boundary*? What's on the other side? Things in themselves, says Kant – the reality that puts in its appearance to us, the noumenal, the transcendent. But consider the reality/appearance distinction. That's a distinction that we use for interpreting the manifold of intuitions: an object appears square to me, but really it is not. Is Kant really picking anything out, getting anything in mind, with his use of the phrase "things in themselves"? Is he, on his premises, entitled to think that he is?

But suppose I do get God in mind, somehow or other. What then, on the Kantian doctrine, is available to me for predicating *about* this entity that I have in mind? Predicates express concepts. But concepts, as we have now been told many times, are rules for interpreting the manifold of intuitions. If so, then it would seem that predicating anything of God must always reflect deep confusion on the predicator's part. The only thing that would seem not to reflect confusion would be to deny things of God. Kantian theology, so it would seem, must be exclusively negative theology. But even negative theology presupposes the ability to get God in mind; only if I have God in mind can I deny something of God. And that brings us back to our prior point: how, on Kantian premises, could one ever get God in mind well enough even to deny things of God? Theology, on Kantian premises, looks impossible.

Kant himself was not willing to discard God-thought and God-talk. Nor was he willing to be a reductionist and say that such thought and talk are nothing else than special ways of thinking and talking about ordinary reality – as when one's atheist friend blurts out, "Thank God it's Friday." But what then are we to make of them? Before we think and speak about God, we must address the question of how such thinking and speaking are possible. That's not the right way to put it, though, since that way of putting it presupposes that we can in fact think and speak about God. The right way to state the project is this: before we engage in God-thought and God-talk, we must address the question whether such thought and speech are ever really about God. If they are, how is that possible? If they are not, how then are we to understand such thought and speech? Is even faith possible, on Kant's terms?

WITHIN KANT'S THOUGHT, WHAT ARE THE OPTIONS
FOR INTERPRETING GOD-TALK?

There are many options to explore for the interpretation of God-thought and God-talk. Many options have in fact been explored, Kant himself being the first of such explorers. From Kant's late book, *Religion within*

the Bounds of Reason Alone, and from his unpublished Lectures on Philosophical Theology, it becomes clear that Kant not only thought that we could get God in mind, but also that we were entitled to predicate a good many things of God. Thus Kant's own option turns out to be relatively non-skeptical. On this occasion I do not propose describing it. It is complex, at many points hazy, and has proved not at all compelling, even for Kantians – which of course explains why so many other options have been explored. Though many theologians and philosophers have found Kant's problem, along with the philosophical framework generating that problem, compelling, few have found his solution compelling.

Looking at proposed solutions does, however, illuminate the issues. So let me look briefly at the solution proposed in a book which, though relatively recent, has already acquired the status of a classic example of a theologian wrestling with the problem of how to understand God-thought and God-talk, given the Kantian boundary. I have in mind Gordon Kaufman's book, *God the Problem*.⁴ While repeatedly claiming that the hand of Kant rests heavy on modern theologians, I have up to now not mentioned anyone on whom it rests heavy. That deficiency I now remove.

Referring to the magisterial theologians who worked between 1920 and 1940, and in particular, to Karl Barth, Kaufman remarks that he does "not wish to criticize the work or depreciate the significance of the men of this period" (*God the Problem*, 4). Yet in our present situation it would be foolish, he says, "to proceed with one's theological work as though the foundations were absolutely firm and unshakable, one's only task being the straightforward explication of the Christian faith" (*God the Problem*, 6). Theological discourse itself has become the overriding problem for the theologian.

What is that problem? Kaufman states it this way in one passage:

The central problem of theological discourse, not shared with any other "language game," is the meaning of the term "God." "God" raises special problems of meaning because it is a noun which by definition refers to a reality transcendent of, and thus not located within, experience. A new convert may wish to refer the "warm feeling" in his heart to God, but God is hardly to be identified with this emotion; the biblicist may regard the Bible as God's Word; the moralist may believe God speaks through men's consciences; the churchman may believe God is present among his people – but each of these would agree that God himself transcends the locus referred to. As the Creator or Source of all that is, God is

⁴ Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972. References to Kaufman's book are given parenthetically in the text.

not to be identified with any particular finite reality. ... But if absolutely nothing within our experience can be directly identified as that to which the term "God" properly refers, what meaning does or can the word have? (*God the Problem*, 7)

Though Kant could certainly have written this passage, with the exception of the phrase "language game," the thought is not, I would say, *uniquely* Kantian. That's not true for Kaufman's restatement of the problem some pages later; the Kantian framework is now unmistakable:

The real referent for "God" is never accessible to us or in any way open to our observation or experience. It must remain always an unknown X, a mere limiting idea with no content. It stands for the fact that God transcends our knowledge in modes and ways of which we can never be aware and of which we have no inkling. (*God the Problem*, 85)

So what to do? Make do, says Kaufman, with the *available referent* of the word "God." It is this that "bears significantly on human life and thought. It is the 'available God' whom we have in mind when we worship or pray; it is the available referent that gives content and specificity to any sense of moral obligation or duty to obey God's 'will' ... This does not mean, of course, that believers directly pray to or seek to serve some mere idea or image in their minds – that would be the crassest sort of idolatry; it is rather that what their images and ideas are *of* is the *available God*, not some utterly unknowable X" (*God the Problem*, 85–86).

And what is the available referent? It is the meaning (as opposed to the referent) of the word "God." It is our ideas of God, the ways we have come to think of God. It is:

that structure of meaning which has developed over many centuries in the West, growing out of certain Hebrew (and also Greek) roots. It is carried in the culture as the meaning of "God" and is elaborated and developed in many ways in literary documents and works of philosophical and theological reflection, as well as in religious liturgies and institutions, moral practice and reflection, and the ordinary work and speech of everyday life. (*God the Problem*, 95)

A crucial component of the available referent of the word "God," says Kaufman, perhaps indeed the *central* component, is the conviction that "God is ultimately profound Mystery and utterly escapes our every effort to grasp or comprehend him. Our concepts are at best metaphors and symbols of his being, not literally applicable" (95). Of course, applying a metaphor or symbol to something presupposes having gotten that *something* in mind well enough to apply a metaphor or symbol to it; the point that keeps nagging the Kantian turns up once more in only a slightly different guise.

Kaufman's proposal as to how we ought to understand theistic discourse has regularly been pilloried by philosophers of religion in the analytic tradition – several of them, friends of mine. I share their conviction that his proposal is unsatisfactory – though I'm sure that he, in turn, regards their criticisms as obtuse, in that they have not even so much as discerned the problem to which he has offered his proposal as a solution. I myself, as a religious person, would stop thinking God-thoughts and cease using God-talk if I thought I was never thinking and speaking about God; thus I see the proposal as one more menace to the religious life. But I have no desire to place Kaufman in the stocks yet once more. For his solution, though unsatisfactory, strikes me as not significantly more so than the other solutions that have been proposed to the problem. It's true that whereas Kaufman offers his analysis of God-thought and God-talk in the context of having conceded that we cannot genuinely think and speak of God, Kant, as already mentioned, resists that concession. In that respect, I regard Kant's proposal as more satisfactory. What's questionable is whether it is internally coherent.

KANT AS WATERSHED IN THE HISTORY OF THEOLOGY

Kant is a watershed in the history of theology. Ever since Kant, the anxious questions, "Can we? How can we?" have haunted theologians, insisting on being addressed before any others. This is the agony, the Kantian agony, of the modern theologian. Since Kant, a good many of our theologians have spoken far more confidently about the existence of The Great Boundary than about the existence of God.

A medieval book of theology opened with the author talking about God. What later in the discussion proves menacing to the religious life, and to the understanding of God that we bring to theology from our participation in the religious life, is the *knowledge* of God that the author claimed to have arrived at. In Kant, it is rather our supposed *inability* to gain knowledge of God that is menacing to the religious life and to the understanding of God embedded therein. More menacing yet is the fact that it is not the least bit clear that even faith is possible, for it's not clear that we can get God well enough in mind even to believe things about God. The medieval simplicity-theologian found himself facing severe intellectual difficulties in the course of pursuing his project of developing knowledge of God. Kant found himself facing severe intellectual difficulties in the course of pursuing his project of explaining how we can at least

think God; knowledge is out of the question. The intellectual challenge for the medieval simplicity-theologian was to understand God – that is, to understand *something* of God; we learn that though God can be ontologically located, God's essence is beyond our grasp in this life: far too rich. The intellectual challenge for the Kantian is to understand not God but God-thought and God-talk. Depending on the conclusion, she may or may not see herself entitled to go on and actually say something about God.

DO THEOLOGIAN HAVE TO BE KANTIAN?

Is it required of present-day theologians that they ask the Kantian questions, "Can we? How can we?" Must one experience the Kantian agony to be a modern theologian?

Questions arise out of contexts. The Kantian questions arise out of the Kantian context. So the issue is whether that context is like a fact of nature to be coped with, or a human artefact to be questioned. Before the analytic philosopher shoots down the proposals offered by theologians, he should at least discern the problem to which those proposals are offered as solutions. Fair enough. But equally, before the theologian offers another solution to the problem, and then yet another, and another, it's important to question the problem. Perhaps the problem is the problem.

The problem is how we are to understand God-thought and God-talk, given the Kantian bound or boundary. No harm in trying to understand God-thought and God-talk. But what about the bound, the boundary? Is it possible to move beyond Kant on this point? Not to halt before him, not to sneak around him, but to move beyond him? I mean, is it possible to appropriate what is important and insightful in Kant on the matters at hand, and discard the rest? To appropriate, without being appropriated? Let me give an indication – on this occasion exceedingly brief – of how, as I see it, this might be done.

Kant's postulation of The Great Boundary depends crucially on his account of intuitions and on his account of concepts. It is especially on those two points, as I see it, that we must focus our reflections. Remove Kant's account of intuitions and concepts, and very nearly the whole structure totters and topples.

As to intuitions, Kant assumes that the intuitional content of our mental life consists entirely of mental representations produced in us by reality; intuitions are inputs. As for concepts, Kant assumes that the basic

function of our concepts is to interpret – conceptually interpret – our intuitional inputs; intuitional inputs are always already conceptualized. Grant these assumptions, and it is difficult to avoid becoming skeptical concerning our ability to have knowledge or rationally grounded beliefs about the reality putting in its appearance to us. Many have seen the only option to be embracing comprehensive anti-realism by denying that there is any such reality.

How might the intuitional component of our mental life be understood differently? Well, we might reject the mental representationalist picture. Reject the assumption that awareness always represents input. Consider sensory perception: we might reject the thesis that perception of an object consists of awareness of some input produced in us by that object, and replace it with the thesis that perception of an object consists of awareness of that object – awareness of an eagle, of a dog, whatever. That is to say: we might think of perceptual awareness not as input but as action – as the actualization of one of our human powers. Of course we had better not make this move if we think we have compelling arguments against analyzing perception of an object as awareness of the object perceived. But do we have such compelling arguments? What are they? We have a picture that has held us in its grip. But do we have compelling arguments? Many, myself included, have concluded that we do not. And let's remind ourselves that as we assess the cogency of such arguments as have been offered, we had better allow the severe difficulties that mental representationalism lands us in to enter into our overall appraisal.

How might we think of concepts differently? Well, surely Kant was right in his claim that awareness is normally if not always awareness under concepts. Normally if not always my perception of the table is the perception of it under the concept of *table*, or the concept of *item of furniture*, or the concept of *brown thing*, or whatever. This part of Kant we should most definitely hang on to. We do interpret our experience conceptually.

But notice that if we understand perception of an object as awareness of the object – rather than as awareness of a mental representation caused by the object – then it will not make sense to follow Kant in the further step he takes of thinking of concepts as rules for structuring the objects of our awareness. For now the objects of our awareness are not mental states but eagles and dogs. And eagles and dogs are already structured; they don't await structuring by us.

How do concepts work on this alternative picture? To perceive an eagle under the concept of eagle is to perceive it to be what it is. Concepts are not barriers between mind and reality but links. The concept of *eagle* is

at one and the same time one of the concepts that I possess and one of the concepts that is satisfied by the thing I perceive, namely, an eagle. As I myself see the matter: to possess the concept of *table* is to grasp the property of being a table. If that is so, then properties are at one and the same time entities that we grasp and entities that external objects possess. They are the links.

On this picture, how might God be gotten in mind? Notice that Kant's use of the metaphor of boundary now no longer has applicability. We no longer have to suppose that the applicability of our concepts is confined to our intuitions. So one way we might get God in mind is by the use of definite descriptions. The expression, "Creator of the universe" might pick God out; synonymously: "The one who brought about all that might not have been." And secondly, it may be that some human beings have had God in mind as that of which they were aware. For a possibility that we now have to take seriously is that human beings might sometimes have awareness of God.

Let me tip my hand. The alternative way of thinking about these matters that I have been pointing towards is the Reidian way. It is my own judgment that there were two philosophers who towered above all others in the late eighteenth century – Immanuel Kant, of course, but along with him, Thomas Reid. Reid's genius has been obscured – for reasons that I won't here go into. I judge the time ripe for exploring the Reidian option.

CURIOSITY BUT NOT AGONY

At the end of our books about God, those of us who are not Kantians will discuss how it is that we human beings can think and speak about God. That for us is an important matter of intellectual curiosity. But not a matter of agony. We empathize with those who experience the Kantian agony, but we do not share it.

If one believes that one's car is in good running order, one does not spend the whole day tinkering under the hood to determine whether it could possibly be in good running order, and if so, how. One gets in and drives off. Along the way one might discuss with one's passengers how it is that this old car runs – especially if *they* thought it wouldn't!

Conundrums in Kant's rational religion

In his *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant argued that the *Summum Bonum* is a necessary ideal of practical reason. Acknowledging morality as real requires that we also think of such a state as real. One aspect of the *Summum Bonum* is that in it, each person's happiness is directly proportioned to that person's moral worth. Obviously this present life does not qualify as such a state, nor are we as human beings capable of bringing about such a state. Accordingly, Kant drew the conclusion that, for there to be such a state, there must be a God who proportions happiness to virtue, and we ourselves must enjoy some sort of "immortal" existence transcending this present physical/historical existence of ours. Another aspect of the *Summum Bonum* is that, in it, each person can endlessly progress in the direction of ideal moral worth – hence also in the direction of complete happiness.¹ Or to put the same point differently, the *Summum Bonum* is that state in which it is possible for us, whatever we may have done in the past, to advance toward becoming persons entirely well-pleasing to God. God will express pleasure over our advance in moral worth by granting to us ever greater happiness.

In *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, Kant speaks again of the *Summum Bonum*, only now from the side of religion rather than from the side of morality. He assumes that religious belief, if it is to be justifiably held, must be based on adequate evidence. Religious belief is not self-justifying. It must receive its justification from elsewhere. Thus Kant continues the tradition of evidentialism concerning religious belief that was initiated by John Locke.² Furthermore, Kant was convinced that

¹ Though without ever reaching it: "if after this life another life awaits [the man of good disposition], he may hope to continue to follow [the course of moral improvement] ... and to approach ever nearer to, though he can never reach, the goal of perfection" (*Religion*, 62; cf. 60). I quote from the version translated and edited by Theodore M. Greene and Hoyt H. Hudson (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1960). References to this text are given parenthetically in the text.

² For a discussion of Locke, see my "The Migration of the Theistic Arguments: From Natural Theology to Evidentialist Apologetics," in Robert Audi and William J. Wainwright, eds.,

morality is the only area of human existence in which there is any hope of finding the adequate evidence. Adequate reasons for religious beliefs will always prove to be moral principles. It would be a serious mistake to say of Kant that he tried to *reduce* religion to morality. What he tried to do, rather, was show that morality provides us with *reasons* for holding certain central religious beliefs, thus making us *justified* in holding them. Kant regarded the moral principles in question as *necessary* truths – albeit synthetic, not analytic, necessary truths. Thus Kant was not only an evidentialist concerning religious belief; his particular way of trying to carry out the evidentialist requirement satisfies the demands of classical foundationalism.

In discussing the justification of religious belief, Kant had his eye especially on Christianity. He did not think that everything in the Christianity of the churches could be rationally grounded. But he did think that the core, the kernel, of Christianity could be justified and, conversely, that Christianity was, above all religions, a religion of morality. The ritualistic side of Christianity should be seen, he thought, as having merely historical worth: rituals are necessary, for a time, if humanity is to progress to the point where it can discard a faith of divine worship and make do with a purely rational religion. Furthermore, some passages in the Bible may have to be interpreted in a somewhat forced manner. Yet Kant thought that, overall, no serious violence would be done to the New Testament – at least, if we interpret it as proclaiming a religion that can, in fact, be grounded on moral foundations – if we interpret it, “as regards its essential content, in line with the universal moral dogmas” (*Religion*, 101).³

The main element of Christianity on which Kant had his eye in *Religion* was faith in salvation. Are we warranted, he asked, in holding out salvation – endless increase in happiness – as a genuine possibility for ourselves? If faith in the possibility of salvation is to be justified, we must be entitled, Kant said, to believe two specific things about our moral

Rationality, Religious Belief, and Moral Commitment (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), 38–81. This essay is reprinted in my *Practices of Belief: Essays in Epistemology*, Terence Cuneo, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

³ An essential part of Kant's overall interpretive strategy was to treat biblical narrative as a “vivid mode of representation” (*Religion*, 78) of moral truths: “since the sacred narrative, which is employed solely on behalf of ecclesiastical faith, can have and, taken by itself, ought to have absolutely no influence upon the adoption of moral maxims, and since it is given to ecclesiastical faith only for the vivid presentation of its true object (virtue striving toward holiness), it follows that this narrative must at all times be taught and expounded in the interest of morality ...” (*Religion*, 123).

status and moral progress: we must be justified in believing “that we can become well-pleasing to God through a good course of life in the future,” and we must be justified in believing that our guilt for our past *wrong-doing* will somehow be undone – in other words, that there will be atonement for us, reparation for guilt, redemption, and thus *reconciliation* with God (*Religion*, 106).

As to the first of these, Kant saw no problem. Even the person characterized by radical evil is capable of a change of heart; for “a change of heart such as this must be possible, because duty requires it” (*Religion*, 60). And though having a good moral character does not yet guarantee that each of one’s individual actions will be good, that too must be seen as a theoretical, if not a practical, possibility – again, on the *ought implies can* principle. The very concept of God implies that insofar as a person’s character and actions are good, that person will be well-pleasing to God.

It is that other conviction, that other component of faith in salvation, that Kant found deeply problematic and which, as I read *Religion*, haunted him throughout. How can our evil past be made well-pleasing to God? How can guilt for our *prior* wrongdoing be “undone” (*Religion*, 106), “wiped out” (*Religion*, 172)? And if somehow it can be undone, what reason is there for thinking it *will* be undone? Yet unless it can be undone, and unless we have reason for thinking it will be undone, faith in salvation is groundless. For none of us is without wrongdoing. So if our guilt is not wiped out, the proportioning of felicity to moral worth will result in our happiness being limited rather than endlessly expansible.

Clearly, says Kant, the wiping out is beyond human capabilities. Suppose that a person, having had a character of radical evil, undergoes a conversion, conversion being, for each of us, as we have seen, always a real possibility.

Whatever a man may have done in the way of adopting a good disposition, and indeed, however steadfastly he may have persevered in conduct conformable to such a disposition, he nevertheless started from evil, and this debt [*Verschuldung*, guilt] he can by no possibility wipe out. For he cannot regard the fact that he incurs no new debts subsequent to his change of heart as equivalent to having discharged his old ones. Neither can he, through future good conduct, produce a surplus over and above what he is under obligation to perform at every instant, for it is always his duty to do all the good that lies in his power. (*Religion*, 66)

So too,

this debt that is original, or prior to all the good a man may do – this, and no more, is what we referred to in Book One as the *radical* evil in man – this debt can never be discharged by another person, so far as we can judge according

to the justice of our human reason. For this is no *transmissible* liability which can be made over to another like a financial indebtedness... rather is it *the most personal of all debts*, namely a debt of sins, which only the culprit can bear and which no innocent person can assume even though he be magnanimous enough to wish to take it upon himself for the sake of another. (*Religion*, 66)

Are we then each forever laden with the guilt we have acquired by the radical evil of our character? Is there no way in which we, past as well as future, can become well-pleasing to God? Is hope for salvation mere illusion? Must all humankind “look forward to *endless punishment* and exclusion from the kingdom of God” (*Religion*, 66)?

No, says Kant. Though “satisfaction must be rendered to Supreme Justice, in whose sight no one who is blameworthy can ever be guiltless” (*Religion*, 67), right there in the act of conversion we can spy the satisfaction rendered to divine justice (*Religion*, 67).

The good principle is present quite as much in the desertion of the evil as in the adoption of the good disposition, and the pain, which by rights accompanies the former disposition, ensues wholly from the latter. The coming forth from the corrupted into the good disposition is, in itself (as “the death of the old man,” “the crucifying of the flesh”), a sacrifice and an entrance upon a long train of life’s ills. These the new man undertakes in the disposition of the Son of God, that is, merely for the sake of the good, though really they are due as *punishments* to another, namely to the old man (for the old man is indeed morally another). (*Religion*, 68)

In short, the moral life here in this present existence of ours requires that we repeatedly reject what promises to give happiness, in favor of the call of duty. It requires that we choose sorrow and suffering. It is this giving up of happiness, this painful embrace of sorrow, that constitutes punishment for the guilt of our former adoption of an evil character.

But the person who, by strength of will, has undergone conversion and thereby painfully entered a life of suffering – this pain making satisfaction for the guilt of the radical evil that characterized him or her before conversion – is not yet in the clear, not typically so, anyway. For though one’s heart may now be pure, it does not follow that all one’s actions will be pure. On the contrary, that person is called to moral *progress*. Good characters come in varying degrees of strength (*Religion*, 42, 43, 69n). So what is to be done about the guilt of the person of good character who performs incidental acts of wrongdoing? Though the guilt of evil character may not haunt us throughout eternity, provided we change our heart, will the guilt for evil actions do so, in particular, the guilt for evil actions done *subsequent* to our conversion?

No, says Kant. Divine forgiveness will undo such guilt. In the first place, “although the man (regarded from the point of view of his empirical nature as a sentient being) is *physically* the self-same guilty person as before and must be judged as such before a moral tribunal and hence by himself; yet, because of his new disposition, he is (regarded as an intelligible being) *morally* another in the eyes of a divine judge for whom this disposition takes the place of action” (*Religion*, 68). And secondly, “what in our earthly life (and possibly at all future times and in all worlds) is ever only a *becoming* (namely, becoming a man well-pleasing to God) is credited to us exactly as if we were already in full possession of it ...” (*Religion*, 70).⁴ Just as the punishment consisting in the pain of choosing a good character wipes out the guilt one has acquired because of one’s evil character and the deeds that flowed from it, so divine forgiveness wipes out, for those who have a good but weak character, the guilt they acquire as the consequence of episodically falling into evil actions.

This divine forgiveness of the evil deeds done by persons of good but weak character, granted on the ground of their goodness of character – or as Kant puts it, this making good by God “in consideration of an upright disposition, the deficiency of the deed” (*Religion*, 110) – is called by Kant an act of *grace*. Obviously in calling it this he is suggesting that his account has captured an important dimension of Christianity. It is questionable, however, whether there is anything at all “gracious” in God’s act, as Kant conceives it. What Kant is doing, in his entire argument, is probing the implications of our human rights and obligations. But something is an act of grace on someone’s part only if the rest of us have no *right* to his or her performance of that act. If we have a moral claim on someone’s doing something, then for that person to do that is not for the person to act graciously but for the person to grant what is due us. It is not to act *graciously* but to act *justly*.⁵ We may of course be distressed over a person’s failure to act graciously; perhaps the source

⁴ Cf. *Religion*, 71: “We learn from this deduction that only the supposition of a complete change of heart allows us to think of the absolution, at the bar of heavenly justice, of the man burdened with guilt.” (See also *Religion*, 60–61 and 61n.)

⁵ This appears to be also how Kant understands grace. In one passage he says that “a superior’s decrees conferring a good for which the subordinate possesses no legal claim but only the (moral) receptivity is called *grace*” (*Religion*, 70n). And in another he says that “it is customary (at least in the church) to give the name of *nature* to that which men can do by dint of the principle of virtue, and the name of *grace* to that which alone serves to supplement the deficiency of all our moral powers and yet, because sufficiency of these powers is also our duty, can only be wished for, or hoped for, and solicited ...” (*Religion*, 161–62). Kant does not indicate disagreement with this customary practice.

of our distress is that we do not like what that failure reveals about the person's character. But what it reveals is not a deficiency in the acknowledgment of legitimate claims on him. Thus Kant cannot have it both ways: he cannot hold that we can expect God's forgiveness, since God's failure to forgive would violate the moral order of rights and obligations, and also hold that God's granting of forgiveness is an act of grace on God's part. But since Kant's project is to ground religion rationally in the deliverances of morality, that is, in the structure of rights and obligations, it is grace that will have to go. God must be understood in the Kantian scheme as *required* to forgive. Of course this means that a sizable gap begins to open between Christianity, on the one hand, and Kant's rational religion, on the other.

There is one passage that appears to say something quite different from what I have just interpreted Kant as holding. It appears to say that even those of good character *do not* have a moral claim on God's forgiveness of the guilt of their incidental wrongdoings. That passage reads:

That what in our earthly life (and possibly at all future times and in all worlds) is ever only a *becoming* ... should be credited to us exactly as if we were already in full possession of it – to this we really have no legal claim, that is, so far as we know ourselves ... and so the accuser within *us* would be more likely to propose a judgment of condemnation. Thus the decree is always one of grace alone, although fully in accord with the divine justice, when we come to be cleared of all liability by dint of our faith in such goodness; for the decree is based upon a giving of satisfaction (a satisfaction which consists for us only in the idea of an improved disposition, known only to God). (*Religion*, 70)

The language of this passage is scarcely lucid. But if we interpret Kant as really holding that those of good character have no claim on God's forgiveness for their acts of incidental wrongdoing, then we would have to conclude already that Kant has failed in his own project of grounding faith in salvation in the domain of morality. Accordingly, I propose that we take as the crucial clue for interpreting this passage the qualification "so far as we know ourselves," which follows the words "to this we really have no legal claim," along with the words at the end, "known only to God." It was one of Kant's doctrines that one can never know with surety whether one has a good character (cf. *Religion*, 56–57, 71). If one does have a good character, one does have a claim on divine forgiveness; the moral order would be violated if such forgiveness were not forthcoming. In fact, though, no one knows whether he or she has a claim on divine forgiveness, for no one knows whether he or she has such a character. Only God knows.

A more serious question to raise about Kant's appeal to divine forgiveness is why, in Kant's scheme, God would ever do such a thing as forgive. In the Christian vision, divine forgiveness, though indeed an act of grace, is not unmotivated. It is grounded in God's love. God, out of love for God's human creatures, transcends the entitlements of justice and forgives. Kant does, on occasion, speak of "the love ... of God toward men" (*Religion*, 110). That seems entirely gratuitous, though. In the Kantian scheme, all we know of God is that God honors and ensures the requirements of morality – i.e., of rights and obligations. Kant himself emphasizes, indeed, that "we must place God's beneficence not in an unconditioned *good will* toward His creatures but in this, that He first looks upon their moral character, through which they can be *well-pleasing* to Him, and only then makes good their inability to fulfill this requirement of themselves" (*Religion*, 132). Here is Kant's thought: to have rejected one's evil character and chosen a good character is to be committed to an endless progress in goodness. Though for us it is impossible to know with surety whether we have indeed adopted a good character, God's sight penetrates to the heart. If God sees there a good disposition, then God "judges" the sequence of individual actions, ordered overall in the direction of moral progress, "as a completed whole" (*Religion*, 60–61); and God does this on account of the good disposition "from which this progress itself is derived" (*Religion*, 61). What is in fact "ever only a becoming" is by God "credited to us exactly as if we were already in full possession of it" (*Religion*, 70) – on the ground that "because of his new disposition, man is ... morally another in the eyes of God for whom this disposition takes the place of action" (*Religion*, 68).

Kant distinguishes here between, on the one hand, the person's underlying character or disposition and, on the other, the person's sequence of actions that, in the case of the person of good character, exhibits moral progress. And he then says that God judges *the moral ideal as attained*, on the ground that the underlying disposition is pure. There are two ways of interpreting "judges" here. In one interpretation, God affirms that the person has reached perfection of action, and this because that person's character is good. But this would be to attribute the affirmation of falsehood to God. I think, accordingly, that we should be extremely reluctant to conclude that this is what Kant had in mind. The other interpretation is that God, because of the person's purity of heart, *treats* the person as if the person's actions had reached perfection.

This latter, more plausible, interpretation raises the question: Why would God do a thing like that? Ultimately Kant's answer has to be: the

person of pure heart has a claim on God to such treatment. If – per impossible – God did not treat the person thus, the moral order would be violated, subverted.

But, to understate the point, it is far from evident that this is so. Would *we* be obligated, if we believed someone to be of good character, to treat the person as if she had attained moral perfection in her actions – thus to practice Kantian forgiveness? It hardly seems so. But in the Kantian universe, God and humanity live under the same moral order.

Further, imagine two persons who have undergone conversion, one of whom now lives in total consistency with her new maxim of character, and the other of whom repeatedly falls into wrongdoing; the person's character, though good, is weak. Surely the former is more virtuous. Can it really be the case, in the Kantian scheme, that God is obligated to treat these two alike? Would we be obligated to treat them alike?

But let us press on. Thus far I have spoken of divine forgiveness, in the Kantian scheme, as consisting of God's treating persons of good but weak character as if they were of good and morally omnipotent character and doing so simply on the ground of their goodness of character. But I do not think that this is in fact how Kant thinks of forgiveness; nor would it be sufficient for his project to think of it thus. Kant describes forgiveness as the *undoing* of guilt, as the *wiping out* of guilt. It is necessary that he think of it thus. For he holds that in the *Summum Bonum*, happiness is proportioned to worth; and he holds further that in the *Summum Bonum* there is no limitation in principle on our attainment of moral perfection, and hence of unadulterated happiness, in spite of the fact that we are all wrongdoers. Indeed, Kant thinks of punishment the same way; it too wipes out guilt.

Two things must be said about this. In the first place, the claim seems necessarily false. How can guilt possibly be removed, undone, wiped out? If at some time one violates the moral law and becomes guilty for so doing, then forever after it is the case that at that time one violated the moral law and was guilty for so doing; one remains guilty for having done so. And secondly, if in fact God wipes out the guilt for the evil actions of the person of good character, on the ground of the person's goodness of character, *then in fact* that person has attained the moral ideal in his actions; and all of Kant's insistences that the actions of the person of good character are at best a matter of moral *progress* are just mistaken. Since persons of good character have the guilt for their evil actions wiped out, presumably as soon as they perform the evil actions, every such person satisfies the moral ideal: there is no tinge of guilt about them.

Christianity also, of course, speaks much about forgiveness. But its conception of forgiveness is different. To forgive a person is to declare that the person's prior wrongdoing will not be held against her. It is to declare that one's moral interactions with the person will be what they would be if she had never done the ill deed. To forgive a guilty person is not to declare that she is not guilty but to declare that the person will be treated as not guilty. So too, punishment does not *remove* guilt. Rather, when punishment is completed, the punished person is received back into the community and treated as one not guilty. What Christianity claims is that God, by an act of grace, forgives us, with the consequence that our fitness for membership in God's kingdom is not judged by our moral status. Kant, by contrast, insists that our fitness for God's kingdom is always judged by our moral status; accordingly he attributes to God the power of making the person who is guilty not guilty.⁶

We have in effect been noticing that Kant's religion, so far from being entirely rational, is riddled with irrationalities. That is true in yet one more way. Kant repeatedly affirms the Stoic maxim that a person's moral worth is determined entirely by that person himself. "Man *himself*," he says, "must make or have made himself into whatever, in a moral sense, whether good or evil, he is or is to become" (*Religion*, 40). Yet it is essential to Kant's particular project of a rational religion that *God* be able to alter our moral status for the better. Here, then, we have not just implausibility or tension, but internal contradiction.

Kant himself was aware of the difficulty. He says:

The concept of supernatural accession to our moral, though deficient, capacity and even to our not wholly purified and certainly weak disposition to perform our entire duty, is a transcendent concept, and is a bare idea, of whose reality no experience can assure us. Even when accepted as an idea in nothing but a

⁶ Further reflections on these matters would do well to take account of this passage from Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition* (University of Chicago Press, 1958), 241: "The alternative to forgiveness, but by no means its opposite, is punishment, and both have in common that they attempt to put an end to something that without interference could go on endlessly. It is therefore quite significant, a structural element in the realm of human affairs, that men are unable to forgive what they cannot punish and that they are unable to punish what has turned out to be unforgivable. This is the true hallmark of those offenses which, since Kant, we call 'radical evil' and about whose natures so little is known, even to us who have been exposed to one of their rare outbursts on the public scene. All we know is that we can neither punish nor forgive such offenses and that they therefore transcend the realm of human affairs and the potentialities of human power, both of which they radically destroy wherever they make their appearance." I think that Arendt quite clearly misunderstands Kant's notion of radical evil. Yet her contention that only what can be punished can be forgiven, and that there are some crimes which human beings cannot punish, is eminently worth considering.

practical context it is very hazardous, and hard to reconcile with reason, since that which is to be accredited to us as morally good conduct must take place not through foreign influence but solely through the best possible use of our own powers. (*Religion*, 179)

What then was Kant's resolution, or attempted resolution, of the difficulty? What he goes on to say is this:

the impossibility thereof (i.e., of both these things occurring side by side) cannot really be proved, because freedom itself, though containing nothing supernatural in its conception, remains, as regards its possibility, just as incomprehensible to us as is the supernatural factor which we would like to regard as a supplement to the spontaneous but deficient determination of freedom. (*Religion*, 179)

In effect, what Kant does here is appeal to what, in other passages, he calls the "mystery of atonement." We do not understand how God could forgive guilt. Reason tells us that God will, but "without presuming to determine the manner in which this aid will be given or to know wherein it will consist: it may be so mysterious that God can reveal it to us at best in a symbolic representation in which only what is practical is comprehensible to us ..." (*Religion*, 159). It seems clear, however, that such an appeal is illegitimate here. To affirm the Stoic principle is to affirm something that *contradicts* the claim that God wipes out guilt.⁷ Our situation is not that we do not know how God wipes out guilt. Our situation, given the Stoic principle, is that we know that God does not.

Reason, says Kant, may conclude that "in the inscrutable realm of the supernatural there is something more than she can explain to herself, which may yet be necessary as a complement to her moral insufficiency," and may further conclude that this is "available to her good will" (*Religion*, 48). Therein, Kant adds, we find consolation.

Reason does not leave us wholly without consolation with respect to our lack of righteousness valid before God. It says that whoever, with a disposition genuinely devoted to duty, does as much as lies in his power to satisfy his obligation

⁷ Kant himself, in one passage, spoke of these claims as *contradicting* each other: "Man, as we know him, is corrupt and of himself not in the least suited to that holy law. And yet, if the goodness of God has called him, as it were, into being, i.e., to exist in a particular manner (as a member of the kingdom of Heaven), He must also have a means of supplementing, out of the fullness of His own holiness, man's lack of requisite qualifications therefor. But this contradicts spontaneity (which is assumed in all the moral good or evil which a man can have within himself), according to which such a good cannot come from another but must arise from man himself, if it is to be imputable to him" (*Religion*, 134).

(at least in a continual approximation to complete harmony with the law), may hope that what is not in his power will be supplied by the supreme Wisdom *in some way or other* (which can make permanent the disposition to this unceasing approximation). (*Religion*, 159)

But surely this is an entirely hypothetical consolation: we can be assured that *if* someone has a good will, that person's deficiency in action will be made good by God. Given that no one can be certain whether she has a good will, the Kantian system gives no actual consolation to any actual human being. Quite to the contrary. As Kant himself remarks, "If this question as to the verdict to be pronounced upon a person is addressed to the judge *within* a man he will pronounce a severe verdict upon himself ..." (*Religion*, 72). "The accuser within us would be more likely to propose a judgment of condemnation" (*Religion*, 70). In the Kantian scheme, this much is clear: for the unconverted there is no mercy.

It may be said that the tenability of the interpretation I have offered of Kant, and of the criticisms I have lodged, requires ignoring the antinomy to which Kant calls attention in Book III of *Religion*. So let us, in conclusion, look briefly at that.

Either we must assume, says Kant, "that the faith in the absolution from the debt resting upon us will bring forth good life-conduct, or else that the genuine and active disposition ever to pursue a good course of life will engender the faith in such absolution according to the law of morally operating causes" (*Religion*, 106–07). This, he says, is "a remarkable antinomy of human reason with itself." He adds that its solution or adjustment "can alone determine whether an historical (ecclesiastical) faith must always be present as an essential element of saving faith, over and above pure religious faith, or whether it is only a vehicle which finally ... can pass over into pure religious faith" (*Religion*, 107).

It seems clear, however, that in Kant's view this is not a true antinomy. Indeed, he himself calls it "only apparent" (*Religion*, 110). For though he lays out both lines of thought – for the view that atonement must precede good life-conduct and for the view that good life-conduct must precede atonement – he makes it emphatically clear, as he has already in Book II, that in his judgment only the latter is correct. It is quite impossible, he says,

to see how a reasonable man, who knows himself to merit punishment, can in all seriousness believe that he needs only to credit the news of an atonement rendered for him, and to accept this atonement *utiliter* (as the lawyers say), in order to regard his guilt as annihilated, – indeed, so completely annihilated (to the very root) that good life-conduct, for which he has hitherto not taken the

least pains, will in the future be the inevitable consequence of this faith and this acceptance of the proffered favor. No thoughtful person can bring himself to believe this. (*Religion*, 107)

It is true, indeed, that the issue cannot be settled “through insight into the causal determination of the freedom of a human being, i.e., into the causes which bring it about that a man becomes good or bad; hence it *cannot* be resolved theoretically ...” (*Religion*, 108). But as a matter of fact, says Kant, a reflective person cannot bring himself to believe that atonement would be extended to the unconverted; that would be a violation of our moral intuitions. “Where shall we start, i.e., with a faith in what God has done on our behalf, or with what we are to do to become worthy of God’s assistance (whatever this may be)? In answering this question we cannot hesitate in deciding for the second alternative” (*Religion*, 108).

In short, when Kant’s discussion of the “antinomy” is scrutinized, it proves not to upset our interpretation but to confirm it. God, in the Kantian system, wipes out the guilt of our wrongdoing if we present God with a good character; God is, in fact, morally required to do so. We have seen that such wiping out, if it were possible, would, in its indiscriminateness, raise a serious issue of justice. Further, we have seen that the claim that God can alter our moral status conflicts with Kant’s repeated insistence that only we ourselves can do so. But in fact such wiping out is not possible. Forgiveness is not the declaration that the guilty are no longer guilty but the declaration that the guilty will no longer be treated as guilty. Forgiveness, in that sense, is eminently possible. Often, when it occurs, morality is transcended. The forgiven have no moral claim on forgiveness; it comes to them as grace.

What Kant affirms is that only the worthy are saved – and that God, so as to bring it about that some are saved in spite of the wrongdoing of all, makes those of worthy character worthy in action as well. Kant affirms this without ever surrendering the affirmation that each can make only himself or herself worthy. What Christianity affirms is that the unworthy are saved – saved by the grace of divine forgiveness.

CHAPTER 4

In defense of Gaunilo's defense of the fool

I propose saying a good word on behalf of Gaunilo. He has not fared well at the hands of history. While not himself a first-rate thinker – that is clear from the brief text of his that has been preserved – he undertook to debate with one of the genius theologian-philosophers of the Western tradition, namely, Anselm. Yet sometimes second- and third-rate thinkers make good points against first-rate thinkers. I shall argue that Gaunilo made some telling points against Anselm – though not, I readily agree, in a first-rate way. Anselm realized the “tellingness” of these points, so I shall also argue. The sign of his realization, however, is not concession; Anselm does not concede. The sign is rather bluster. Not even the saints are sinless! Anselm’s glittering genius has made many reluctant to concede that Gaunilo made any telling points against him; his saintly reputation makes us all reluctant to concede that he concealed when he should have conceded.¹

Suspicion first arises when, in the course of reading *the whole* of Gaunilo’s defense of the fool and *the whole* of Anselm’s reply, we look to see why Anselm thinks Gaunilo’s argument for the existence in reality of an island, such that none more excellent can be conceived, is not a good analogue to his own argument for the existence of that than which nothing greater can be conceived. It’s absurd to suppose that one could in this way establish the existence of such an island. By offering this absurd analogue, Gaunilo meant to show that something had gone wrong in Anselm’s original argument. To defend himself, Anselm has to point out why the finest conceivable island argument is not a good analogue. He does nothing of the sort. Instead he blusters: “With confidence I reply: if besides that than which a greater can be thought anyone finds for me

¹ A few assessments concerning the relative strength of the arguments of Anselm and Gaunilo are cited in Jasper Hopkins, “Anselm’s Debate with Gaunilo,” in Hopkins, ed., *Anselm of Canterbury*, vol. IV (Toronto and New York: Mellen Press, 1976).

[anything else] (whether existing in reality or only in thought) to which he can apply the logic of my argument, then I will find and will make him a present of that lost island – no longer to be lost" (A 3; 285).²

The only additional reference Anselm makes to Gaunilo's analogue occurs a few pages later when he says, with equal sarcasm: "Do you see, then, the respect in which you did rightly compare me with that fool who wanted to assert the existence of Lost Island from the mere fact that its description was understood?" (A 5; 293). This remark reads as if it were the conclusion to a passage in which Anselm points out the disanalogy. In fact it is not that.

The passage opens with Anselm claiming that on a crucial point Gaunilo has misunderstood him. Gaunilo, so Anselm says, has interpreted him as working with the formula "that which is greater than all others" (*quodest maius omnibus*); in fact, says Anselm, he used the formula "that than which nothing greater can be conceived" (*aliquid quo nihilmaius cogitari potest*). The argument does not work if we use the former formula, only if we use the latter. Perhaps Anselm is correct in this charge. But before we conclude that he is, it is worth noting that in Section 1 of his response, Gaunilo, before he used the formula "greater than all others," had used a variant on Anselm's own formula, namely, "some such nature than which nothing greater can be thought." In assessing the significance of his move from this formula to the other, it is relevant to note that at the beginning and end of Section 4 of his response, Gaunilo uses the formula "that which is greater than all others that can be thought" (*illud maius omnibus quae cogitari possunt*). This suggests that Gaunilo may have intended the formula "greater than all others" (*maius omnibus*) as short for "greater than all others that can be thought" (*maius omnibus quae cogitari possunt*), rather than as Anselm interpreted it, namely, as short for "greater than all others that are" (*maius omnibus quae sunt*). But if Gaunilo was not confused about the formula Anselm was using, then at least it seems that he did not fully appreciate the precise role of the formula in the argument; if

² Throughout, I shall be using the translation by Jasper Hopkins, *A New, Interpretive Translation of St. Anselm's Monologion and Proslogion* (Minneapolis, MN: Arthur J. Banning Press, 1986). I do so with some hesitation, since the translation is very interpretive indeed. But all translations are interpretive; and Hopkins has certainly thought through the issues with care. (See, for example, his very combative introduction.) Further, I have no objection to raise against his translation of any of the passages that I cite. I shall use "G" as an abbreviation for the title of Gaunilo's text, "On Behalf of the Fool," and "A" as an abbreviation for the title of Anselm's text, "Reply to Gaunilo." Vertical slash marks within the quotations indicate places where Hopkins added words or phrases to clarify the literal text. References to these works will be given parenthetically in the text.

he had, it seems unlikely that he would have used an abbreviated formula that is so easily interpreted in such a way as to be useless for the argument (as it is for his own analogue). So although Anselm may not successfully have *identified* a deficiency in Gaunilo's understanding, he has at least, we may say, *located* a deficiency.³

After observing that he had worked with the formula "that than which nothing greater can be conceived," rather than with the formula "that than which nothing is greater," and that this difference makes all the difference for his argument, Anselm observes that, since that than which nothing greater can be conceived will of course be greater than anything else, by demonstrating the existence of an entity of the former sort one will have demonstrated the existence of an entity of the latter sort. The passage then closes with the sharp ironic words quoted above: "Do you see, then, the respect in which you did rightly compare me with that fool who wanted to assert the existence of Lost Island from the mere fact that its description was understood?" But *why* he cannot rightly be compared to such a fool, Anselm has not said and does not say.

Why would Anselm not have pointed out the disanalogy between his argument for God's existence and Gaunilo's for the existence of a lost island? I can think of just two reasons. One is that the lost island argument is so obviously not a good analogue that it would humiliate Gaunilo and insult the reader to point out the disanalogy; better to let readers discern it for themselves and allow Gaunilo to retain some dignity. The other reason is that Anselm realized that there was no relevant disanalogy to point out.

Most of Anselm's readers down through the centuries have assumed that it was the former of these possible reasons that was the actual one; and very many of those of us who are teachers have undertaken to do for our students what Anselm did not do for Gaunilo: we have undertaken to lay out the disanalogy that Anselm had in mind – or what we presume to be the disanalogy that we presume Anselm had in mind. (In the past I have done so as well.) Of course in doing so we presuppose that the disanalogy is not obvious – or that our students are fools indeed!

A successful defense of this line of interpretation will have to overcome two considerations that make it *a priori* implausible. For one thing, why

³ In the points made in this paragraph I am following closely Hopkins in "Anselm's Debate with Gaunilo."

the bluster? Why the sarcasm? If charity to the befuddled Gaunilo inspired Anselm's silence concerning the point of disanalogy, what inspired his sharp bluster? Anselm remarks that "It is easy even for someone of very little intelligence to detect what is wrong with the other objections which you raise against me on behalf of the Fool; and so, I thought I ought to forego showing this" (A 5; 289). But Anselm makes this sharp comment *after* his first reference to the analogue and *before* the second, in neither of which, as we have seen, does he pinpoint the disanalogy. Furthermore, he continues the comment as follows: "But because I hear that they do seem to some readers to avail somewhat against me, I will deal with them briefly."

Thus – and this is the second consideration – Anselm does not refrain from pointing out Gaunilo's errors, be they obvious or not. If one comes straight from the cryptic crispness of chapters 2 and 3 of the *Proslogion* to the paragraph in Anselm's response to Gaunilo in which he blusters, "I will find and will make him a present of that lost island – no longer to be lost," one might with some plausibility regard this as another example of Anselm's cryptic elegance. In fact his response to Gaunilo is as prolix and repetitious as the *Proslogion* is economical and elegant. But if Anselm belabors Gaunilo's errors and presumed errors, why does he leave this error unanalyzed? It makes one suspicious.

Then, too, there is something suspicious about Anselm's opening declaration that he will answer Gaunilo as a Catholic rather than as a fool, a declaration that has its payoff just a bit later when Anselm says: "But I make use of your faith and conscience as a very cogent consideration [in support of] how false these [inferences] are" (A 1; 279). "[I]f that than which a greater cannot be thought is not understood or thought and is not in the understanding or in thought, then, surely, either (1) God is not that than which a greater cannot be thought or (2) He is not understood or thought and is not in the understanding or in thought." Of course Gaunilo is not one of the Psalmist's "fools"; he is a believer. So it would not be appropriate to answer him as a fool. But why answer him as a Catholic, calling on his faith and conscience? Why not answer him as a rational person, calling on his capacity to grasp the self-evident?

Most readers of Anselm do not have these suspicions, whether because they do not read enough of Anselm's text, or because they are bewitched by his towering reputation, or whatever; or, having them, they stifle them. I, having them, propose not stifling them, to see where they lead.

GAUNILO'S INTERPRETATION OF THE ARGUMENT

Gaunilo did more than offer an analogue to Anselm's argument whose absurdity was meant to persuade us that something had gone wrong in the original argument. He tried to put his finger on what had gone wrong. Let us begin, then, by looking at how he construed the argument. I have already conceded that Gaunilo probably did not fully see why the argument would not work with the formula "that than which nothing is greater," why it required the formula "that than which nothing greater can be conceived." Gaunilo's apparent lack of perceptiveness on this point is one of the things that lead me to conclude that he was not a first-rate philosopher. But the error does not really make any difference to Gaunilo's main points. So in my statement of his construal of the argument I shall correct for this error.

There is another point on which, so it appears to me, Gaunilo's interpretation is in error, though Anselm does not challenge him on it and though it, too, makes no difference to the Gaunilo/Anselm dialectic. Gaunilo attributes to Anselm the general principle that anything that exists in reality is greater than anything that exists only in the understanding. So far as I can tell, Anselm never appeals to this general thesis – though, for all I know, he accepted it. (If he did, that would account for his silence on the matter.) What he says is just that, since one can think of that than which nothing greater can be conceived as existing in reality, then, if it did exist only in the understanding, in thinking of *it* as existing in reality one would be thinking of *it* as greater than it is. Here, too, in my discussion I will correct for what seems to me an erroneous interpretation on Gaunilo's part.

Gaunilo, I suggest, construed Anselm's argument as the following:

- (1) *The Psalmist's "fool" understands the words "that than which nothing greater can be conceived."*
- (2) *If he understands the words "that than which nothing greater can be conceived," then he understands that than which nothing greater can be conceived.*
- (3) *If he understands that than which nothing greater can be conceived, then at least in the understanding there exists that than which nothing greater can be conceived.*
- (4) *It is impossible that that which exists in the understanding, namely, that than which nothing greater can be conceived, should exist in the understanding alone and not also in reality.*

- (5) *Therefore there exists in reality that than which nothing greater can be conceived.*
 (6) *This being cannot even be conceived not to exist.*

Did Anselm accept this construal of his argument? He should have – and he did. That Anselm held claims (1) through (3) is clear from chapter 2 of *Proslogion*: when the “Fool hears my words ‘something than which nothing greater can be thought,’ he understands what he hears. And what he understands is in his understanding... So even the Fool is convinced that something than which nothing greater can be thought is at least in his understanding; for when he hears of this [being], he understands [what he hears], and whatever is understood is in the understanding” (*Proslogion* 2; 226–27). In his reply to Gaunilo Anselm reaffirms these points:

And so, in the argument which you criticize I said that when the Fool hears the utterance “that than which a greater cannot be thought,” he understands what he hears. (Surely, if it is spoken in a language one knows, then one who does not understand [what he hears] has little or no intelligence [*intellectus*].) Next, I said that if it is understood, [what is understood] is in the understanding. (Or would what [I claim] to have been necessarily inferred to exist in reality not at all be in the understanding?) (*A* 2; 283)

As to the affirmation of (4) and the move from (4) to (5), there can be no doubt that in the second chapter of *Proslogion* Anselm has also affirmed this and made this inference; in his reply he so repetitively reaffirms it and so repetitively makes the inference again as to become tiresome: “what follows more logically than [this conclusion, viz.]: if that than which a greater *cannot* be thought were only in the understanding, it would be that than which a greater *can* be thought? But, surely, that than which a greater cannot be thought is in no respect that than which a greater can be thought” (*A* 2; 285). We may take the following from Anselm’s response as a crisp summary of points (2) through (5): “that than which a greater cannot be is understood and is in the understanding and hence is affirmed to exist in reality” (*A* 5; 293). It is just as clear that in the third chapter of *Proslogion* Anselm affirmed (6). In his reply to Gaunilo he does so again: “anyone who thinks of this [viz., what cannot even be thought not to exist] does not think that it does not exist. Otherwise, he would be thinking what cannot be thought. Therefore, it is not the case that that than which a greater cannot be thought can be thought not to exist” (*A* 3; 287).

One can easily think of analogues of (1) through (3). Here is one: I understand the words “the golden mountain.” If I understand those

words, then I understand the golden mountain. And if I understand the golden mountain, then in my understanding, at least, there is a golden mountain. Gaunilo's ingenious move was to offer an example that appears to be an analogue, not only of steps (1) to (3), but of (4) and (5) as well: I understand the words "the finest conceivable island." If I understand those words, then I understand the finest conceivable island. And if I understand the finest conceivable island, then there must be the finest conceivable island, at least in my understanding. Now suppose that this finest conceivable island, which I understand, existed only in my understanding. I can conceive of it existing in reality; if it did so, it would then be greater. But that which I understand and that exists in my understanding is the finest conceivable island. So this finest conceivable island, which exists in my understanding, must also exist in reality.

A POINT OF TERMINOLOGY

Let us begin with a crucial terminological point that Gaunilo raises. A condition of understanding something is that what is understood exists in reality; from "S understands x" it follows that "x exists in reality." Correspondingly, then, it is proper to *speak* of understanding so-and-so only if one believes that so-and-so exists in reality. If one does not believe that Pegasus exists, then it would be inappropriate to speak of oneself or anyone else as understanding Pegasus. However, it would not necessarily be inappropriate, when in that circumstance, to speak of someone as *thinking of* or *conceiving of* (*cogitare*) Pegasus. In Gaunilo's words: "in accordance with the proper meaning of this verb [viz., "to understand"], false things [i.e., unreal things] cannot be understood (*nequeunt intelligi*); but surely, they can be thought (*cogitari*) – in the way in which the Fool thought that God does not exist" (G 7; 275). Perhaps the best way of translating *intelligere* in contemporary English, so as to reflect Gaunilo's point, is with the word *know*. One cannot know Pegasus, since Pegasus does not exist; one can, though, conceive of, or think of, Pegasus.

Anselm concedes Gaunilo's terminological point while at the same time giving the impression of believing that nothing of importance hangs on it. Without expressing any disagreement he says, speaking of Gaunilo: you "say that false [i.e., unreal] things cannot be 'understood,' in the proper sense of the word" (A 4; 287). And just a bit later, making a different though related point, he says: "even if no existing things could be *understood* not to exist, still they could all be *thought* not to exist – with the exception of that which exists supremely" (A 4; 287). It is not

to the distinction itself, but to the points Gaunilo makes by using the *intelligere/cogitare* distinction, that Anselm raises his objections. So let us turn to those.

GAUNILO OBJECTS TO THE END OF THE ARGUMENT

Gaunilo uses his terminological point to object to line (6) of the argument. "But when one says that this Supreme Being *cannot be thought* not to exist, he might better say that it *cannot be understood* (*nequeat cogitari*) not to exist or even to be able not to exist" (G 7; 275). The general principle to which Gaunilo is alluding here can be expressed as follows: where "N" is any nominative expression you please, the predicate "understands N to be so-and-so" can be truthfully affirmed of someone only if N is so-and-so, whereas it is possible for the predicate "conceives N to be so-and-so" to be truthfully affirmed of someone even if N is not so-and-so. Specifically then, though the predicate "understands (knows) God not to exist" cannot be truthfully affirmed of anyone, since God does exist, there may well be persons of whom one can truthfully affirm the predicate "thinks of God as not existing." Accordingly, the thing to say, when we arrive at line (6) of the argument, is not that one cannot think of, but that one cannot *understand*, God as not existing. That God exists, and even that God "cannot fail to exist" (G 7; 275), can be known; but God cannot be known (understood) to not exist, nor even to possibly not exist (*non esse aut etiam posse non esse*), since God does exist, and necessarily so. Anselm sees clearly what Gaunilo is objecting to in this part of his argument, and he states the objection himself as follows: "As for your claim that when we say that this Supreme Thing *cannot be thought* not to exist we would perhaps do better to say that it *cannot be understood* not to exist or even to be able not to exist ..." (A 4; 287).

However, says Gaunilo, it may be that there is an important limitation on the scope of our ability to conceive of what does not exist and of what is not the case; perhaps we can conceive of what does not exist or is not the case only if we do not *know* that it exists or is the case. For example, perhaps we can conceive of the non-existence of God only if we do not *know* that God exists. "I do not know whether, during the time when I know most certainly that I exist, I can think that I do not exist" (G 7; 275). If our ability to think and conceive is in fact thus limited, then the person who knows that the being than which nothing greater can be conceived exists in reality will indeed find himself or herself unable to conceive or think of God as not existing (conceive or think of the non-existence

of God). But then, says Gaunilo, it must be observed that, contrary to Anselm's claim in *Proslogion* 3 that anything that there is except God can be conceived not to exist, everybody will find the non-existence of many things inconceivable – specifically, the non-existence of anything that the person knows exists. Says Gaunilo: “if I cannot [think that I do not exist], then this [property of not being able to be thought not to exist] will no longer be a unique characteristic of God” (*G* 7; 275). Depending, then, on whether Anselm does or does not accept the suggested limitation on our ability to conceive the non-existent, he must either concede that God's non-existence is not unique in its inconceivability, or that we can conceive of God's non-existence. Anselm cannot have it both ways. What is undoubtedly true, though, is that we cannot *understand* that God does not exist.

In reply to this objection Anselm remarks that it is indeed true that God cannot be known (understood) as not existing: “nothing which exists can be understood not to exist. For it is false that what exists does not exist ...” (*A* 4; 287). But if this is what he, Anselm, had said, he would have laid himself open to exactly the same objection concerning understanding that Gaunilo cites for conceiving (if the scope of that is limited in the way Gaunilo suggested) – the objection, namely, that in the unknowability of God's non-existence there is nothing unique. “It would not be a unique characteristic of God not to be able to be understood not to exist” (*A* 4; 287). So the right thing to say is not that the Supreme Being cannot be known not to exist, true though that is; the right thing to say is rather what *was* said, namely, that the Supreme Being cannot be *thought* or *conceived* not to exist – in other words, that its non-existence cannot be *conceived*. “For if it could be thought not to exist, it could be thought to have a beginning and an end. But this [consequence] is impossible” (*A* 3; 287).

Gaunilo would find this last argument unimpressive. Whether or not the suggested limitation on the scope of conceiving holds, the fool can conceive of God as beginning and ending as well as not existing. And as for us who know that God exists and is everlasting, we too can do so, if the suggested limitation on the scope of conceiving does not hold. (The different point may also be noted that there is nothing contradictory in the concept of a being that has among its essential properties *lacking a beginning* and *lacking an end*, but that yet exists contingently.)

Anselm goes on, however, to reject the limitation on the scope of our power of conceiving that Gaunilo suggested and to propose another in its place. Probably Gaunilo's inclination to accept the suggested limitation

on the scope of our power of conceiving was due to confusion on his part, says Anselm. Concerning something that one knows to exist, one cannot conceive *that it does and does not exist*; “we cannot think [it] to exist and at the same time think [it] not to exist” (A 4; 289). However, that is a different point from whether we can think of something as not existing while knowing that it exists. But if one confuses the second phenomenon with the first, then one will be led to deny that “many things which we know to exist we think not to exist, and many things which we know not to exist [we think] to exist” (A 4; 289). The truth of the matter, so Anselm suggests, is that we can conceive the non-existence of anything that exists *except for that* which exists “most truly of all and thus most greatly of all” (*Proslogion* 3; 227). All existing things can be conceived not to exist, “with the exception of that which exists supremely. Indeed, all and only things which have a beginning or an end or are composed of parts – and whatever (as I have already said) at any place or time does not exist as a whole – can be thought not to exist. But only that in which thought does not at all find a beginning or an end or a combination of parts, and only that which thought finds existing only as a whole always and everywhere, cannot be thought not to exist” (A 4; 287).

How shall we assess the outcome of the attack and defense concerning line (6) of the argument? Gaunilo thinks that we can conceive of anything whatsoever as not existing, or perhaps instead, of anything whatsoever of whose existence we do not know. Either way, so he claims, Anselm is not entitled to say, at the end of the argument, that that than which nothing greater can be conceived is unique in that it alone among existing things cannot be thought (conceived) not to exist. Anselm replies that we can conceive of anything whatsoever as not existing except for that which exists in the highest degree (possible); its non-existence is uniquely inconceivable. One's estimate of the cogency of the ending of Anselm's argument will depend on one's estimate of the principle concerning the scope of conceiving that he proposes in place of Gaunilo's principle – the principle, namely, that one cannot conceive of the non-existence of that which exists most truly (and that is, on that account, eternal, simple, and always and everywhere a whole). But since the matters are difficult and complex, and since Gaunilo has more interesting and decisive things to say about other parts of the argument, I propose moving on and not trying to determine whether Gaunilo was correct in this part of his attack.⁴

⁴ A full consideration of the matter would have to take into account what Anselm says about God's uniqueness in *Proslogion* 13 and 20.

What is surprising for us in our century is that Anselm did not adopt a different defense – or rather, that he did not phrase this part of his argument differently in the first place. Why did he not speak of its being *impossible* that God not exist rather than of its being *inconceivable* that God not exist? Of the *necessity* of God's existence rather than of the *inconceivability* of God's non-existence? Rather than claiming in *Proslogion* 3 that "there can be thought to exist something which cannot be thought not to exist; and this thing is greater than that which can be thought not to exist" (227), why did Anselm not instead claim that it is possible to think of a being that exists necessarily; and this is greater than one that does not exist necessarily? Why allow oneself to get into these indecisive arguments about the scope of our power of conceiving? It is often said or assumed nowadays that by "inconceivable" Anselm just meant *impossible*. Not only does the drift of the argument above make that implausible; there are passages in which Anselm clearly distinguishes inconceivability from impossibility: "it is evident that [that than which a greater cannot be thought] neither (1) fails to exist nor (2) is able not to exist nor (3) is able to be thought not to exist" (A 5; 291). Moreover, he himself on at least two occasions states the argument in terms of impossibility rather than inconceivability:

[I]f indeed it can be even thought, it is necessary that it exist. For no one who doubts or denies that there exists something than which a greater cannot be thought doubts or denies that if it were to exist it would neither actually nor conceivably (*nec actu nec intellectu*) be able not to exist. For otherwise [i.e., if it existed but in either respect were able not to exist] it would not be that than which a greater cannot be thought. (A 1; 281)

But it is evident that, likewise, "that which is not able not to exist" can be thought and understood. Now, someone who thinks this thinks of something greater than does someone who thinks of that which is able not to exist. (A 9; 299)

Why did Anselm not evade Gaunilo's criticism by preferring *this* argument? I do not know. Perhaps because he was in pursuit of God's uniqueness; and in existing necessarily, God is not unique.

GAUNILO OBJECTS TO THE BEGINNING OF THE ARGUMENT, WITH A DILEMMA

Gaunilo also uses his *intelligere/cogitare* distinction to raise an objection to the beginning of the argument. The objection can be put in the form of a dilemma: when Anselm says that "this thing is ... in my understanding simply because I understand what is said" (G 2; 265), he

may be using the clause "this thing is in my understanding" as a mere synonym of the clause "I understand what is said" – with consequences to be mentioned shortly. Alternatively, in using the word "understanding" in its proper sense (i.e., the sense discussed above), he may be expressing two different propositions with these clauses, and claiming that the proposition expressed by the one is entailed by that expressed by the other. The consequences of this interpretation will also be noted shortly.

Let me pause for a moment to note that what I have interpreted as Gaunilo's posing of a dilemma to Anselm – if you understand *intelligere* this way, then this follows, if that way, then that follows – Anselm understands as Gaunilo contradicting himself. On most points, Anselm seems to me an extremely accurate interpreter of Gaunilo; not on this. Here is what Anselm says: "How, I ask, are [these two statements] consistent? – viz., (1) that false things are understood and (2) that to understand is to comprehend, with cognitive certainty, that a thing exists" (A 6; 293). But Gaunilo's whole point has been to pose to Anselm a choice between two different uses of *intelligere*.

Back to the dilemma. Suppose Anselm is using *intelligere* in such a way that saying that one understands that than which nothing greater can be conceived, and saying that that than which nothing greater can be conceived exists in one's understanding, are simply ways of saying that one understands the meaning of the words "that than which nothing greater can be conceived." Then what is said with these locutions is indeed non-controversial; but it will scarcely serve for the argument. The argument depends on persuading us that there is a certain entity that even the fool conceives or understands – an entity distinct, of course, from the words; and then going on to argue that that entity exists in reality and not only in the understanding.

Alternatively, suppose Anselm understands *intelligere* in its proper sense. Then, from the standpoint of the fool, point (2) of the argument is just a begging of the question. The fool is in the position of not believing that God exists; hence he will not concede that he *understands* (*knows*) that than which nothing greater can be thought. One can't first get the fool to agree that he understands this being and then observe that it follows that this being exists in reality; one must first get him to agree that this being exists in reality, then perhaps one can get him to agree that he understands it.

We may assume, however, that the fool would concede that we can *conceive* or *think* of entities that don't exist and of states of affairs that are

not actual. Accordingly, the non-question-begging way to proceed would be to try to establish that the fool, because he understands the meaning of the words “that than which nothing greater can be conceived,” has a *conception* of that than which nothing greater can be conceived; and that done, to go on to try to establish, somehow, that he could not have this conception without that than which nothing greater can be conceived existing in his mind – and bearing to him the relation of being conceived by him, or even of being understood by him.

Before we consider what Gaunilo has to say about this proposed revision of Anselm’s argument, a revision designed to avoid begging the question against the fool, let us note that part of Anselm’s response to the point made thus far is to offer a *new* ontological argument, this new one formulated in exactly the style that Gaunilo recommended – namely, in terms of *cogitare* rather than *intelligere*, and making no reference at all to things existing in the understanding. The clue that this is what he is doing comes in Anselm’s sentences, “Therefore, it is false [to suppose] that something than which a greater cannot be thought does not exist even though it can be thought. Consequently, [it is] all the more [false to suppose that it does not exist] if it can be understood and can be in the understanding” (*A* 1; 281). (It may be noted, parenthetically, that the ontological argument that Alvin Plantinga formulates and defends in his *God, Freedom, and Evil* is a variant on this alternative argument, formulated in terms of conceiving, rather than a variant on the original *Proslogion* argument formulated in terms of understanding.) The basic thrust of the new argument can be gathered from this paragraph:

[W]ith confidence I assert that if it can be even thought to exist, it is necessary that it exist. For that than which a greater cannot be thought can be thought to exist only without a beginning. Now, whatever can be thought to exist but does not exist can be thought to exist through a beginning. Thus, it is not the case that that than which a greater cannot be thought can be thought to exist and yet does not exist. Therefore, if it can be thought to exist, [there follows] of necessity, [that] it exists. (*A* 1; 280–81)

GAUNILO’S OBJECTION TO THE NON-QUESTION-BEGGING VARIANT ON THE ARGUMENT

Let us return to Gaunilo. Gaunilo has suggested that to avoid begging the question against the fool at the beginning of the argument, Anselm should have used something like the following as steps (2), (3), and (4) in the argument:

- (2*) *If one understands the words "that than which nothing greater can be conceived," then one has a conception of that than which nothing greater can be conceived.*
- (3*) *If one has a conception of that than which nothing greater can be conceived, then at least in one's conception (mind) there exists that than which nothing greater can be conceived.*
- (4*) *It is impossible that that which exists in the "fool's" mind, namely, that than which nothing greater can be conceived, should exist in the mind alone and not also in reality.*

What does Gaunilo wish to say about this non-question-begging variation on the original argument? He wishes to say two quite different things, one of them, in my judgment, indecisive, the other entirely decisive. Let us begin with the indecisive, quoting at some length what Gaunilo says:

[I]n this way I also |can| not |think of| God Himself (whom, surely, for this very reason, I can also think not to exist). For neither am I acquainted with this thing itself nor am I able to make inferences |about it| on the basis of some other similar thing; for even you maintain that it is such that there cannot be anything else similar |to it|. Now, suppose that I were to hear something being said about a man totally a stranger to me – |a man| whom I was not even sure existed. Still, by means of the specific or generic knowledge by which I know what a man is (or what men are), I would be able to think of him as well, by reference to the very thing that a man is. ... But when I hear someone speaking of God or of something greater than all |others|, I cannot have this thing |in my thought and understanding| in the way that I might have that false thing |i.e., that unreal man| in my thought and understanding. For although I can think of that |non-existent man| by reference to a true |i.e., a real| thing known to me, I cannot at all |think of| this |supreme| thing except only with respect to the word. And with respect only to a word a true thing can scarcely or not at all be thought of. For, indeed, when one thinks in this way |i.e., with respect to a mere word|, he thinks not so much the word itself (i.e., not so much the sounds of the letters or of the syllables), which assuredly is a true thing, as he does the signification of the word that is heard. Yet, |the signification is| not |thought| in the manner of one who knows what is usually signified by this word – i.e., one who thinks in accordance with the true thing, even if |it exists| in thought alone. Rather, |the signification is thought| in the manner of one who does not know that |which is usually signified by the word| but who thinks only (1) according to the movement-of-mind that is brought about by hearing this word and (2) in the fashion of one trying to represent to himself the signification of the word he has heard. (But it would be surprising if he could ever |in this manner| discern the true nature of the thing.) Therefore, it is still evident that in this way, and not at all in any other way, this thing is in my understanding when I hear and understand someone who says that there is something greater than all |others| that can be thought. (*G* 4; 270–71)

Two distinct lines of thought are interwoven in this passage. The line on which I shall focus first, the “indecisive” line, goes as follows: God cannot be understood by us; neither can we stand to God in the relation of conceiving God. God is beyond our understanding and conceiving. But we do in some way understand the words “that than which nothing greater can be conceived.” Accordingly, understanding those words does not require that one stand to that than which nothing greater can be conceived in the relation of conceiving of it and understanding it.

What is Anselm’s response? Begin with this:

For even if anyone were so foolish as to say that something than which a greater cannot be thought does not exist, nevertheless he would not be so shameless as to say that he cannot think or understand what he is saying. Or if some such [impudent person] is found, not only is his word to be rejected but he himself is to be despised. Therefore, with regard to whoever denies the existence of something than which a greater cannot be thought: surely, he thinks and understands the denial he is making. And he cannot think or understand this denial without [thinking or understanding] its parts – one of which is “that than which a greater cannot be thought.” Therefore, whoever denies this [viz., that this being exists] thinks and understands [the signification of] “that than which a greater cannot be thought.” (A 9; 299)

The point Anselm is making is clear, especially from that last sentence: if we understood the words of some definite description, “the K that is F,” then we have a conception of, and understand, the K that is F. But this is the very principle that Gaunilo is calling into question – calling into question, for one thing, because it compromises the doctrine of God’s unintelligibility; so far, Anselm has simply reaffirmed the principle without saying anything to answer Gaunilo’s scruples.

But let us look farther. What *we* would be inclined to say here is that one may understand the words “that than which nothing greater can be conceived” without there being that entity and without our standing to it in the relation of conceiving or knowing or understanding it. But this reply is not available to Anselm. For it’s clear from the passage just quoted that, on his view, if one understands *the words* “that than which nothing greater can be conceived,” then one conceives and understands the *being* or *entity* than which nothing greater can be conceived. So this is what he says in place of what we would have said:

Yet, even if it were true that that than which a greater cannot be thought could not be thought or understood, nonetheless it would not be false that “that than which a greater cannot be thought” can be thought and understood. Nothing prevents our saying [the word] “unsayable,” even though that which is called unsayable cannot be said. Moreover, we can think [the concept] *unthinkable*,

even though that which it besuits to be called unthinkable cannot be thought. By the same token, when "that than which nothing greater can be thought" is uttered, without doubt what is heard can be thought and understood, even if that thing than which a greater cannot be thought could not be thought or understood. (A 9; 298–99)

By itself, this passage is baffling. Anselm appears to want to have it both ways. He wants to affirm that God is beyond our conceiving and understanding; yet it is crucial to his argument that we not just understand the words "that than which nothing greater is conceivable," but conceive and understand *the being than which nothing greater is conceivable*. Or rather, perhaps he thinks of understanding the words *as* conceiving and understanding the being.

Clearly the solution Anselm had in mind is that, though none of us *fully* conceives and understands the being than which nothing greater can be conceived, even the fool conceives or grasps that being well enough to deny of it that it exists – and hence well enough for the purposes of the argument. This is what he says to Gaunilo:

Don't you think that that thing about which these [statements] are understood can to some extent be thought and understood, and to some extent can be in thought and in the understanding? For if it cannot [be thought or understood], then the foregoing [statements] cannot be understood about it. But if you say that what is not fully understood is *not* understood and is *not* in the understanding, then say [as well] that someone who cannot stand to gaze upon the most brilliant light of the sun does not see daylight, which is nothing other than the sun's light. Surely, that than which a greater cannot be thought is understood and is in the understanding at least to the extent that the foregoing [statements] are understood about it. (A 1; 283)

(In chapter 8 of his response, Anselm goes about trying to show how we could actually arrive at this conception of God, which, while adequate, is not thorough.)

To the fool Anselm must argue, without any appeal to the faith, that if one understands the words "that than which nothing greater is conceivable," then one stands to the entity than which nothing greater is conceivable in the relation of conceiving of it. To the Catholic, however, he can dispense with his theory as to what goes into understanding words and simply argue that it is an implication of the faith that we have a conception (and understanding) of God. This, then, is the significance of his saying that he will answer Gaunilo as a Catholic rather than as a fool:

But I contend that if that than which a greater cannot be thought is not understood or thought and is not in the understanding or in thought, then, surely,

either (1) God is not that than which a greater cannot be thought or (2) He is not understood or thought and is not in the understanding or in thought. But I make use of your faith and conscience as a very cogent consideration [in support of] how false these [inferences] are. (*A* 1; 279)

Anselm clinches the point later: "But if a Catholic makes this denial, let him remember that 'the invisible things of God (including His eternal power and divinity), being understood through those things that have been made, are clearly seen from the mundane creation'" (*A* 8; 297). In short, the Catholic should accept points (2*) and (3*) in the revised argument even if the inferences from (1) to (2*) and from (2*) to (3*) are not acceptable.

It would appear that Anselm has the better of this part of the interchange. Why should it not be that, though our cognitive grasp of God is woefully inadequate when measured against the reality of God, nonetheless it is good enough for us to be able to say and believe things about God? We do not know what Gaunilo thought about this part of Anselm's response; so far as I can see, a "Catholic" would have to accept it. But Gaunilo has another line of thought up his sleeve; and this, I think, is decisive. Compared to this new line of thought, everything so far has been preliminary skirmishing.

GAUNILO'S DECISIVE OBJECTION: A NEW DILEMMA

The rather lengthy passage quoted from Gaunilo contains, or at least hints at, a line of thought distinct from the one just canvassed. It can be seen as presenting Anselm with a new dilemma, this one a dilemma pertaining to Gaunilo's proposed variant on Anselm's original argument. The presentation of the dilemma requires distinguishing two different phenomena called "conceiving" ("thinking"). If one understands some expression – in particular, some definite description – then it might appropriately be said of one that one has a *conception*; if I understand the expression "the earth's moon," then I have a conception of the earth's moon. But we must distinguish two different acts, or states, called "conception." The phenomenon sometimes called "conceiving" consists of having a cognitive grip on that which the words signify – or as we in our century would put it, on that which the words refer to, or stand for, or designate. The phenomenon at other times called "conceiving" consists, rather, says Gaunilo, of *imagining* for ourselves, or *representing* to ourselves, a signification of the words. We might call these two kinds of conceiving, respectively, *R-conceiving* (*R* for reality), and *I-conceiving* (*I* for imagination). *R-conceiving* will not

differ, in any way relevant to our discussion here, from understanding. Let me quote that part of Gaunilo's passage that makes this point most directly:

For, indeed, when one thinks in this way, [i.e., with respect to a mere word], he thinks not so much the word itself (i.e., not so much the sound of the letters or of the syllables), which assuredly is a true thing, as he does the signification of the word that is heard. Yet, [the signification is] not [thought] in the manner of [*R-conceiving*, that is, of] one who knows what is usually signified by this word – i.e., one who thinks in accordance with the true thing, even if [it exists] in thought alone. Rather, [the signification is thought] in the manner of [*I-conceiving*, that is, of] one who does not know that [which is usually signified by the word] but who thinks only (1) according to the movement-of-mind that is brought about by hearing this word and (2) in the fashion of one trying to represent to himself the signification of the word he has heard. (*G* 5; 271)

Of course, we who come after Frege would want to say that the relevant distinction is not that between *knowing* the referent of an expression and *imagining* a referent, but that between knowing the *referent* of a word and knowing the *sense* of the word. Though Gaunilo is groping in the right direction, he doesn't have a firm hold on that for which he is groping.

But back to Gaunilo's proposed variant on Anselm's argument, with Gaunilo's distinction in hand between two kinds of conceiving. We may agree that if the fool understands the words "that than which nothing greater can be conceived," then he has a corresponding conception. But what shall we understand this conception as being, a case of *R-conceiving* or a case of *I-conceiving*? The tacit assumption of the argument is that it consists of conceiving that which the definite description signifies or refers to – namely, that than which nothing greater can be conceived. In short, the tacit assumption of the argument is that it consists of a case of *R-conceiving*. But why, says Gaunilo, would the fool grant that that is what he is doing? Why would he not insist that, so far as he knows, all he does when he hears the words and understands them is *imagine* a signification? Why would he not insist that, so far as he knows, it is *I-conceiving* that he is engaged in? We do, after all, speak of thinking about Pegasus, conceiving of the golden mountain, and so on – "conceiving of things that don't exist." Such conceiving is not to be analyzed as consisting of standing in the relation of conceiving to what the expression refers, since the expression doesn't refer to anything. It consists of hearing and understanding the expression and imagining a referent. Thus the issue of whether the entity to which the expression refers exists only in the mind or also in reality does not even arise – since it is not granted that the expression refers to anything.

I suggest, in short, that Gaunilo's fundamental objection to his non-question-begging variant on Anselm's argument is that the kind of conception that the fool will grant that he has is of no use for the argument, and that the kind of conception that is needed for the argument the fool will not grant that he has. The fool will resist the move from (2*) to (3*).

It might be thought that I am over-interpreting what Gaunilo has to say about conception in the passage quoted – or if not that, basing too much on too little. But Gaunilo makes the same point in other passages. Referring to the passage from *Proslogion* in which Anselm says that a painting first exists in the mind of the artist and then is made by the artist to exist in reality, Gaunilo says this: “before that painting is made it exists in the painter's art. And such a thing in the art of the painter is nothing other than a part of the painter's understanding” (G 3; 267). Notice that last phrase: *is nothing other than a part of the painter's understanding*. By contrast, when genuine knowledge or understanding takes place, then “whatever true [i.e., real] thing, when heard of or thought of, is apprehended by the understanding; without doubt that true thing is other than the understanding by which it is apprehended” (G 3; 267–68). One can indeed say that understanding the words of some definite description “the K that is F” requires having a conception of the K that is F; but it's not true that the type of conceiving required consists of performing the mental act of conceiving that entity for which those words stand. Thus it is that Gaunilo says: “I do not concede to it any other existence than that [existence] (if it is to be called existence) present when the mind tries to represent to itself a thing completely unknown, [trying to do so] in accordance with a word which it has merely heard” (G 5; 271).

We understand the expression “the golden mountain.” So we may be described as having a conception of the golden mountain. Thus it may be said that we have conceptions of things that don't exist. But we must not fall into the trap of supposing that there are those things – that there is a non-existent golden mountain – and that for one to have a conception of the golden mountain is for there to be a golden mountain and for one to stand to that entity in the relation of conceiving it. “How, then, from the [alleged] fact that it is, patently, greater than all [others] does one prove to me that that [which is] greater [than all others] exists in reality? For I still so doubt and deny it to exist that I claim that this greater [than all others] is not even in my thought and understanding even in the way that numerous doubtfully real and uncertainly real things are” (G 5; 271). One may understand the words “the present king of France,” and have what is appropriately called *a conception of the present king of*

France, without there being the present king of France in any mode of being whatsoever.

My use of this example, along with the example of the golden mountain, is obviously meant to suggest that the fundamental topic of dispute between Gaunilo and Anselm was a topic of dispute again in the twentieth century between (among others) Meinong and the early Russell on the one hand, and Frege on the other. Meinong is the Anselm of the twentieth century, Frege the Gaunilo. A singular term, said Frege, may have a sense without having a reference; and to understand a singular term is, in general, to understand its sense, not to understand its reference. It is not inappropriate to say, of someone who understands the singular term "the golden mountain," that this person has a conception of the golden mountain. But this is to be understood as consisting in grasping the sense of the expression, not in grasping its reference. It has no reference to be grasped. After citing a singular term that has no reference, Michael Dummett, speaking for Frege, says that:

Such an expression has a sense because we have a criterion, perhaps quite sharp, at any rate at least as sharp as for most names having a genuine reference, for an object's being recognized as the referent of the name: but it lacks a reference, because as a matter of fact there is nothing which would identify any object as the referent of the name; there is no object which satisfies the condition determined by the sense for being its referent. What could be more straightforward?⁵

Of course, Gaunilo does not distinguish between the sense and the reference of expressions in the articulate way that Frege does. And Frege would never have said that the grasping of the sense of an expression is nothing other than a part of the understanding itself; the senses of expressions are, on Frege's view, objective features of language. But then, Anselm's alternative account of linguistic understanding and conception was scarcely less primitive than Gaunilo's; it remained for Meinong to develop an ontology in which, of all the entities that there are, some exist in reality and some do not.

Yet, primitive and unacceptable though Gaunilo's account of linguistic understanding and conception was, it was adequate for his polemical question: Why assume that if one understands the words "that than which nothing greater is conceivable," then *there is* that than which nothing greater can be conceived and one stands to it in the relation of conceiving? Other accounts than this can be given of what goes on when

⁵ Michael Dummett, *Frege: Philosophy of Language*, 2nd edn. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 160.

we understand singular terms and have conceptions. One doesn't have to suppose that every genuine term has a referent and that to understand the term is to cognitively grasp the referent.

THE UPSHOT

Anselm saw clearly the point in the argument to which Gaunilo was lodging his objection. Here is one among other indications of that: you say that "something than which a greater cannot be thought is in the understanding in no other way than [as something] which cannot even be thought in accordance with the true nature of anything" (*A* 1; 279). We have already seen part of Anselm's reply: to understand the words "that than which nothing greater can be conceived" is to have a conception of that which these words signify (stand for) – namely, that than which nothing greater can be conceived. The rest of his reply goes as follows:

[F]rom the fact of its being understood, there does follow that [it] is in the understanding. For what is thought is thought by thinking; and with regard to what is thought by thinking: even as it is thought, so it is in [our] thinking. Similarly, what is understood is understood by the understanding; and with regard to what is understood by the understanding: even as it is understood, so it is in the understanding. What is more obvious than this? (*A* 2; 284–85)

The reply is clear; Anselm reaffirms the very principles under dispute and then adds that they are self-evidently true. But what is the *import*, in the polemic, of the reply? I see no other way of interpreting its import than as follows: Gaunilo has uncovered a weak point in Anselm's ontological argument, a *crucial* weak point; and Anselm has nothing to say in his own defense. So he reaffirms his conviction that the principles under dispute are self-evidently true, and leaves it at that. He says nothing at all to support his conviction. Not until the twentieth century would the dispute be substantially advanced beyond where Gaunilo and Anselm left it – Gaunilo questioning Anselm's theory of linguistic comprehension and conception and offering suggestions for an alternative theory, Anselm claiming that the original theory (itself not much more than suggestions) was self-evidently true. But let us be clear on the structure of the polemic: since it was Anselm who gave the argument, the burden of proof was on him. He did not bear the burden.

Let me summarize Gaunilo's major objection, using mainly his own words: "If that which cannot even be thought in accordance with the true nature of anything must [nonetheless] be said to be in the understanding,

then I do not deny that in this [improper] sense it is in my [understanding]" (G 5; 271). That is to say: if all you mean by "having so-and-so in the understanding" is *having a conception of so-and-so*, then even things that could not exist can be in the understanding.

But since from this [concession] its existence also in reality cannot at all be inferred, I still will not at all concede to it that existence [in reality] until [that existence] is proved to me by an indubitable line of reasoning. Now, anyone who says, "that which is greater than all [others] exists, [for] otherwise it would not be greater than all [others]" does not pay enough attention to whom he is speaking. For I do not yet admit – indeed, I even doubt and deny – that that [which is] greater [than all others] exists at all in reality. I do not concede to it any other existence than that [existence] (if it is to be called existence) present when the mind tries to represent to itself a thing completely unknown, [trying to do so] in accordance with a word which it has merely heard. (G 5; 271)

And now, finally, what, given Anselm's assumptions, is wrong with this analogous argument? I understand the meaning of the words "an island than which none greater can be conceived." If someone understands those words, then that person understands (or conceives of) an island than which none greater can be conceived. And if someone understands (or conceives of) an island than which none greater can be conceived, then that island exists in the mind. But if that island existed only in the mind, then one could conceive of it as greater. But that one, the one which exists in the mind, is that island than which none greater can be conceived. Therefore it exists in reality.

I submit that the argument is fully analogous to Anselm's, and that the reason Anselm failed to point out the disanalogy is that he realized there was no disanalogy to point out. Anselm displayed an implication of Meinongianism that he liked; Gaunilo, one that everyone finds embarrassing. Of course, there are variants on Anselm's argument to which the corresponding variant on Gaunilo's lost island argument is not a good analogue. But Gaunilo was not offering an analogue to all possible variations on Anselm's argument; he was offering an analogue to Anselm's argument. The analogue is apt. The absurdity of its conclusion shows that something has gone wrong in Anselm's argument. Gaunilo offered a suggestion as to what that was. Anselm reaffirmed the principles to which Gaunilo took exception and declared them self-evident, having nothing to say in their support. The monk from Marmoutiers deserves better from history than he has received. He saw that Anselm's argument in *Proslogion* 2 depended on taking meaning to be reference; and he saw that meaning is not reference.

As for the other parts of Anselm's treatise, they, said Gaunilo, "are argued so truthfully, so brilliantly, |so| impressively, and, indeed, abound with such great usefulness and with such great fragrance (because of an innermost scent of devout and holy affection) that they are not at all to be despised on account of the things which in the beginning parts are rightly sensed but less cogently argued" (*G* 8; 275).

CHAPTER 5

Divine simplicity

Once upon a time, back in the so-called middle ages, theologians, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim alike, in developing their doctrine of God, gave extraordinary prominence to the attribute of simplicity. God, they said, is simple; in God there are no distinctions whatsoever. I am not aware of any theologian in these three traditions contending that God's simplicity ought to be prominent in one's religious consciousness, in the way, for example, that it appears to have been prominent in the religious consciousness of Plotinus. It was, instead, theoretical prominence that they gave it.

For one thing, they recognized its *theoretical fecundity*. If one grants God's simplicity, then one also has to grant a large number of other divine attributes: immateriality, eternity, immutability, having no unrealized potentialities, etc. Aquinas, in his earlier *Summa contra gentiles*, still argued for God's eternity, immateriality, and lack of passive potency before he introduced God's simplicity. By the time he wrote his later *Summa Theologiae* he had fully recognized the theoretical fecundity of this attribute and moved it up to the top of the list, introducing it immediately after he had established the existence of a first mover. Secondly, the doctrine of divine simplicity had, for the medievals, extraordinary *framework significance*. If one grants that God is simple, one's interpretation of all God's other attributes will have to be formed in the light of that conviction. Of course the fecundity of this attribute for deriving others of God's attributes, and its framework significance, are quite beside the point unless one has good reason for holding that God is simple. The medievals thought they had such good reason.

A theology structured by moving from God's existence immediately to God's simplicity and then on to God's other attributes seems part of a quaint and bygone era for anyone reared on twentieth-century theology. Contemporary theologians seldom speak of God's simplicity. And when they do, they rarely (if ever) give it a significant structural role in their

doctrine of God – let alone give it the pre-eminent role that it enjoyed in the articulated doctrine of God developed by the medieval school theologians.

I shall not on this occasion ask why this striking alteration has taken place in the mode of structuring theology – partly because, though I find the question intriguing, I am far short of knowing the answer. I suspect that a full answer would illuminate, down to a deep level, the differences between contemporary theology and medieval school theology. But I am more in need of illumination on that score than able to give illumination. On this occasion I want to pursue the answer to a different question suggested by the difference between medieval and contemporary attitudes toward the doctrine of simplicity. And from here on I shall speak mainly of *Christian* philosophical theology.

The doctrine that God is simple was understood by the medievals as the denial of any form of composition in God. In his *Summa Theologiae* Aquinas, before drawing the general conclusion that God is simple, dismisses various specific modes of composition. He argues, among other things, that:

(1) God is not distinct from God's essence;

that:

(2) God's existence is not distinct from God's essence;

and that:

(3) God has no property distinct from God's essence.

Since I shall want to refer to these three theses rather frequently in what follows, let me, for convenience sake, call them the *theistic identity* claims.

In the Thomistic texts there is no sign – none of which I am aware, anyway – that Aquinas found anything ontologically problematic in these claims. He marshals arguments for them. He does not toss them out as self-evident. But he gives no sign of bafflement over how it can be that something would be identical with its essence, nor over how it can be that that entity's existence would be identical with its essence, nor over how it can be that all its properties are identical with its essence (and hence, that its essence itself has no complexity).

Though Aquinas gave no sign of finding anything problematic in the theistic identity claims as such, when he combined those claims with certain other convictions of his, he experienced bafflement aplenty. Aquinas found himself, by virtue both of his construal of his biblical inheritance

and his acceptance of certain arguments from his Greek inheritance, as committed to the propositions that:

(4) God is omniscient;

and that:

(5) God is omnibenevolent.

Further, it seemed to him that in predicating omniscience of God, one is predicating of God something other, for example, than omnibenevolence; and that in predicating either of these of God, one is predicating of God something other than existence. But how can one give an intelligible account of these predications without assuming that there is in God God's goodness and God's wisdom, distinct from each other and from God's existence? To assume this, however, would be flagrantly to compromise God's simplicity. Aquinas struggled, then, to find a way of accounting for the predications that his biblical and Greek inheritance required him to make of God that would preserve the distinctness of these predications without compromising God's simplicity.

Second, Aquinas struggled to show that the doctrine of divine simplicity is not in contradiction with other doctrines that he felt required to affirm. For example, Aquinas held, on the basis of his biblical inheritance, that:

(6) God has free choice.

But it was far from clear how this is compatible with the claim that God has no properties distinct from God's essence – i.e., that God has no accidents, either essential or contingent. Likewise, it was not at all clear how the doctrine of simplicity is compatible with the doctrine that:

(7) God is triune.

To the best of my knowledge it was the same for all other medieval philosophers and theologians – though here I stand to be corrected by those whose acquaintance with medieval thought goes beyond my own. When Marilyn Adams, in her fine book on Ockham,¹ reviews the medieval debates over simplicity through Ockham, the debates she reports occur, so far as I can tell, only at the point of Aquinas' bafflement. Some of the medievals gave a different ontological construal of the theistic identity claims than Aquinas gave; but none, so far as I can see, found anything especially baffling in those claims as such.

¹ *William of Ockham*, 2 vols. (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1987).

For most of us contemporary philosophers the situation is strikingly different. Our bafflement does not arise only when we reach the point where we have to find a theory of predication that, without compromising the doctrine of simplicity, accounts for how we can say a multiplicity of distinct true things about God, or when we reach the point where we have to show the compatibility of the doctrine of simplicity with other doctrines. It arises already with this trio of ontological claims. How could any substance possibly be its essence, we ask? Maybe a property could be its essence – though even that merits careful reflection. But how could something that is not a property be its essence? And how could such an entity's essence be its existence? And how could all its properties be identical with its essence? We have no difficulty in repudiating *some* modes of composition in God – for example, that God is composed of matter. But those three theistic identity claims seem to many, if not most, of us incoherent.

There are some who do not confess to seeing any difficulty. Stump and Kretzmann in their article "Absolute Simplicity" concentrate on the advantages and disadvantages of accepting the doctrine of divine simplicity.² They think the most important reason for hesitating to accept it is the apparent incompatibility of the doctrine with God's free choice. They then argue that Aquinas had a way of harmonizing God's simplicity with whatever someone who accepts the biblical tradition would want to say about God's choice. As they see it, this leaves the theologian in the situation where there are no significant reasons for not accepting the doctrine, whereas there are significant theoretical advantages in accepting it.

Admittedly this is a considerably less ringing endorsement of the doctrine than the medievals customarily gave it. Nonetheless, in their discussion I find no sign that Stump and Kretzmann find the theistic identity claims problematic. For them the only question is whether those claims, and the other claims making up the doctrine of simplicity, should be accepted.

Why would a medieval thinker find the theistic identity claims ontologically non-problematic, whereas so many of us find them inscrutable or incoherent? That is the question whose answer I want to pursue. The answer I shall offer is that we have here a clash between two fundamentally different ontological styles; if we are to understand and engage the medievals on this matter, we shall have to enter imaginatively into their ontological style and then debate, among other things, the tenability of

² *Faith and Philosophy* 2 (1985): 353–82.

these two different styles. We need, if you will, a paradigm shift. Meta-ontology is what is needed. Possibly the reason Stump and Kretzmann find nothing problematic in the doctrine is that they, being medieval scholars themselves, do their thinking in terms of this alternative ontological style.

I am also inclined to think that we will never succeed in finding a satisfactory non-trivial formulation of the doctrine of divine simplicity in our own dominant contemporary ontological style. But I see no way of defending this thesis; for all I know, it might be the case that right over the horizon is a creative discussion by someone who proves that it can be done by doing it. Hence I shall content myself with the less daring thesis, that to understand the medievals we must enter imaginatively into a style of ontology different from that which is dominant among us.

But first, what exactly are the difficulties that we have with the identity claims? Alvin Plantinga has canvassed them lucidly in his book *Does God Have a Nature?*³ A substance's essence, says Plantinga, will be a certain one of its properties – that conjunctive property that includes as conjuncts those properties that the substance has in all possible worlds in which it exists. So if God is identical with God's essence, then God is identical with a property. But God, being a person, is not a property.

That is the most fundamental difficulty. But Plantinga also finds difficulties in roughly the region where Aquinas and most medievals found them. Let us suppose that God has the attributes of omniscience and omnibenevolence. Now the theistic identity claims entail that all God's attributes are identical with God and, hence, with each other. But surely omniscience and omnibenevolence are not the identical property; and if either were identical with God, then, once again, God would be a property, which God is not.⁴

These moves are so simple, swift, and decisive, that Plantinga acknowledges that what he has refuted must not be what the medievals meant. So he tries again. The medievals speak of God's goodness, God's existence, God's power, God's wisdom, etc. Maybe in speaking thus they did not mean to refer to *properties*. Maybe with the expression "God's goodness" they did not intend to refer to that property of goodness that God has. Maybe with the expression "God's existence" they did not intend to refer to that property of existence that God has, and so forth. Maybe they intended to pick out entities of some other ontological category. Perhaps,

³ Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1980. ⁴ Cf. *Does God Have a Nature?*, 47.

says Plantinga, they intended to pick out states of affairs, relationships. Perhaps with the locution "God's wisdom" they intended to pick out the state of affairs of God's being wise; with the locution "God's goodness," the state of affairs of God's being good, etc.

One challenge facing us immediately, in working out this suggestion, is to find a criterion of identity/diversity for *states of affairs* that is both plausible in its own right and has the consequence that God's wisdom is identical with God's goodness, with God's existence, etc. Plantinga formulates a criterion, modifies it in the light of an objection, and raises an objection to the modification. Then he drops the matter. For even if we find a satisfactory criterion, we would be left with this deep difficulty: on this account, God is identical with a certain state of affairs. But, says Plantinga, "If God is a state of affairs, then he is a mere abstract object and not a person at all; he is then without knowledge or love or the power to act. But this is clearly inconsistent with the claims of Christian theism at the most basic level."⁵

At the point where Plantinga drops the matter, William Mann picks it up in his paper titled "Divine Simplicity."⁶ Perhaps, says Mann, we should look once again at what the medievals had in mind by their locutions "God's existence," "God's wisdom," "God's goodness," etc. Perhaps it was not abstract objects like states of affairs that they had in mind. Perhaps they had in mind what may be called *property instances*. (Property instances are what I called *cases* in my *On Universals*; they are what D. C. Williams called *abstract particulars*, and *tropes*. They are Aristotle's *entities present in something*. And at least some of them are what the medievals called *qualia*.) Suppose that Socrates had the property of wisdom. Then we can say that whereas Socrates was an *exemplification* of wisdom, Socrates' wisdom was an instance of it. And as to the relation of the person Socrates to the property instance, *Socrates' wisdom*, perhaps Aristotle's phrase is as good as any: Socrates' wisdom is *present in* Socrates. As his reason for thinking that property instances are not states of affairs Mann says this: "It is claimed by the friends of states of affairs that all states of affairs *exist*, but only some of them *obtain* or are actual. This feature does not hold for property instances. In order for a property instance to exist, it must be actual: some existing thing must either exemplify it or be it."⁷

Two fundamental challenges face this proposal. By now we can guess what they are. We need a criterion of identity/diversity for property

⁵ *Does God Have a Nature?*, 52–53.

⁶ *Religious Studies* 18 (1982): 451–71.

⁷ "Divine Simplicity," 457.

instances that is both plausible in its own right and whose consequences are consistent with the theistic identity claims. And we must be assured that God's being a property instance is not incompatible with God's having the properties that we want to predicate of God. Mann faces up to both these challenges; but let me, on this occasion, rush past what he says about the identity and diversity of property instances to get to what he says on the issue of whether God's being a property instance would be compatible with our convictions as to what God is like. Mann formulates the challenge to his view thus: "this conclusion offends against deeply entrenched theistic belief that God is knowing, loving, and active. In brief, God is a person; no property instance is a *person*; therefore God is not a property instance. Given the theist's beliefs about the personhood of God, the doctrine of divine simplicity must be rejected."⁸

Mann's way of answering this objection is to argue that one of the principles assumed in the objection, viz., that no property instance is a person, is false. Take anything whatsoever, says Mann, and consider all its properties. From these, single out that conjunctive property that includes as its conjuncts all the properties of the thing. Call that the *rich property* of the thing. The thing itself, says Mann, is "an instantiation of the appropriate rich property." To generalize: "For anything whatsoever, there is an appropriate rich property. Therefore, everything is a property instance of some rich property or other. Therefore, every person is a property instance... It is certainly true that *most* property instances are not persons, yet every person is a property instance."⁹

It appears to me that Mann has here fallen into an ontological trap. Let us once again have before us the distinction between an *exemplification* of a property and an *instance* of a property. Whereas Socrates exemplified the property, wisdom, Socrates' wisdom instantiated it.

Now a person certainly *exemplifies* its rich property. But what reason is there to think that the person also *instantiates* that property – that in this case the instantiation is the exemplification? What reason is there to think that Socrates' instantiation of his rich property just is Socrates? I see no reason at all to think this; nor does Mann offer any reason. I surmise that Mann, at this crucial point in his argument, momentarily lost sight of the distinction between an exemplification of a property and an instance of a property. Mann does not think that *Socrates' wisdom* is identical with Socrates, whereas he does think that the one and only

⁸ "Divine Simplicity," 465. ⁹ "Divine Simplicity," 467.

instance of Socrates' rich property is identical with him. Presumably what was going through Mann's mind was the thought that Socrates' wisdom was not rich and complex enough to be Socrates. So he proposed taking a property instance that was as rich as necessary. But taking a more complex property instance does nothing to collapse this trio of ontological relationships into a solo: Socrates *exemplifies* his properties, his property instances *instantiate* those properties, and his property instances are *present in* him.

The most decisive consideration against identifying Socrates with Socrates' instantiation of his rich property is this: if Socrates were identical with his instantiation of his rich property, then his exemplifying of that property would of course be the same as his instantiating of it. But notice that Socrates might have exemplified a different rich property from that which he in fact exemplified; he only contingently exemplified the rich property that he did exemplify. By contrast, an instance of a property cannot instantiate different properties from those it does instantiate – on pain of losing its identity. Call Socrates' rich property, *SR*. That entity which is Socrates' instantiation of *SR* cannot have existed and not have been the instantiation of *SR*. Instances do not contingently instantiate the properties that they do instantiate.

In response to a criticism of his theory lodged by Thomas Morris, Mann, in a later article, has made some revisions and introduced some additions.¹⁰ Morris' criticism was this: if God is an instance of a property, then "there is at least one property existing distinct from God as an abstract object on which God is, in some sense, dependent for what he is – an instance of that property."¹¹ But this violates the conviction that God exists *a se*. Mann's response, in the first place, is to combine a property account of divine simplicity with a property-instance account by proposing that God's property be taken as identical with God's instance of that property – that omniscience be taken as identical with God's omniscience, omnipotence as identical with God's omnipotence, etc.

What strikes one about this proposal, as Mann presents it, is its *ad hoc* character. One looks for a general discussion of properties and property instances in which it is shown that certain properties are self-instantiating (n.b., not self-exemplifying but self-*instantiating*), in which the general conditions under which that is the case are laid out, and in which it is

¹⁰ Morris' discussion is in "On God and Mann," *Religious Studies* 21 (1985): 299–318. Mann's response is in "Simplicity and Properties," *Religious Studies* 22 (1986): 343–53.

¹¹ "On God and Mann," 302.

shown that these conditions are satisfied in the case of omniscience, omnipotence, omnibenevolence, and the rest of God's properties. But Mann offers no such general ontological discussion. Instead he concerns himself entirely with a certain rather obvious objection to this theory.

The objection is this: if God is identical with the property instance, *God's omniscience*, and if that property instance is identical with the property, *being omniscient*, then it follows that God is a property. But to hold that God is a property is to be confronted once again with Plantinga's objection: properties are abstract objects, incapable of having the personal attributes that belong to God. This objection, which formerly Mann regarded as decisive, he now tries to meet by questioning the assumption that properties are abstract objects. He suggests that the properties of objects are the *causal powers* of the objects (though he also speaks of a property's presence in some entity as *conferring* a causal power on that entity).

I myself fail to see, however, that this proposal secures Mann's goal. I presume that by the causal powers of objects, Mann means those capacities that objects have for causing one and another event. Water, for example, has the causal power of dissolving sugar. Mann himself speaks of causal powers as that in *virtue of which*. But if this is indeed what causal powers are, they seem to me clearly *abstract* entities. They are not concrete causal agents but abstract powers of agents. On the other hand, it is possible that I don't at all understand what Mann has in mind by "causal powers." For he speaks of *being triangular* as the same causal power of objects as *being trilateral*. I myself have considerable doubt as to whether these properties are correctly thought of as causal powers; but if one does so think of them, then it seems to me that they must be thought of as distinct causal powers. It is in virtue of the triangularity of this object, not its trilaterality, that I have these three bloody points in my hand. So also, though I find it difficult to think of omniscience as a causal power, it appears to me that if it is a causal power, it is a different causal power from omnibenevolence – whereas of course Mann, because of the pressures of the simplicity doctrine, holds that they are the same. Perhaps, then, I do not understand what Mann has in mind by causal powers. For as I think of causal powers, the theory that properties are causal powers does not have the consequence that properties are in general concrete. Of course it would be open to Mann to argue that in the case of God, the causal powers of the agent just are the causal agent. That is to say, he could hold that though causal powers are in general abstract entities, that is not true of all of them. At least one causal power just is a concrete

causal agent, that one being God. And perhaps this is Mann's actual line of thought. For though he uses words which suggest that he wishes to question Plantinga's assumption that properties, in general, are abstract objects, he also says the following, which appears to go in the other direction that I have suggested: "if properties are causal powers and if God is a property, then he is a causal power. Moreover, if the property that God is is variously identified as omniscience, omnipotence, moral perfection, and the like, then the property *cum* causal power that God is looks more and more analogous to the causal powers that ordinary persons have."¹² About this, I think we must simply say that the thought is too undeveloped for us to know whether Mann's theory that properties are causal powers meets Plantinga's objection to the identification of God with any property, or whether it merely presents the proposal to which Plantinga made his objection under a new guise. I might add that Mann himself stresses the inchoate character of his theory.

We have canvassed one of the recent attempts to offer a construal of the theistic identity claims that will both make those claims ontologically intelligible and not yield consequences patently unacceptable to theists. None of the attempts of which I am aware has made any significant advance in this endeavor. One possible explanation for this situation is that we are just much less intelligent than our medieval forebears; not only can we not devise an acceptable account of divine simplicity; we cannot even understand accounts presented to us by the medievals that they found non-problematic. I prefer another explanation. The theistic identity claims were put forward by thinkers working within a very different ontological style from ours. They worked within a style of ontology that I shall call *constituent ontology*. We typically work within a style that might be called *relation ontology*. We should expect that claims that are baffling within the one style will sometimes seem straightforward within the other. The theistic identity claims are a paradigm example of this.

I propose now to try to enter into that alternative way of thinking far enough to explain how a medieval, thinking within the style of constituent ontology, would have understood those theistic identity claims. One criterion of success in this endeavor will be that those claims cease to be baffling. Bafflement is to enter at the next point, where we try to show that divine simplicity is compatible, say, with God having free choice, and where we try to devise a theory of predication – note, not a

¹² "Simplicity and Properties," 352.

theory of property-identity but a theory of predication – which, without compromising God’s simplicity, accounts for the multiplicity of distinct predications that Jews, Christians, and Muslims want to make about God.

Let us start with the first of the theistic claims. But let us for the most part not use the word “essence” in our reflections, since for us it carries too many misleading connotations. Let us instead use the term “nature,” and speak of the nature of a thing.

The nature of an entity, a medieval would have said, is *what-it-is-as-such*. An entity does not *have* a certain nature in the way it has a certain property. It *is* a certain nature. If an entity is something as such, then it is a certain nature. One has to add at once that, for most things, that isn’t all they are. But with that qualification understood, everything is a certain what-it-is-as-such. I am something as such. I am not only that, indeed; but I am at least that. You too are something as such. So too are all the plants and animals in the world. So too are the angels. And so too is God. There is no mystery in how it can be that God is something as such – that God is a certain nature. Everything is something as such; everything is a certain something-as-such, a certain what-it-is-as-such. The only mystery about God – if mystery it be – is that we do not have to add, “but that’s not all God is.” For all other substances, we have to make this addition.

It has become habitual for us twentieth-century philosophers, when thinking of essences, to think of things as *having* essences, and to think of these essences as certain properties or sets of properties. An essence is thus for us an abstract entity. For a medieval, I suggest, an essence or nature was just as concrete as that of which it is the nature. That is because everything, including every concrete thing, is a something-as-such. A medieval would have found the suggestion that that is not the case baffling – though, of course, plenty of later thinkers have made this suggestion. Naturally the medieval will speak of something as *having* a certain nature. But the having here is to be understood as *having as one of its constituents*. Very much of the difference between medieval and contemporary ontology hangs on these two different construals of “having.” Whereas for the medievals, *having an essence* was having an essence as one of its constituents, for us, having an *essence* is having an essence as one of its properties: exemplifying it.

So far, then, no problem. But now we come across a perplexity that generated enormous controversy among the medievals. Socrates appears to have the same nature as Plato – appears to have the same what-it-is-as-such,

viz., human nature. Yet obviously Socrates is not identical with Plato. How are we to explain this?

Well, notice in the first place that both Socrates and Plato are made out of something; namely, out of a certain lump, or parcel, or bit, or quantity of matter (we don't have the right word in English). And the bit of matter out of which Socrates is made is distinct from the bit of matter out of which Plato is made. So let us think of Plato and Socrates as composites, articulated composites, with different constituents playing different roles. That composite that is Socrates will include his nature, but will also include his bit of matter. And what makes Socrates distinct from Plato is that he is made out of a different bit of matter. Admittedly that is not the only thing that makes him distinct; he also has different "accidents." But that's the basic thing.

Having said this, we had better look once again at that human nature that we found, or thought we found, in both Socrates and Plato. Is the situation really that there is a common human nature that enters into different substantive-composites? Or do the different bits of matter that enter into substantive-composites also, as it were, "particularize" the natures? Does Socrates, contrary to initial appearances, have a distinct nature from Plato – similar but distinct? And if so, is it the matter out of which Socrates is made that makes his nature distinct from all others? Suppose it is. And suppose, further that we make Socrates' nature an object of thought, focusing just on the nature and abstracting from the bit of matter with which it is associated in that composite that is Socrates. Is that which we are thinking of in such a case distinct from what we would be thinking of if we thought about Plato's nature along the same lines, or is it identical with it?

All these questions, and many more in the same region, were posed and discussed by the medievals. It would serve no purpose in this essay to go into them farther. But notice that the difficulties are posed by material objects sharing, or being capable of sharing, or *apparently* being capable of sharing, their natures. In the case of immaterial entities, everyone agreed: everything is its own nature.

I have already suggested that what enters into the sorts of composites that you and I are is more than a certain nature and a certain bit of matter. We also possess various attributes that, though they are not involved in what we are as such, nonetheless characterize us. Some of these are essential to us; some, non-essential. We should not think of these attributes themselves as constituents of those composites that we are. But for each of these properties not belonging to a thing's nature,

be they essential or non-essential, there will be a property instance that is present in that thing. Let us call these the *accidents* of the thing. The composite that I am will include my accidents. To say it once again: I am an articulated composite, with different sorts of constituents playing different roles in the composite, explaining different facts about me.

And now for our question: Why should there not be a certain entity which, like everything else, just *is* a certain nature, but which, unlike most or all other entities, is nothing more than that – is not a composite? Such an entity will not be made out of matter. Nor will it have any accidents. It will be just a certain something-as-such, a certain what-it-is-as-such. That would be an extraordinary entity. We would know next to nothing about what it would be like to be such an entity. But there seem to be no ontological difficulties in the proposal that there is such an entity. Of course there will be a variety of things that such an entity is not, and there will be a variety of relations between that entity and others. But there seems no reason to think that these facts imply that the entity is, after all, a composite of constituents.

In the *respondeo* of the third article of question 3 of Part I of his *Summa theologiae*, Aquinas gives a lucid exposition of the points I have been making. The *respondeo* in this case is a bit longer than most. Nonetheless it is worth having before us in its entirety:

God is the same as His essence or nature. To understand this, it must be noted that in things composed of matter and form, the nature or essence must differ from the *suppositum*, because the essence or nature connotes only what is included in the definition of the species; as, humanity connotes all that is included in the definition of man, for it is by this that man is man, and it is this that humanity signifies, that, namely, whereby man is man. Now individual matter, with all the individualizing accidents, is not included in the definition of the species. For this particular flesh, these bones, this blackness or whiteness, etc., are not included in the definition of a man. Therefore this flesh, these bones, and the accidental qualities distinguishing this particular matter, are not included in [humanity. Nevertheless they are included in] the thing which is a man. Hence the thing which is a man has something more in it than has humanity. Consequently humanity and a man are not wholly identical; but humanity is taken to mean the formal part of a man, because the principles whereby a thing is defined are regarded as the formal constituent in regard to the individualizing matter. On the other hand, in things not composed of matter and form, in which individualization is not due to individual matter – that is to say, to this matter – the very forms being individualized of themselves, – it is necessary the forms themselves should be subsisting *supposita*. Therefore *suppositum* and nature in them are identified. Since God is not composed of matter

and form, He must be His own Godhead, His own Life, and whatever else is thus predicated of Him.¹³

There are interesting connections between that part of the Thomistic perspective that I have been expounding, and some of the things Mann says. It is Aquinas' view that humanity, i.e., human nature, has as its instances the various particularized human natures to be found in reality – Socrates' nature, Plato's nature, etc. Not human beings, but human natures, are the instances of humanity – each human being including in its composite a human nature but always more than that as well. But what, then, about the property of *being a human being*? What does this have as its instances? The instances of this property will be human beings. But obviously human beings are also the entities that exemplify this property. In the case of such “individuating” properties as this, then, exemplification and instance coincide – rather than for those properties that Mann calls “rich.”

We are ready to look at the second of the three theistic identity claims. The first, that God is not distinct from God's essence, has proved to be non-problematic when considered within the medieval frame of thought; perplexities arise instead for certain of those entities not identical with their essences. But what about the claim that God's existence is not distinct from God's essence. Isn't God's existence an accident, or an accident-like entity? If so, how can it possibly be identical with God's nature?

Let us be sure that we have in hand the most felicitous way of putting the question here. I think it is not helpful to say that God's essence is to exist – as if what God is as such were just a lump or bit of existence. I think it is only slightly better to say that God's essence is identical with God's existence. The most felicitous way to put the claim, in my judgment, is the way Aquinas puts it in the first section of chapter 22 of *Summa contra Gentiles*: God's “essence or quiddity is not something other than his being.” In other words, God's existence is not something distinct from God's nature. We have seen that God is a something-as-such,

¹³ Jan Aertsen called my attention to the fact that there are some words in Thomas' Latin text for which the equivalents are missing in the Dominican translation that I have been using (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1947). I have inserted them in brackets. With the passage quoted, compare *Summa contra Gentiles*, Book One, Chapter 21, section 2: “There must be some composition in every being that is not its essence or quiddity. Since, indeed, each thing possesses its own essence, if there were nothing in a thing outside its essence all that the thing is would be its essence, which would mean that the thing is its essence. But, if some thing were not its essence, there should be something in it outside its essence. Thus, there must be composition in it. Hence it is that the essence in composite things is signified as a part, for example humanity in man. Now, it has been shown that there is no composition in God. God is, therefore, His essence.”

a certain what-it-is-as-such. The question before us now is whether God's existence is distinct from what God is as such.

If God existed contingently, then God's existence would be distinct from God's essence – it would not belong to what God is as such. But of course Aquinas holds that God does not exist contingently. Elucidating the point here is a bit tricky. For if we say that something belongs necessarily to some entity X just in case X has it in all possible worlds in which X exists, then everything that exists has its existence necessarily. But whatever difficulties there may be in elucidation or articulation, let us on this occasion agree that it is right to say that if an entity exists contingently, then its existence is distinct from what it is as such. Aquinas himself tries to articulate the point in terms of causation, or accounting for. If a thing exists contingently, then one cannot account for its existence just by referring to its essence; whereas, for example, to account for why a horse is an animal, one just points to its nature.

So what about entities that exist necessarily? Is their existence distinct from or identical with their essence? Perhaps for some it is distinct. For it may be that for certain necessarily existing entities, there is something external to them that accounts for why they exist. Aquinas was of the conviction that God accounts for the existence not only of contingently existing entities but of all necessarily existing entities distinct from God. To account for why they exist, we have to appeal to God – whereas appealing to them does nothing whatever to account for why God exists. Articulating the concept of account/explanation/cause that is operative here is a challenging intellectual task.¹⁴ But suppose it can be done. Then it seems right to say that whether or not some entity X exists necessarily, if to account for its existence one has to refer to something other than its own nature, its existence is distinct from its nature – does not belong to what it is as such. Aquinas says that “that thing, whose existence differs from its essence, must have its existence caused by another.”¹⁵ And clearly he intends to affirm the converse as well. It was the uniform conviction of the medievals that there is nothing other than God's nature that accounts for why God exists. Hence God's existence is not distinct from God's essence – as also, for example, Bucephalus' equinity is not distinct from Bucephalus' essence.

¹⁴ See Chris Menzel, “Theism, Platonism, and the Metaphysics of Mathematics,” *Faith and Philosophy* 4 (1987): 365–82.

¹⁵ *Summa Theologiae* 1, 3, 4 *resp.*

Aquinas was of the view that, for every non-divine nature, what belongs to the nature is not existence but *potentiality for existing*. What belongs to what I am as such is not existence but being capable of existing. My existence is the realization, the actualization, of this potential. Thus for non-divine entities, their essence and their existence stand in a potentiality/actualization relation to each other. "Existence must be compared to essence, if the latter is a distinct reality," says Aquinas, "as actuality to potentiality" (ibid.). What makes God different from everything else is that it is not *potentiality for existing* that belongs to what God is as such, but *existing*. There seems, then, to be nothing ontologically problematic in the second of the theistic identity claims, the claim that God's existence is not distinct from God's essence, when that claim is considered within the framework of the constituent ontology characteristic of the medievals. The principal problem in this area will be to explain how, for an entity that exists necessarily, there can yet be something that accounts for its existence.

The last of the theistic identity claims that we are considering is that God has no properties distinct from God's essence. Perhaps the best way to begin reflecting on this is to consider some necessary entity other than God – some number, say. So consider the number 9. The number 9 stands to me in the relation of just having been mentioned by me; we would conclude, in contemporary ontology, that it has the relational property of *having been mentioned by me*. We all feel, however, that this property is extrinsic to the number 9, in contrast, say, to the property of being odd, which is intrinsic to it. Though I think we all have some grasp of this extrinsic/intrinsic distinction, no one, to the best of my knowledge, has yet succeeded in articulating it. It's not the same as the contingent/necessary distinction. For instance, take the two properties of *having believed that God is simple*, and *having been mentioned by me*. Aquinas possesses both of these properties. Clearly the former is intrinsic to him, the latter, extrinsic. Yet both are contingent properties of him.

Now it seems plausible to think that all the intrinsic properties of the number 9 are essential to it. It even seems plausible to think that they all belong to what the number 9 is as such, i.e., to the nature of 9. So I think there is also nothing especially problematic in the third identity claim, that none of God's properties is distinct from God's nature. Admittedly Aquinas would not have made the point in the way I just made it, in terms of a distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic properties of a thing. He would have denied that what I have called extrinsic properties are truly properties. Whatever I do when I assertively utter of something, "was

referred to by me," Aquinas would not have described that as predicating a property of it. If he had conceded that they are extrinsic properties, he would have faced the question: In what are their property instances present? He would have been extremely reluctant to view those as constituents of that entity that purportedly possesses the extrinsic properties. (Furthermore, he would probably have thought it misleading to speak of anything other than the nature of the thing as *intrinsic* to it.)

The task I set myself in this essay has been completed. I wanted to show that the three theistic identity claims, which to many of us who do ontology in the twentieth century seem so baffling, are, when approached within the ontological framework of the medievals, not at all baffling. The root of the difference, I have suggested, is that whereas the medievals worked within the style of constituent ontology, we typically work within the style of relation ontology and as part of this difference we work with a different view of essence. Of course not every constituent ontology will render the theistic identity claims non-problematic. The great exception to my generalization about the style of twentieth-century ontology is Gustav Bergmann. Bergmann worked relentlessly in the style of constituent ontology.¹⁶ His way of developing constituent ontology was such, however, that he would probably find the theistic identity claims as baffling as do the rest of us. So my point has not been that working in the style of constituent ontology automatically makes the theistic identity claims non-problematic, but rather that working in the style of relation ontology automatically makes them problematic.

According to the dominant style of twentieth-century ontology, the essence of an entity is something to which it bears a certain relation – the relation of necessarily exemplifying it. Likewise a contingent property of an entity is something to which it bears a relation, the relation of contingently exemplifying it. And if we acknowledge property instances, these too are in relation: the property instances of those properties that some entity exemplifies are *present in* that entity. The pattern is clear: twentieth-century ontology is relentlessly relational in its style. We don't think of entities as being composites of constituents but as standing in multiple relationships with other entities. And naturally God stands in relationships too. A medieval looking at our ontology would find acknowledgment of essence just missing. We talk about the properties of things; and some of those properties we call the *essence* of the thing. But nowhere do we give ontological acknowledgment to what an entity is *as such*. What we call the essence of

¹⁶ See my "Bergmann's Constituent Ontology," *Noûs* 9 (1970): 109–34.

an entity would by a medieval be regarded as something whose instance is a non-contingent accident of the entity.

It may be added that a characteristic feature of our contemporary way of practicing relation ontology that also plays a role in the discussions over simplicity is a clear-eyed denial of the Platonic thesis that properties are ideal examples of themselves – that justice is ideally just entity, etc. We hold that, in general, 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.

Shortly after noticing the difference of ontological style between us and the medievals, however, the thought comes to mind that the twentieth-century ontologist actually has no difficulty at all with the doctrine of divine simplicity. True, he finds the three theistic identity claims to be baffling, if not incoherent. But these three claims emerged from the attempt of the medieval philosophers to articulate the doctrine of divine simplicity. They are not to be identified with the doctrine itself. The relation ontologist doesn't think of things as composites. In a way, then, he thinks of everything as simple. If one goes about the ontological enterprise trying to discern the constituents that each sort of thing must be acknowledged as having, then the claim that there is something with no constituents comes as an extraordinary limiting case to one's whole style of thinking. One can see why a theologian who is a constituent ontologist would feel compelled to lead off with this claim in his reflections on the nature of God. But if one's fundamental ontological model is that of entities standing in relation rather than of entities composed of constituents – well then, as it were, everything is simple, nothing is a composite. The doctrine of divine simplicity fits even more smoothly into the contemporary style of ontology than into the medieval. In the medieval style, simplicity is a limiting case – albeit, an intelligible one. In the contemporary style, simplicity is the general case.

Unfortunately, victory in the debate is not to be won so easily. For though the medievals deduced a great many of God's attributes from God's simplicity, they deduced that in turn from something else even more fundamental; namely, from God's self-sufficiency and sovereignty. As I read the history of medieval philosophy and theology, the medievals were ineluctably gripped by the Plotinian vision of reality as requiring something that is the unconditioned condition of everything not identical with itself; this they identified with God. Says Plotinus: "If there were nothing outside all alliance and compromise, nothing authentically one, there would be no Source. Untouched by multiplicity, it will be wholly

self-sufficing, an absolute First, whereas any not-first demands its earlier, and any non-simplex needs the simplicities within itself as the very foundations of its composite existence.”¹⁷ Anyone who is gripped by these convictions and arguments would see our twentieth-century claim, that God has an essence – i.e., that God stands in the relation of exemplification to an essence – as an obvious violation of God’s self-sufficiency. Thus in my judgment Plantinga is absolutely right in concluding that the fundamental issue facing us in our reflections – us, who think in the style of relation ontology – is whether God has a nature. And he is quite right in suggesting that in reflecting on this we will find ourselves dealing with a fundamental conflict of intuitions.

I hope to have shown, however, that that was *not* the fundamental perplexity facing the medievals. For them, as I have already suggested, the fundamental perplexities were twofold. The doctrine that God has no properties distinct from God’s essence seems, on the face of it, incompatible with some of the things that Christians hold about God, e.g., that God has free choice. And, secondly, the medievals found it difficult to devise a theory of predication that would adequately account for the multiplicity of distinct things that we find ourselves required to affirm of this simple being that is God. We say of God that God is wise, and that God is good, and that God is powerful. In speaking thus, we are not simply repeating ourselves. The general strategy of the medievals was clear: to interpret these different predications as expressing different “cognitive fixes” on God. What they could not say, however, was that the difference between these different cognitive fixes on God is grounded in some difference within God’s essence or God’s accidents; for that, of course, would introduce composition. But neither were they willing to give up the conviction that these predicates do indeed express some sort of cognitive fix on God. Their recourse was to say that our predications concerning God express either determinate negations concerning God, or refer to some relation of God to entities other than God. But working this out in detail proved difficult, and proposed solutions to the difficulties, almost always controversial.

Plotinus and Kant, wrestling with the same issues, gave up on the attempt to offer a cognitive construal of predications concerning God. We are, they said, to select and choose among ways of thinking and speaking of God by reference to some non-cognitive purpose. For Kant,

¹⁷ Fifth Ennead IV, 1. I use the version of the *Enneads* translated by Stephen MacKenna (Burdett, NY: Larson Publications, 1992).

the relevant purpose was the moral life: it is conducive to the moral life to think of the transcendent as if it were a God related to us as a father. For Plotinus, the relevant purpose was the mystical vision: to think of the One as existing, as one, etc., is more conducive to the mystical vision than to think of it as not thus:

when we speak of this First as Cause, we are affirming something happening not to it but to us, the fact that we take from this Self-enclosed: strictly we should put neither a This nor a That to it; we hover, as it were, about it, seeking the statement of an experience of our own, sometimes nearing this Reality, sometimes baffled by the enigma in which it dwells...

Our way then takes us beyond knowing; there may be no wandering from unity; knowing and knowable must all be set aside; every object of thought, even the highest, we must pass by, for all that is good is later than This and derives from This as from the sun all the light of the day.

"Not to be told; not to be written": in our writing and telling we are but urging towards it: out of discussion we call to vision: to those desiring to see, we point the path; our teaching is of the road and the travelling; the seeing must be the very act of one that has made this choice.¹⁸

None of the medieval school theologians was willing to follow this non-cognitive strategy; only some of the mystics were willing to do so. Hence the perplexities.

It would require another paper to canvas and appraise the strategies that the medievals adopted in their struggle to explain how it can be that we can make a multiplicity of distinct true predications concerning the simple God. But I suggest that if we grant them their ontological style, the *constituent* style, then the place to engage them is not on the theistic identity claims as such. Those prove to be non-problematic. The place to engage them, in the first place, is on the tenability in general of constituent ontology. The place to engage them, in the second place, is on the general question of whether it is possible, while holding that God is simple, to develop a theory of predication that adequately accounts for the multiplicity of distinct things Christians wish to say about God. And the place to engage them, thirdly, is in their attempt to show that the doctrine of simplicity does not contradict other fundamental doctrines. As part of this third engagement, we shall want to look closely at their attempt to find something in the simple God and its relationships to other things that can be called knowledge, something else to be called love, something else to be called creating, something else to be called

¹⁸ Sixth Ennead IX, 3–4.

revealing, something else to be called redeeming, etc. We shall want to ask whether what they identify as knowledge, love, creation, revelation, redemption, etc., in the simple self-sufficient God, can be viewed as what the theist is speaking of when she says that God knows and loves what God has created, that God reveals to human beings God's will, and that God is working for the redemption of the cosmos. I have my doubts. But that, too, is another tale.¹⁹

¹⁹ I discuss some of the issues in "Suffering love," chapter 9 in the present volume.

Alston on Aquinas on theological predication

In the 1980s, William Alston published a number of important papers in which he argued that it is possible to affirm something true of God by speaking literally.¹

The topic was not one that just happened to pique his curiosity. What drew his attention to the topic, and made it important, was the fact that, as he put it in the earliest of the articles, “the impossibility of literal talk about God has become almost an article of faith for theology in this century.”²

I share Alston’s reason for regarding the issue as important. But I have a more specific interest as well. In my *Divine Discourse* I claimed that it is philosophically tenable to hold that it is literally true of God that God speaks – commands, asserts, asks, promises, and the like. What I had in mind by “speaking” was the performance of illocutionary acts.³ Though I myself see nothing impossible in God’s performing locutionary acts, nonetheless the traditional claim or assumption that God cannot literally speak very much depended on not having available J. L. Austin’s distinction between locutionary and illocutionary acts; the traditional argument, that since God has no body, God cannot literally speak, does not work if it is illocutionary acts that one has in mind. What I did not do is mount a more general argument to the effect that one can predicate of God what is true of God by speaking literally. Thus I have a vested interest in the cogency of Alston’s argumentation.

Alston did not content himself with easy victory in these articles. He did not content himself with observing that even the most hardened

¹ I have in mind “Irreducible Metaphors in Theology,” “Can We Speak Literally of God?,” and “Functionalism and Theological Language.” These can now be found in the collection of Alston’s articles, *Divine Nature and Human Language: Essays in Philosophical Theology* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989). An important paper on a closely related topic, “Referring to God,” is also to be found in this collection.

² Quoted from William P. Alston, “Irreducible Metaphors in Theology,” in *Divine Nature*, 17.

³ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse* (Cambridge University Press, 1995).

opponents of literal speech about God must concede that one can affirm something true of God by the literal use of such negative or disjunctive predicates as “is not a toucan” or “is either a toucan or not a toucan.” Nor did he content himself with observing that what have come to be called “Cambridge predicates” must be true of God – for example, “is said by many theologians to be insusceptible of having predicates true of him when they are used literally.” It was what he called “intrinsic” predicates that Alston had his eye on – predicates that, as he put it, “tell us something” about the nature or operations of the subject.

Apart from observing that some of those who insist, in their theory, that such speech is impossible, nonetheless take its possibility for granted in their practice, Alston’s argument in these articles came in two parts. He offered an account of metaphor, according to which a condition of saying something true about some entity by way of speaking metaphorically about it is that it be possible to say something true about that entity by speaking literally about it; and he argued that there is good reason to think there is sufficient similarity between God’s actions and states of self, and our actions and states of self, for certain predicates to be literally true of both. I judge both parts of Alston’s argument to be conclusive.⁴

In spite of the cogency of his argumentation, however, Alston’s articles appear to have had little influence on those whom he was addressing, namely, the theological community. Why is that? Well, for one thing, most theologians don’t pay much attention to what contemporary analytic philosophers are saying, even if the latter are speaking directly to theological issues and to claims made by theologians. But I think there is another reason as well. Alston addresses the conclusion of the theologians, namely, that literal speech about God is impossible, but not the lines of thought that led them to this conclusion. He explicitly announces that he will not be doing the latter.⁵ It seems evident to me that, in general, human beings who find themselves in situations of this sort will often stick with what they have believed all along – believed for what

⁴ At one point, Alston makes the argument more difficult for himself than it need be by affirming the thesis that all human basic actions consist in moving some part of one’s body (*Divine Nature*, 55ff.). This seems to me not correct. For example, this morning I have been thinking about Alston’s case for literal speech about God because I decided to do so. My thinking about the topic is a basic action; I did not perform it by performing some other action. And my thinking about Alston’s case does not consist of moving some part of my body.

⁵ In “Can We Speak Literally of God?” he says, “In my opinion, all these arguments are radically insufficient to support the sweeping denial that *any* intrinsic predicate can be literally true of God. But this is not the place to go into that” (*Divine Nature*, 41, his emphasis).

were supposedly good reasons – and either ignore arguments against their view or live with cognitive dissonance.

In the course of his articles, Alston identifies three major lines of thought that have led theologians to the conclusion he is contesting. Some regard the conclusion as an implication of their view that God is not *a* being but the *ground* of all beings; some regard it as an implication of their view that God is an ontologically simple being; and some regard it as an implication of their view that God is transcendent, “wholly other.” I myself regard this latter claim as coming in two forms; or more precisely, I regard the language of transcendence and otherness as regularly used to express two quite different claims. Some theologians regard Scripture as teaching that God is transcendent, and hold that it is an implication of this Scriptural teaching that none of our predicates is true of God when used literally; others hold the philosophical thesis that God, being outside of time, transcends the bounds of literal use of concepts. Behind the first, the second, and the fourth of these lines of thought there is a philosophical figure who is generally regarded as having given to that line of thought its classic formulation – Plotinus, Aquinas, or Kant, respectively.

One way to supplement Alston’s argumentation, thus making it more likely that his goal will be achieved of disabusing theologians of the view that nothing true can be said of God when using intrinsic predicates literally, would be to contest the claims that God lacks individuality, that God is simple, and that God is outside of time. Another way to go would be to concede these claims for the purpose of the argument and then go on to argue that it does not follow that nothing true can be said of God when speaking literally. No doubt it would be especially effective in persuading theologians of this last point if one could show that not even their great patron philosophers – Plotinus, Aquinas, and Kant – held that nothing true can be said of God when using intrinsic predicates literally.

This seems to me in fact to be the case. Plotinus, though he certainly denied that *The Supreme*, as he sometimes called it, is an entity, nonetheless did not hold that nothing true can be said of it when using intrinsic predicates literally. He did hold this thesis, so far as I can tell, for one-term predicates; but most definitely he did not hold it for multi-term predicates. For example, he held it to be true of The Supreme that it was the ultimate ground of everything other than itself, ultimately accounting for the existence and character of all else. So too Aquinas explicitly says that when one predicates of God the intrinsic predicates “good” and “powerful” and speaks literally, one affirms of God what is true of God. And Kant held that when one abstracts from our ordinary concept of

causation its temporal component, retaining just the idea of a ground, then one has a concept that is literally true of God. In short, it turns out that our contemporary theologians, in denying the possibility of literally true intrinsic predications concerning God, are departing from the thought of their great patron figures from the philosophical tradition. And more generally: there are very few important figures from the philosophical and theological traditions whom they can summon in support of their position – pseudo-Dionysius perhaps, though even that is debatable.

In what follows I propose to elaborate and defend the claim I have just made concerning Aquinas. Full support, of the sort I have just indicated, of Alston's program would require a defense of my claim concerning each of the three classic figures; but that's impossible in a single essay. My reason for settling on Aquinas is that, in 1993, Alston published a full article in which he offers his interpretation of Aquinas on predications concerning God: "Aquinas on Theological Predication: A Look Backward and a Look Forward" (ATP).⁶ I will be engaging that article.

Before I turn to what Alston says in this article, let me quote a passage from an earlier article in which he helpfully distinguishes "various ways in which creaturely terms can be used in speaking of God." He distinguishes six such ways:

1. Straight univocity. Ordinary terms are used in the same ordinary senses of God and human beings.
2. Modified univocity. Meanings can be defined or otherwise established such that terms can be used with those meanings of both God and human beings.
3. Special literal meanings. Terms can be given, or otherwise take on, special technical senses in which they apply to God.
4. Analogy. Terms for creatures can be given analogical extensions so as to be applicable to God.
5. Metaphor. Terms that apply literally to creatures can be metaphorically applied to God.
6. Symbol. Ditto for "symbol," in one or another meaning of that term.⁷

⁶ In Eleonore Stump, ed., *Reasoned Faith: Essays in Honor of Norman Kretzmann* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 145–78. References to this article are given parenthetically in the text.

⁷ "Functionalism and Theological Language," in *Divine Nature*, 65.

Immediately after presenting this six-fold typology, Alston says that “the most radical partisans of otherness, from Dionysius through Aquinas to Tillich, plump for something in the (4) to (6) range and explicitly reject (1). The possibility of (3) has been almost wholly ignored, and (2) has not fared much better.” Alston agrees that it is Aquinas’ view that we can speak truly of God using terms in their literal sense; his argument is that Aquinas sees himself as having to pay the price, for that position, of denying “straight univocity.” My argument will be that Aquinas affirms both straight univocity and the possibility of saying of God what is literally true of him – while also affirming analogy.

ALSTON’S INTERPRETATION OF AQUINAS

Let us get Alston’s interpretation before us. A great many commentators give the impression of doing their best to put out of mind Aquinas’ answer to his question in Article 3 of Question 13, Part I of *Summa Theologiae*. Alston does not. The question is “whether any term (*nomen*) can be said (*dicatur*) literally (*proprie*) of God?”⁸ Employing the distinction between saying a term literally of some thing and saying it metaphorically of it, Aquinas answers that “not all terms are said metaphorically of God; but some are said literally” (*sed contra*). These are those terms that signify “the perfections that flow from [God] and are to be found in creatures, yet which exist in [God] in an eminent way” (*resp.*). Aquinas cites “being,” “good,” and “living” as examples; these terms, he says, “can be said literally of God” (*ad 1*).

There is no reason in the text to suppose that Aquinas is not using “literal” (*proprie*) strictly and in its literal sense. And given that it is *metaphorice* that he contrasts with *proprie*, our term “literal” is surely the correct translation. In short, it was clearly Aquinas’ view that, when using the terms literally, we can affirm of God what is true of God by predicating of God such perfection terms as “exists,” “good,” and “living.” Here is Alston’s summary of Aquinas’ thought on the matter:

In article 3 [Aquinas] argues that some terms can be used literally [*proprie*] of God, namely, those that do not include in their meaning the imperfect mode in which a perfection is realized in creatures, for example, such terms as “being,” “good,” and “living.” Let’s call these “pure perfection terms.” By contrast, those

⁸ Neither the Dominican nor the Blackfriars’ translation of the *Summa Theologiae* is entirely satisfactory for my purposes, since both misinterpret Aquinas on the very points that I will be discussing. In general, however, I will be following the Dominican translation, on the ground that it is more literal, revising it when I deem that necessary.

terms that do include a creaturely mode in their meaning, for example, "rock" and "lion," can be said of God only metaphorically. (ATP, 147)

In the same *respondeo* (ST I, 13, 3) Aquinas clarifies his claim by means of the distinction between that which is signified by a term, its *res significata*, and the term's mode of signification, its *modus significandi*. It is only "so far as that which is signified is concerned" that some terms "are applied literally (*proprie*) to God." Indeed, such terms are applied "more properly [to God] than to creatures, and are said primarily (*per prius*) of God." With respect to mode of signification, however, there are no terms that can be "literally (*proprie*) said of God; for they [all] have a mode of signification that is relevant to creatures" (*resp.*).

Aquinas assumes familiarity with the distinction between *res significata* and *modus significandi*; he does not explain it. What's meant by the *res significata* of a predicate term is clear enough – or given that many predicate terms have a number of distinct meanings, what's clear enough is what is meant by the *res significata* of a predicate term with a certain meaning. It's the property "signified" by the term with that meaning – that is, the property that one would attribute to something if, speaking literally, one predicated of it the predicate with that meaning. When it is pure perfection terms that we are using, the *res significata* is the perfection designated (signified): goodness, life, existence, and so forth.

What Aquinas has in mind by the *modus significandi* of a term is less clear – though still clear enough for our purposes here. We get the essential information in his remark that "our intellect apprehends these perfections in the mode that they are present in creatures, and thus they are signified by our terms." Take any case of apprehending some predicable entity, any case of having it in mind. Aquinas distinguishes between, on the one hand, the entity apprehended, and, on the other hand, one's way of apprehending it. One's way of apprehending it is determined by the mode in which that predicable is present in creatures – by which Aquinas surely means creatures with which one is familiar. Thus when I am thinking of *power*, one can distinguish between that which I am apprehending, namely, power, and my way of apprehending it, this latter being shaped by the powerful things – the things possessing power – with which I am familiar from my experience. Of course, not only do I apprehend the abstract predicable, power; you do so as well, along with almost all other human beings out of infancy. Hence we can speak not just of my way of apprehending power and your way of apprehending power; we can speak of our way.

Aquinas' thought is that the distinction between the object of our apprehension of some predicable and our way of apprehending it is carried over into, or preserved within, the corresponding predicate term. A predicate term will not only signify a certain predicable; it will also express – “express” is probably the best word here – our way of apprehending that predicable, this latter, to say it once again, being shaped by the instantiations of that predicable familiar to us from our experience. And whatever else may be true of such experiences of ours, this will be true: they will have been experiences of creatures.

The highly schematic character of Aquinas' remark about the *modus significandi* of a term leaves room for the idea to be fleshed out in a number of different ways. Let me quote a passage from one of those earlier articles of Alston in which he draws a distinction that he describes as “reminiscent” of Aquinas' distinction between “the property signified by a term and the mode of signifying.” The general point, he says:

[I]s that the common possession of abstract features is compatible with as great a difference as you like in the way in which these features are realized. A meeting and a train of thought can both be “orderly” even though what it is for the one to be orderly is enormously different from what it is for the other to be orderly... This general point suggests the possibility that the radical otherness of God might manifest itself in the *way* in which common abstract features are realized in the divine being, rather than in the absence of common features. What it is for God to *make something* is radically different from what it is for a human being to make something; but that does not rule out an abstract feature in common, e.g., that *by the exercise of agency something comes into existence*... Many theistic thinkers have moved too quickly from radical otherness to the impossibility of any univocity, neglecting this possibility that the otherness may come from the way in which common features are realized.⁹

In the essay we are engaging, “Aquinas on Theological Predication,” Alston suggests a somewhat different way of articulating Aquinas' thought (ATP, 161–62) on *modus significandi*. For our purposes here, however, there is no point in selecting any one way. What is important is just Aquinas' contention that aspects of the mode in which some “perfection” is manifested in our creaturely experience become ingredients in our way of apprehending that perfection, and thereby also ingredients

⁹ From “Functionalism and Theological Language,” in *Divine Nature*, 66–67 (his emphasis). Alston adds, in a footnote, that “neither Thomas nor the Thomistic tradition has seized this opportunity to locate an area of univocal predication.” What I will be arguing is that Aquinas does what Alston here says he does not do; viz., he uses the distinction between the property signified by a term and the mode of signifying to “locate an area of univocal predication.”

in the mode of signification of a term that signifies that perfection. Thus it is that he says, when distinguishing between terms that can be said literally of God and those that can only be said metaphorically: "Those terms that are said literally of God do not include bodily conditions in that which is signified but only in their mode of signification, whereas those that are said (*dicuntur*) metaphorically of God include bodily conditions in the very thing signified" (*ST* I, 13, 3, *ad* 3). Speaking more elaborately, he says this:

There are some names which signify these perfections flowing from God to creatures in such a way that the imperfect way in which creatures receive the divine perfection is part of the very signification of the name itself, as *stone* signifies a material being; and names of this kind can be applied to (*attribui*) God only in a metaphorical sense. Other names, however, signify these perfections absolutely, without any such mode of participation being part of their signification, as the words *being*, *good*, *living*, and the like and such names can be literally said of (*dicuntur*) God. (*ST* I, 13, 3, *ad* 1)¹⁰

Using Aquinas' conceptuality, I can now formulate my own thesis about the attribution of speech to God as follows: though the predicate "performs illocutionary acts" includes corporeal conditions in its mode of signification, it does not include corporeal conditions in the action signified. To say of God that God speaks (i.e., performs illocutionary acts) is thus quite unlike saying of God that God is a rock – and also quite unlike saying of a forest that it speaks.

Two articles later, in this same question on "The Names of God," Aquinas poses the question "whether terms are said univocally or equivocally of God and creatures" (*ST* I, 13, 5). It is of critical importance to see that this question has not already been answered in what Aquinas has said about the literality of speech about God. When considering whether a term has been used literally or metaphorically, one takes a single instance of its use and poses the question concerning that instance. By contrast, one cannot take a single instance of the use of a term and ask whether the term, in that instance, is being used univocally or equivocally. That makes no sense. It is only with reference to two or more uses of a term that one can raise the issue of univocity or equivocation. The issue is whether the term, in these two or more uses, is being used to designate

¹⁰ Also see Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles* I, 30, 3: "And so with reference to the mode of signification no name is fittingly applied to God; this is done only with reference to that which the name has been imposed to signify. Such names, therefore, as Dionysius teaches, can be both affirmed and denied of God. They can be affirmed because of the meaning of the name; they can be denied because of the mode of signification."

the same property or different properties. If the same, then it is being used univocally; if not, then it is being used equivocally.

So consider two instances of the use of a single term. One might be using it literally in each instance while nonetheless using it equivocally as between the two; that would be the case if the term had two established senses, and in one instance one was using it literally in one of those senses and in the other instance one was using it literally in the other of those two established senses. Or suppose one is using it metaphorically in the two instances; one might nonetheless be using it to say the same thing, in which case one would be using it univocally; alternatively, one might be using it to say different things, in which case one would be using it equivocally as between the two instances. Or yet again, one might be using the term literally in one instance and metaphorically in the other, in which case, as between the two, one would be using it equivocally. And so forth. Alston sees all of this clearly in his discussion.

So back to Aquinas' question, whether terms are said univocally or equivocally of God and creatures: Aquinas' answer is that "it is impossible to predicate (*praedicare*) anything univocally of God and creatures." The predication will always be equivocal. And this is always Aquinas' answer to this question. As Alston says, "Aquinas always takes the first order of business [when dealing with this issue] to be to show that terms are not, and cannot be, used univocally of God and creatures" (ATP, 148).

Alston goes on to make a point that will be of critical importance for my subsequent discussion. "All Aquinas's reasons for this, at least all those that make explicit the differences between God and creatures that prevent univocity, stem from one basic divine attribute – simplicity" (ATP, 148). This is correct; Aquinas never fails to make clear, when discussing this issue, that the doctrine of divine simplicity is what forces him to deny univocity. Alston remarks that "twentieth-century philosophers, in arguing against univocity, are more likely to cite divine immateriality or atemporality, and theologians are more likely to make unspecific appeals to 'otherness' or to God's not counting as 'a being.'" For Aquinas, on the other hand, "it is simplicity that makes all the difference" (ATP, 148).

Here is one passage in which Aquinas makes the point, from the *sed contra* of I, 13, 5 of *Summa Theologiae*: "That which is predicated (*praedicatur*) of several things according to the same term, but not according to the same *ratio*, is predicated of them equivocally. But no term applies (*convenit*) to God with that *ratio* according to which it is said (*dicitur*) of a creature." Using "is wise" as an example, Aquinas then offers his

reason for this claim: "For wisdom in creatures is a quality, though not in God."

Everyone reading this essay will know that Aquinas did not content himself with saying that when we predicate the same term of God and of creatures, and we speak truly in both cases, our terms are always "said equivocally of God and creatures." The equivocation is not *mere* equivocation. Though different things are being said, there's a relation between the things said, making the predications *analogous*. Equivocal, yes; but the equivocation of analogy.

Cajetan, in *The Analogy of Names* (1498), distinguished three types of analogy – inequality, attribution, and proportionality – and argued that Aquinas, in his teaching concerning predications of God, had in mind the analogy of proportionality (i.e., of relationality). Cajetan's interpretation became canonical among followers of Aquinas, especially among neo-Thomists of the twentieth century. Alston argues that there is no indication whatsoever in the Thomistic texts that Aquinas had the analogy of proportionality in mind; everything indicates that he was thinking in terms of the analogy of attribution. Alston's argument seems to me decisive. For my purposes here, however, it makes no difference one way or the other. What is important is just Aquinas' consistent teaching that, given God's ontological simplicity and our ontological complexity, terms are never said univocally of God and creatures but at best analogically.

THE PUZZLE POSED BY ALSTON'S INTERPRETATION OF AQUINAS

Alston perceives with greater clarity than any other interpreter I know of that Aquinas now appears to have a serious problem on his hands. Pure perfection terms are literally true of God. The *res significata* of those pure perfection terms is just those perfections themselves, not any particular mode of participation in the perfection. Hence such terms can be applied literally to God, even though our creaturely mode of participation in those perfections is different from God's mode of participation. Yet as between God and creatures, these perfection terms, like all others, are predicated at best analogically, never univocally.

But if in the two instances, predication of creatures and predication of God, the same perfection is designated by the predicate term, and if both God and we have that perfection (albeit in a different mode), and if the term applies literally to God, how could the term not apply literally

to us as well as to God? But if it does, then the predication is univocal as between us and God. Let me quote Alston:

It appears that the doctrine of an analogical meaning of theological terms has been frozen out; there is no place for it. Instead of analogically related creaturely and divine senses [of the terms we predicate], what we have are creaturely senses all up and down the line, together with the recognition that one aspect of each such sense [i.e., its *modus significandi*] is ineluctably inappropriate for application to the divine... On Aquinas's own showing there is no room for an analogy of meaning for creaturely and divine applications of terms. (ATP, 165)

WHY ALSTON'S SOLUTION OF THE PUZZLE DOES NOT WORK

Alston remarks that "at one point in [his] decades-long reflection on this topic, [he] thought that this was the last word" (ATP, 165). He now thinks he has a solution to the problem. His solution is to back away from interpreting Aquinas as holding that God and we participate in the same perfection; the difference in our modes of participation makes for a difference in the perfections (forms). In Alston's words, "both difference of form and difference of mode of being of the form are derived from the same basic divine-creature difference: the simplicity of God. There can be no exact reproduction of form just because creatures have in a divided way what is found in God in an absolutely simple way, without any real distinction between the perfections" (ATP, 167). Hence in predicating a pure perfection term of God and of creatures, we are not predicating the same *res significata* after all.

Alston cites two passages in favor of this interpretation, one from *Summa Theologiae* and one from *Summa contra Gentiles*. Let me say something about the latter passage a bit later, and consider the former here. Here is the passage, in the rather more literal translation of the Dominicans than in the Blackfriars' translation that Alston uses:

God prepossesses in Himself all the perfections of creatures, being Himself simply and universally perfect. Hence every creature represents Him, and is like Him so far as it possesses some perfection; yet it represents Him not as something of the same species or genus, but as the excelling principle of whose form the effects fall short, although they derive some kind of likeness thereto. (*ST I*, 13, 2, *resp.*)

Though the passage is compatible with Alston's interpretation, it strikes me as not supporting it. Read all by itself, it can be interpreted as saying that the perfections of creatures are not identical with the perfections

of God but only similar to them; they “fall short” of God’s perfections. But let us not forget that over and over in these articles of Question 13, Aquinas cites as the relevant difference between us and God that God participates in perfections as a simple being whereas we participate in perfections as complex beings. So when Aquinas speaks of “the effects [falling] short,” what effect does he have in mind – the perfection itself that is to be found in us, or our mode of participation in the shared perfection? The passage all by itself seems to me ambiguous on the matter (in Latin, that is). But if so, it cannot be used as evidence for Alston’s point.¹¹

Apart from the fact that neither this passage nor, as we shall see shortly, the other that Alston cites, supports his interpretation, there are a number of textual and systematic reasons for not embracing his solution. Recall that in the very next article after the one from which Alston has just quoted, Aquinas, employing his distinction between the *res significata* of terms and their *modus significandi*, says that, as regards the former, perfection terms apply literally (*proprie*) to God. So if Alston’s present view were correct, then, given that predication is analogous as between God and us, and given Aquinas’ clear statement that perfection terms are literally true of God, it would follow that perfection terms are only metaphorically true of us. I think there are at least three good reasons for not interpreting Aquinas as holding this.

First, Aquinas nowhere *says* that perfection terms apply only metaphorically to us, not literally. Admittedly it is also true, so far as I know, that he nowhere says that they do apply to us literally. But if you and I were writing, we wouldn’t bother to make a point of that; it would seem too obvious. Only if we held that no such terms apply to us literally would we even raise the issue of whether they apply to us literally or metaphorically. So, too, for Aquinas. The only question in the region he thinks worth discussing is whether any terms apply to God literally.

Second, this interpretation conflicts with the way Aquinas employs the distinction between the *res significata* and the *modus significandi* of terms. We quoted him as saying, in *Summa Theologiae* I, 13, 3, *ad* 1, that certain terms signify “perfections absolutely, without any [creaturely] mode of participation being part of their signification.” Given the looming presence of the doctrine of divine simplicity in these articles, he surely means to include, under the category, “creaturely mode of participation,”

¹¹ Herbert McCabe, in the Blackfriars’ translation that Alston is using, pretty much eliminates the ambiguity; he translates it Alston’s way: “But a creature is not like to God as it is like to another member of its species or genus, but resembles him as an effect may in some way resemble a transcendent cause although failing to reproduce perfectly the form of the cause.”

the fact that creatures participate in perfections as complex beings rather than simple. Aquinas' teaching is that the *res significata* of pure perfection terms is stripped entirely clean of all creaturely modes of signification, including the fact that we participate in perfections as complex beings.

And third, an implication of this interpretation is a very non-Thomistic doctrine concerning the learning of language. Aquinas' constant doctrine is that we learn the meaning of our terms from their application to creatures; having learned their meanings, we then extrapolate to using them in discourse about God. So if Alston's interpretation were correct, we would first learn the metaphorical use of "good," "exists," "is alive," etc., since it is in their metaphorical use that they are true of creatures; and we would then extrapolate from that to using the term literally in speaking of God. Now it may be that you and I do sometimes first learn a metaphorical use of a term and then later learn its literal use – though, so far as I can see, before learning the literal use we would not realize that we had all along been using it metaphorically (unless someone explicitly told us that). But this will be the case when the term in both its metaphorical and its literal use applies to creatures. I fail to see how we human beings could first learn a metaphorical use of these perfection terms and then, by extrapolation, get a hang on how to use them in speaking literally about God.

In addition to reasons for not interpreting Aquinas as holding that perfection terms apply only metaphorically to us, I think there are also reasons for doubting the ontology that Alston now attributes to Aquinas; namely, that perfections are not the same in God and in us, the difference in mode of participation causing a lack of identity in the object of participation. Here, too, I have three difficulties, the first, once again, being Aquinas' silence on the matter. Or not to pre-judge the case against Alston, his *relative* silence – his allusiveness. If this were Aquinas' position, one would expect him to call attention to it. At best he alludes to it in the passages Alston cites.

But second, the proposed ontology remains obscure, to say the least. How are we to understand this purported phenomenon, that a difference in one's mode of participation in a perfection makes a difference in the perfection in which one participates? Presumably not every difference in mode of participation makes such a difference. What makes for the difference between the cases in which it does make a difference and those in which it does not? And why exactly does it make a difference, in the cases in which it does?

And third, one has to weigh up against those two rather allusive passages that Alston cites in favor of his new interpretation, all those other passages that Alston himself cites when leading up to his statement of the problem that Aquinas has apparently created for himself. These latter passages seem to me much more clear in their affirmation that the perfection is identical, than are the passages Alston now cites, in their affirmation that the perfections are not identical. Here is one of those clearer passages. I will quote it in the translation that Alston was using, that of the Blackfriars:

All the perfections of all things are in God... This may be seen from two considerations. First, because whatever perfection exists in an effect must be found in the producing cause: either in the same formality... or in a more eminent degree... Since therefore God is the first producing cause of things, the perfections of all things must pre-exist in God in a more eminent way... Second... God is being itself, of itself subsistent. Consequently, He must contain within Himself the whole perfection of being... Now all the perfections of all things pertain to the perfection of being: for things are perfect precisely so far as they have being after some fashion. It follows therefore that the perfection of no thing is wanting to God. (*ST*I, 4, 2, *resp.*)

"All the perfections of all things are in God." This seems to me as clear a statement as one could want of the view that the perfections in God and in us are the same.

A BETTER SOLUTION

If the problem that Alston so acutely identifies is not to be solved his way, how then is it to be solved? Well, Alston assumes, along with all other interpreters I am familiar with, that when Aquinas is talking about analogous predications of a term, he means to say that the *res significata* in the one instance is analogous to, but not identical with, the *res significata* in the other instance. That is to say, Alston and the other commentators assume that the property predicated in the one case is not identical with the property predicated in the other case. In Alston's own words, Aquinas' view is that pure perfection terms "are predicated of God in a sense not exactly the same as that in which they are predicated of creatures but in a sense that is related to the latter" (ATP, 160). I suggest that we give up that assumption. That is not what Aquinas had in mind when he says that predications as between God and creatures are at best analogous. He is not saying that the terms predicated have a different sense. They have a different *mode* of signification, undeniably; but the thing designated (signified) is exactly the same.

Suppose that you and I held Aquinas' ontology. What would we say on this matter of predication? Given our conviction that God and we participate in the same perfections, we would say that in assertively uttering "God is alive," "God is good," "God is powerful," and the like, the predicate terms "alive," "good," and "powerful" have exactly the same sense that they do when we assertively utter, about some human being, "he is alive," "he is good," "he is powerful." The predicate terms designate (signify) the same perfection in both cases. In assertively uttering "God is alive" and assertively uttering "Joe is alive," we are predicating the same "form" of two different things. But given our other conviction, that God "participates" in perfections as a simple being whereas Joe participates in them as a complex being, we would say that we are claiming a different relationship to hold in the two cases – though not entirely different, since in both cases we can describe the subject as "participating in" what is designated by the predicate term. It's our *predicating* of the predicate term to God that is analogous to our predicating it of Joe; the analogy is to be located, not in the sense (meaning) of the predicate term itself but in the copula. This, I submit, is what we would say if we held Aquinas' ontology.

And this is what Aquinas says. Consider, once again, his comment in the *sed contra* of I, 13, 5: "That which is predicated of several things according to the same term, but not according to the same *ratio*, is predicated of them equivocally. But no term applies (*convenit*) to God with that *ratio* according to which it is said (*dicitur*) of a creature." The clue to Aquinas' doctrine of analogical predication lies in taking with full seriousness the reason he proceeds to give for this claim. The reason is that "wisdom in creatures is a quality, though not in God."

In Question 3 of Part I of the *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas had argued for the doctrine of divine simplicity; in God there is no distinction between God and God's essence, between God and God's attributes, between one of God's attributes and another, and so forth. It follows that in predicating "is wise" of God we are claiming a different relation to hold between wisdom and God from that which we claim to hold between wisdom and some human being when we predicate "is wise" of that human being. The "is" in "God is wise" necessarily has a different force, a different *ratio*, from the "is" in "Socrates is wise" – assuming that we are using our words in such a way that in each case what we say is true. But the force (*ratio*) of the copula in the two cases is not completely different and unconnected; the copula is not being used *purely* equivocally. Its force (*ratio*) when used to speak of creatures is *analogical* to its force (*ratio*) when used to speak

of God; in both cases one is claiming some mode of participation in the perfection by the entity referred to.

In short, Aquinas' doctrine of analogy pertains to the predicating, not to what's predicated, to the copula, not to the predicate term. When we say "is wise" of God, the predicate term "wise" is being used literally, as it is when we say "is wise" of some human being; but the copula when used to speak of creatures has a sense that is only analogical to its sense when used to speak of God. Aquinas uses the literal/metaphorical contrast when speaking of predicate terms; he uses the univocal/analogical contrast when speaking of the copula.

It might be replied that this amounts to a radical over-interpretation of Aquinas' brief remark in the *sed contra* of the Fifth Article. But that it was in fact Aquinas' thought, that analogy pertains to the predicating and not to the term predicated, to the copula and not to the predicate term, becomes incontestably clear in the *respondeo* of the article. Let me quote some of what he says:

Univocal predication is impossible between God and creatures. The reason for this is that every effect which is not an adequate result of the power of the efficient cause receives the similitude of the agent not in its full degree, but in a measure that falls short, so that what is divided and multiplied in the effects resides in the agent simply, and in the same manner; as for example the sun by the exercise of its one power produces manifold and various forms in all inferior things. In the same way, ... all perfections existing in creatures divided and multiplied, pre-exist in God unitedly. Thus when some term pertaining to a perfection is said of a creature, it signifies that particular perfection in distinction from others. For example, when the term "wise" is said of a human being, we signify a perfection distinct from the essence of the person, from his powers, his existence, and from all the other things about him. But when we say this term of God, we do not intend to signify something distinct from his essence, or power, or existence ... Hence it is clear that this term "wise" is not said of God and of a human being according to the same *ratio*. The same point holds for other terms. Accordingly, no term is predicated univocally of God and creatures. But also not purely (*pure*) equivocally, as some have said ... Therefore it must be said that terms are said of God and of creatures according to analogy, that is, proportion.

This is Aquinas' argument for holding that our predication of perfection-terms of God is not univocal with our predication of perfection-terms of creatures. His argument for holding that it is nonetheless not *purely* equivocal, but analogical, goes as follows:

Whatever is said of God and creatures is said, according to the relation of a creature to God as its principle and cause, wherein all perfections of things pre-exist excellently. Now this mode of community of idea is a mean between pure

equivocation and simple univocation. For in analogies the idea is not, as it is in univocals, one and the same, yet it is not totally diverse as in equivocals; but a term which is thus used in a multiple sense signifies various proportions to some one thing; thus *healthy* applied to urine signifies the sign of animal health, and applied to medicine signifies the cause of the same health. (*ST I*, 13, 5, *resp.*)

Our English translations conceal Aquinas' thought

That this is Aquinas' thought is concealed from us by our English translations. Consider once again the sentence that I quoted from the *sed contra* of *Summa Theologiae* I, 13, 5: "That which is predicated of several things according to the same term, but not according to the same *ratio*, is predicated of them equivocally. But no term applies (*convenit*) to God with that *ratio* according to which it is said (*dicitur*) of a creature." The Blackfriars' translation (done by Herbert McCabe, O.P.) renders the second sentence (clause) as follows: "but no word when used of God means the same as when it is used of a creature." This is interpretation, not translation. Aquinas does not say that no word *means the same* when used of God as when used of a creature. The Latin is this: "Sed nullum nomen convenit Deo secundum illam rationem, secundum quam dicitur de creatura." Literally, "But no name applies to God according to the same *ratio* according to which it is said of a creature." Aquinas does not say that the term does not mean the same in the two cases; he says that no term *is said of* God and of creatures according to the same *ratio*.

The Dominican translation renders the sentence (clause) this way: "But no name belongs to God in the same sense that it belongs to creatures." It could be argued, I suppose, that this rendering leaves it ambiguous as to whether it is the *name* that has a different sense in the two cases or whether it is the *belonging to* that is different; and this would be a virtue of the translation, since Aquinas' own mode of expression leaves the issue open. But given that we much more naturally speak of different senses of names (words, terms) than of different senses of belonging to, I judge that the English reader will almost inevitably misinterpret what Aquinas is saying.

Again, consider the passage from the *respondeo* of *Summa Theologiae* I, 13, 5, which I translated this way: "Hence it is clear that this term 'wise' is not said of (*dicitur*) God and of a human being according to the same *ratio*. The same point holds for other terms." McCabe, in the Blackfriars' translation, renders the passage as follows: "Hence it is clear that the word 'wise' is not used in the same sense of God and man, and the same is true

of all other words.” But Aquinas does not say that the word is not used in the same sense. He says that the term is not *said of* (*dicitur*) God and creatures according to the same *ratio*.

Consider a third passage, part of the *sed contra* of the same question. McCabe translates it this way: “‘Wisdom’, for example, means a quality when it is used of creatures, but not when it is applied to God. So then it must have a different meaning, for we have here a difference in the genus which is part of the definition.” I have already quoted part of the paragraph in my own translation. Let me now quote the whole passage in a literal translation:

That which is predicated (*praedicatur*) of several things according to the same term, but not according to the same *ratio*, is predicated of them equivocally. But no term applies (*convenit*) to God according to that *ratio* according to which it is said of (*dicitur*) a creature; for wisdom in creatures is a quality, though not in God. Now a different genus changes [the] *ratio*, since it is part of the definition; and the point is the same in [i.e., for] others. Therefore that which is said (*dicitur*) of God and of creatures is said equivocally.

Aquinas does not say that the term “wise” has a different meaning when applied to God and to creatures.

THE ALTERNATIVE INTERPRETATION FURTHER CONFIRMED

I mentioned earlier that Alston cited two passages in support of his claim that Aquinas thinks the perfections in which creatures participate are not identical with those in which God participates – similar to and derived from, but not identical with. Life, existence, goodness, power, and the like, are not the same in us as in God. Let me now quote the second passage he cites in support of his interpretation. It comes from *Summa contra Gentiles* I, 32, 2–3. The first part of the passage, from section 2, runs as follows:

An effect that does not receive a form specifically the same as that through which the agent acts cannot receive according to a univocal predication the name arising from that form ... Now, the forms of the things God has made do not measure up to a specific likeness of the divine power: for the things that God has made receive in a divided and particular way that which in Him is found in a simple and universal way. It is evident, then, that nothing can be said univocally of God and other things.

Notice that the way forms in things are said not to “measure up to” forms in God is just that God receives forms in a simple way and we receive forms in a divided way. It’s for that reason that nothing can be said

univocally of God and us. The saying-of, the predicating-of, is what is not univocal; the terms predicated designate the same perfection in both cases.

The passage from section 3 makes the same point:

If, furthermore, an effect should measure up to the species of its cause, it will not receive the univocal predication of the name unless it receives the same form according to the same mode of being. For the form of the house that is in the art of the maker is not univocally the same being in the two locations. Now, even though the rest of things were to receive a form that is absolutely the same as it is in God, yet they do not receive it according to the same mode of being. For as is clear from what we have said, there is nothing in God that is not the divine being itself, which is not the case with other things. Nothing, therefore, can be predicated of God and other things univocally.

The same pure perfection terms apply literally to both God and creatures with respect to their *res significata*. It's the *act of predicating* that is not univocal – or if you prefer, the force of the copula. Of course, if one dissents from Aquinas' doctrine of divine simplicity, as Alston and I both do, then Aquinas' reason for holding that the predicating of terms of God is only analogical to the predicating of terms of creatures falls away.

Those contemporary theologians who hold that no terms apply literally to God have no support for their contention in Aquinas, nor do those slightly more guarded ones who hold that predicate terms that apply to God never have the same sense as those that apply to creatures.

COULD GOD LITERALLY SPEAK?

In conclusion, let me return to my vested interest in these matters. I hold that God speaks – that is, discourses, performs illocutionary acts; and as I indicated earlier, I have argued, in *Divine Discourse*, that it is philosophically tenable to hold that this is literally true of God. If, when speaking literally, one predicates of God that God discourses, one says what is true of God.¹²

In the course of arguing, in the Third Article of Question 13 of Part I of his *Summa Theologiae*, that certain terms which apply literally to

¹² It's clear from the three articles under discussion that Alston and I are in agreement on this; he too has a vested interest in the issue of whether it is literally true that God speaks. In another article collected in *Divine Nature*, "Some Suggestions for Divine Command Theorists," Alston argues that God's speaking should not be understood as including God's promising or covenanting; in chapter 6 of *Divine Discourse* I give reasons for concluding that his argument on this point is not compelling.

creatures also apply literally to God – with respect to their *res significata*, not their *modus significandi* – Aquinas remarked that perfections which flow from God to creatures exist in what he calls “a more eminent” way in God than in creatures. Take the perfection *wisdom*. What he means is that though the *res significata* of the term “wise,” namely, wisdom, is to be found in both God and creatures, the way in which God is wise is eminent compared to the way in which we are wise, indeed, pre-eminent. The difference that is ontologically most fundamental is that, whereas for us wisdom is one among other attributes, God’s wisdom is identical with God. Another difference, though less fundamental ontologically, is that whereas we are always limited in what we know, God is unlimited in knowledge, in wisdom. *Being one among other attributes* and *being limited with respect to what’s known* do not, however, belong to the things signified by our term “wise,” only to its mode of signification.

May it be that similar things are to be said about speech, that is, discourse – the performance of illocutionary acts? Is discourse a perfection that exists eminently in God but only non-eminently, limitedly, in us? And does *being limited in discourse*, though not belonging to the *res significata* of our term “speaks,” nonetheless belong to its *modus significandi*, so that though the term applies literally to both God and creatures with respect to what it signifies, it applies to creatures alone with respect to the way it signifies? What we have seen is that, for Aquinas, this question is different from the question as to whether predicating the term “speaks” of creatures is only analogical to predicating the term of God, not equivocal. But since Alston and I deny that God is ontologically simple, Aquinas’ reason for holding that predication of terms to God is only analogous to predication of terms to us is rendered irrelevant.

I doubt that there is an eminent/non-eminent distinction between God and us with respect to discourse. Eminence with respect to discourse would presumably consist of being capable of performing any appropriately responsible act of discourse whatsoever, and necessarily so; non-eminence would consist of lacking that capacity, or if not lacking it, at least not possessing it necessarily. Now it is clear that you and I are limited in all sorts of ways in our capacity for performing acts of discourse. There are countless truths I cannot assert because, among other considerations, I lack the conceptual repertoire for doing so, and so also for you. And there are countless declarations I cannot make because I lack the standing requisite for doing so, and so also for you; I cannot make the judicial declaration “guilty,” since I am not a judge. But God is also limited in such ways. Though it is my view, contra Alston, that God can

literally promise, nonetheless there are all sorts of promises I can make that God cannot make. I can promise my grandchildren to drive them to the zoo; God cannot promise that. And if there are so-called “essential indexicals,” with the English personal pronoun “I” being among them – as I am inclined to think is the case – then the proposition I assert when I assertively utter, “I am running late for class,” is not one that anyone else, including God, can assertively utter.

Nonetheless, it is the case that God is very different indeed from the sort of speaker that we come across in our experience – thus very different from the sort of person to whom we learn to apply the concept *speaking* and the word “speaks.” The persons to whom we learn to apply that concept and that word are all embodied persons, whereas God has no body. That difference between us does not imply, so I have argued, that it cannot be said literally and truly of God that God speaks – that is, discourses. But it does imply, I freely concede, that application to God of the term “speaks” or “discourses” is for us a highly idiosyncratic application of the term.

I have no objection to using Aquinas’ conceptuality at this point and saying that though *having a body* belongs to the *modus significandi* of our term “speaks,” it does not belong to the *res significata* of the term. Alston’s way of explaining the distinction, in his essay “Functionalism and Theological Language,” seems to me here the best. Let me quote again what he says, changing the example this time from *making* to *speaking*:

The most general idea... is that the common possession of abstract features is compatible with as great a difference as you like in the way in which these features are realized... This general point suggests the possibility that the radical otherness of God might manifest itself in the *way* in which common abstract features are realized in the divine being, rather than in the absence of common features. What it is for God to speak is radically different from what it is for a human being to speak; but that does not rule out an abstract feature in common, viz., that of *performing an illocutionary act*.¹³

¹³ *Divine Nature*, 66–67.

CHAPTER 7

God everlasting

All Christian theologians agree that God is without beginning and without end. The vast majority have held, in addition, that God is *eternal*, existing outside of time. Only a small minority have contended that God is *everlasting*, existing within time.¹ In what follows I shall take up the cudgels for that minority, arguing that God as conceived and presented by the biblical writers is a being whose own life and existence is temporal.

The biblical writers do not present God as some passive factor within reality but as an agent in it. Further, they present God as acting within *human* history. The god they present is neither the impassive god of the Oriental nor the non-historical god of the deist. Indeed, so basic to the biblical writings is their speaking of God as agent within history that if one viewed God as only an impassive factor in reality, or as one whose agency does not occur within human history, one would have to regard the biblical speech about God as at best one long sequence of metaphors pointing to a reality for which they are singularly inept, and as at worst one long sequence of falsehoods.

More specifically, the biblical writers present God as a redeeming God. From times most ancient, human beings have departed from the pattern of responsibilities awarded them at their creation by God. A multitude of evils has followed. But God was not content to leave human beings in the mire of their misery. Aware of what is going on, God has resolved, in response to the sin of human beings and the resultant evils, to bring about renewal. God has, indeed, already been acting in accord with that resolve, centrally and decisively in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

What I shall argue is that if we are to accept this picture of God as acting for the renewal of human life, we must conceive of God as everlasting rather than eternal. God the Redeemer cannot be a God eternal. This

¹ The most noteworthy contemporary example is Oscar Cullmann, *Christ and Time*, translated by Floyd V. Filson (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1950).

is so because God the Redeemer is a God who *changes*. And any being that changes is a being among whose states there is temporal succession. Of course, there is an important sense in which God as presented in the Scriptures is changeless: God is steadfast in God's redeeming intent and ever faithful to God's children. Yet, *ontologically*, God cannot be a redeeming God without there being changeful variation among God's states.

If this argument proves correct, the importance of the issue here confronting us for Christian theology can scarcely be exaggerated. A theology which opts for God as eternal cannot avoid being in conflict with the confession of God as redeemer. And given the obvious fact that God is presented in the Bible as a God who redeems, a theology that opts for God as eternal cannot be a theology faithful to the biblical witness.

My line of argument will prove to be neither subtle nor complicated. So the question will insistently arise, why have Christian theologians so massively contended that God is eternal? Why has not the dominant tradition of Christian theology been that of God everlasting?

My argument will depend heavily on taking with seriousness a certain feature of temporality that has been neglected in Western philosophy. But the massiveness of the God-eternal tradition cannot, I am persuaded, be attributed merely to philosophical oversight. There are, I think, two factors more fundamental. One is the feeling, deep-seated in much of human culture, that the flowing of events into an irrecoverable and unchangeable past is a matter for deep regret. Our bright actions and shining moments do not long endure. The gnawing tooth of time bites all. And our evil deeds can never be undone. They are forever to be regretted. Of course, the philosopher is inclined to distinguish the mere fact of temporality from the actual pattern of the events in history and to argue that regrets about the latter should not slosh over into regrets about the former. The philosopher is right. The regrettableness of what transpires in time is not good ground for regretting that there is time. Yet where the philosopher sees the possibility and the need for a distinction, most people have seen none. Regrets over the pervasive pattern of what transpires within time have led whole societies to place the divine outside of time – freed from the “bondage” of temporality.

But I am persuaded that William Kneale is correct when he contends that the most important factor accounting for the tradition of God eternal within Christian theology was the influence of the classical Greek philosophers on the early theologians.² The distinction between eternal

² William Kneale, “Time and Eternity in Theology,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 61 (1961): 87–108.

being and everlasting being was drawn for the first time in the history of thought by Plato (*Timaeus* 37–38), though the language he uses is reminiscent of words used still earlier by Parmenides. Plato does not connect eternity and divinity, but he does make clear his conviction that eternal being is the highest form of reality. This was enough to influence the early Christian theologians, who did their thinking within the milieu of Hellenic and Hellenistic thought, to assign eternity to God. Thus was the fateful choice made.

A good many twentieth-century theologians have been engaged in what one might call the dehellenization of Christian theology. If Kneale's contention is correct, then in this essay I am participating in that activity. Of course, not every bit of dehellenization is laudatory from the Christian standpoint, for not everything that the Greeks said is false. What is the case, though, is that the patterns of classical Greek thought are incompatible with the pattern of biblical thought. And in facing the issue of God everlasting versus God eternal we are dealing with the fundamental pattern of biblical thought. Indeed, I am persuaded that unless the tradition of God eternal is renounced, fundamental dehellenizing will perpetually occupy itself in the suburbs, never advancing to the city center. Every attempt to purge Christian theology of the traces of incompatible Hellenic patterns of thought must fail unless it removes the road-block of the God-eternal tradition. Around this barricade there are no detours.

WHAT IS IT FOR SOMETHING TO BE IN TIME?

Before we can discuss whether God is outside of time we must ask what it would be for something to be outside of time. That is, before we can ask whether God is eternal we must ask what it would be for something to be eternal. But this in turn demands that we be clear on what it would be for something to be a temporal entity. We need not be clear on all the features which something has by virtue of being temporal – on all facets of temporality – but we must at least be able to say what is necessary and sufficient for something's being in time.

For our purposes we can take as the decisive feature of temporality the exemplification of the temporal-ordering relations of precedence, succession, and simultaneity. Unless some entities did stand to each other in one or the other of these relations, there would be no temporal reality. Conversely, if there is temporal reality then there are pairs of entities whose members stand to each other in the relation of one occurring

before (precedence) or one occurring after (succession) or one occurring simultaneously with (simultaneity) the other.

We must ask in turn what sort of entity is such that its examples can stand to each other in the relations of precedence, succession, and simultaneity. For not every sort of entity is such. The members of a pair of trees cannot stand in these relations. The golden chain tree outside my back door neither occurs before nor after nor simultaneously with the shingle oak outside my front door. Of course, *the sprouting of the former* stands in one of these relations to *the sprouting of the latter*; and so too does *the demise of the latter* to *the demise of the former*. But the trees themselves do not. They do not occur at all.

We have in this example a good clue, though, as to the sort of entity whose examples can stand in the relations of precedence, succession, and simultaneity. It is just such entities as *the demise of my golden chain tree* and *the sprouting of my shingle oak*. It is, in short, what I shall call *events* that stand in these relations.

As I conceive of an event, it consists in something's actually having some property, or something's actually performing some action, or something's actually standing in some relation to something. Events as I conceive them are all actual occurrences. They are not what *can have* occurrences. They are, rather, themselves occurrences. Furthermore, as I conceive of events, there may be two or more events consisting in a given entity's having a given property (or performing a given action). For example, my golden chain tree flowered last spring and is flowering again this spring. So there are two events each consisting in the flowering of my golden chain tree. One began and ended last year. The other began and will end this year.

Such events as I have thus far offered by way of example are all temporally limited, in the sense that there are times at which the event is not occurring. There are times at which it has not yet begun or has already ended. Last year's flowering of my golden chain tree is such. It began at some time last spring and has now for about a year or so ceased. But there are other events which are not in this way temporally limited – *3's being prime*, for example. ("The event of three's being prime" sounds strange; but recall our definition of "event." If time itself begins and ends, then this event, too, occurs wholly within a finite interval. Yet even then there is no time at which it does not occur.)

I said that every event consists in something's actually having some property, actually performing some action, or actually standing in some relation to something. So consider some event *e* which consists in

some entity *a* having some property or performing some action or standing in some relation. Let us call *a* a *subject* of *e*. And let us call *e* an *aspect* of *a*. A given event may well have more than one subject. For example, an event consisting of my sitting under my shingle oak has both me and the shingle oak as subjects. Indeed, I think it can also be viewed as having the relation of *sitting under* as subject. I see nothing against regarding an event consisting of my sitting under my shingle oak as identical with an event consisting of the relation of *sitting under* being exemplified by me with respect to my shingle oak.

Now consider that set of a given entity's aspects such that each member bears a temporal-order relation to every member of the set and none bears a temporal-order relation to any aspect not a member of the set. Let us call that set, provided that it is not empty, the *time-strand* of that entity. I assume it to be true that every entity has at most one time-strand. That is, I assume that no entity has two or more sets of temporally interrelated aspects such that no member of the one set bears any temporal-order relation to any member of the other. I do not, however, assume that each of the aspects of every entity which has a time-strand belongs to the strand. And as to whether every entity has at least one time-strand – that of course is involved in the question as to whether anything is eternal.

Consider, next, a set of events such that each member stands to every member in one of the temporal-order relations, and such that no member stands to any event which is not a member in any of these relations. I shall call such a set a *temporal array*. A temporal array is of course just the union of a set of time-strands such that every member of each member strand bears some temporal-order relation to every member of every other member strand, and such that no member of any member strand bears any temporal-order relation to any member of any strand which is not a member of the set. In what follows I assume that there is but one temporal array. I assume, that is, that every member of every time-strand bears a temporal-order relation to every member of every time-strand.

Now suppose that there is some entity all of whose aspects are such that they are to be found in no temporal array whatsoever. Such an entity would be, in the most radical way possible, outside of time. Accordingly, I shall define "eternal" thus:

Def. 1: *x* is eternal if and only if *x* has no aspect that is a member of the temporal array.

An alternative definition would have been this: "*x* is eternal if and only if *x* has no time-strand." The difference between the two definitions is

that, on the latter, an entity is eternal if none of its aspects bears any temporal-order relation to any of those events which are *its* aspects; whereas on the former, what is required of an entity for it to be eternal is that none of its aspects be related by any temporal-order relation to *any event whatsoever*. Of course, if every event which bears any temporal-order relation to any event whatsoever is also simultaneous with itself, then everything which fails to satisfy the “temporal array” definition of “eternal” will also fail to satisfy the “time-strand” definition.

At this point, certain ambiguities in the concepts of precedence, succession, and simultaneity should be resolved. By saying that event e_1 occurs *simultaneously with* event e_2 , I mean that there is some time at which both e_1 and e_2 are occurring. I do *not* mean – though indeed this might reasonably also have been meant by the words – that there is *no* time at which one of e_1 and e_2 is occurring and the other is not. When two events stand in that latter relation I shall say that they are *wholly simultaneous*. By saying that e_1 *precedes* e_2 , I mean that there is some time at which e_1 but not e_2 is occurring, which precedes all times at which e_2 is occurring. I do not mean that every time at which e_1 occurs precedes every time at which e_2 occurs. When e_1 stands to e_2 in this latter relationship, I shall say that it *wholly precedes* e_2 . Lastly, by saying that e_1 *succeeds* e_2 , I mean that there is some time at which e_1 but not e_2 is occurring which succeeds all times at which e_2 is occurring. This, as in the case of precedence, allows for overlap. And, as in the case of precedence, an overlapping case of succession may be distinguished from a case in which one event *wholly succeeds* another.

When “simultaneity,” “precedence,” and “succession” are understood thus, they do not stand for exclusive relations. An event e_1 may precede, occur simultaneously with, and succeed, another event e_2 . But of course e_1 cannot *wholly* precede e_2 while also being *wholly* simultaneous with it, and so forth for the other combinations.

Reflecting on the consequences of the above definitions and explanations, someone might protest that the definition of eternal is altogether too stringent. For consider, say, the number 3. This, no doubt, was referred to by Euclid and also by Cantor. So, by our explanation of “aspect,” *3’s being referred to by Euclid* was an aspect of the number 3, and *3’s being referred to by Cantor* was another aspect thereof. And of course the former preceded the latter. So, by our definition, 3 is not eternal. But – it may be protested – the fact that something is successively referred to should not be regarded as ground for concluding that it is not eternal. For after all, successive references to something do not produce any change in it.

Although they produce variation among its aspects, they do not produce a changeful variation among them.

In response to this protest it must be emphasized that the concept of an eternal being is not identical with the concept of an unchanging being. The root idea behind the concept of an eternal being is not that of one which does not change but rather that of one which is outside of time. And a question of substance is whether an unchanging being may fail to be eternal. The most thoroughgoing and radical way possible for an entity to be outside of time is that which something enjoys if it satisfies our definition of "eternal." And it must simply be acknowledged that if an entity is successively referred to, then it is not in the most thoroughgoing way outside of time. There is temporal succession among its aspects.

However, the idea of change could be used by the protester in another way. It is indeed true that not every variation among the aspects of an entity constitutes change therein. Only variation among some of them – call them its *change-relevant* aspects – does so. So on the ground that the change-relevant aspects of an entity are more basic to it, we might distinguish between something being *fundamentally* non-eternal and something being *trivially* non-eternal. Something is *fundamentally* non-eternal if it fails to satisfy the concept of being eternal by virtue of some of its change-relevant aspects. Something is *trivially* non-eternal if its failure to satisfy the concept of being eternal is not by virtue of any of its change-relevant aspects.

Now in fact it will be change-relevant aspects of God to which I will appeal in arguing that God is not eternal. Thus my argument will be that God is *fundamentally* non-eternal.

A SECOND WAY IN WHICH THINGS ARE IN TIME

In order to present our argument that God is fundamentally non-eternal we must now take note of a second basic feature of temporality; namely, that all temporal reality comes in the three modes of past, present, and future.³

An important fact about the temporal array is that some events within it are *present*: they *are occurring*; some are *past*: they *were occurring*; some

³ There are two other basic features of temporality: one is the phenomenon of temporal location – the fact that events occur at or within intervals. The other is the phenomenon of temporal duration – the fact that intervals have lengths. In the preceding discussion, I repeatedly made appeal to the phenomenon of temporal location without calling attention to doing so.

are *future*: they *will be occurring*. Indeed, every event is either past or present or future. And not only is this the case now. It always was the case in the past that every event was either past or present or future. And it always will be the case in the future that every event is either past or present or future. Further, every event in the array is such that it either was present or is present or will be present. No event can be past unless it was present. No event can be future unless it will be present. Thus the present is the most basic of the three modes of temporality. To be past is just to have been present. To be future is just to be going to be present. Further, if an event is past, it *presently* is past. If an event is future, it *presently* is future. In this way, too, the present is fundamental.

The reason every event in the temporal array is either past, present, or future is as follows: in order to be in the array at all, an event must occur either before or after or at the same time as some other event. But then, of course, it must occur sometime. And when an event is occurring it is present. So consider any event *e* which is to be found in the temporal array. If *e* is occurring, *e* is present. If, on the other hand, *e* is not occurring, then *e* either precedes or succeeds what is occurring. For *some* event is presently occurring. And every event in the array either precedes or succeeds or is wholly simultaneous with every other. But if *e* were wholly simultaneous with what is occurring, *e* itself would be occurring. So *e* either succeeds or precedes what is occurring if it is not itself occurring. Now for any event *x* to precede any event *y* is just for *x* sometime to be past when *y* is not past. So if *e* precedes what is occurring and is not itself occurring, then *e* is past. On the other hand, for any event *x* to succeed any event *y* is just for *x* sometime to be future when *y* is not future. So if *e* succeeds what is occurring and is not itself occurring, then *e* is future. Hence everything to be found in the temporal array is either past, present, or future.

In contemporary Western philosophy the phenomenon of temporal modality has been pervasively neglected or ignored in favor of the phenomena of temporal-order relationships, temporal location, and temporal duration. Thus time has been "spatialized." For though space provides us with close analogues to all three of these latter phenomena, it provides us with no analogue whatever to the past/present/future distinction.⁴

⁴ A recent example of the neglect of temporal modality in favor of temporal location is to be found in David Lewis, "Anselm and Actuality," *Noûs* 4 (1970): 175–88. Concluding several paragraphs of discussion he says, "If we take a timeless view and ignore our own location in time, the big difference between the present time and other times vanishes."

Perhaps the most fundamental and consequential manifestation of this neglect is to be found in the pervasive assumption that all propositions expressed with tensed sentences are mode-indifferent and dated. Consider for example the tensed sentence "My golden chain tree is flowering." The assumption is that what I would assert if I now (June 5, 1974) assertively uttered this sentence with normal sense is *that my golden chain tree is or was or will be flowering on June 5, 1974*. And that the proposition I would be asserting if I assertively uttered the same sentence on June 4, 1975, is *that my golden chain tree is or was or will be flowering on June 4, 1975*. And so forth.

In order to see clearly what the assumption in question comes to, it will be helpful to introduce a way of expressing tenses alternative to that found in our natural language.⁵ We begin by introducing the three tense operators, *P*, *T*, and *F*. These are to be read, respectively, as "it was the case that," "it is the case that," and "it will be the case that." They are to be attached as prefixes either to sentences in the present tense which lack any such prefix,⁶ or to compound sentences which consist of sentences in the present tense with one or more such prefixes attached. And the result of attaching one such operator to a sentence is to yield a new sentence. For example: *P* (my golden chain tree is flowering), to be read as, "*it was the case that my golden chain tree is flowering*." And: *F*[*P* (my golden chain tree is flowering)], to be read as: "*it will be the case that it was the case that my golden chain tree is flowering*."

So consider any sentence *s* which is either a present tense sentence with no operators prefixed or a compound sentence consisting of a present tense sentence with one or more operators prefixed. The proposition expressed by *P*(*s*) is true if and only if the proposition expressed by *s* was true (in the past). The proposition expressed by *T*(*s*) is true if and only if the proposition expressed by *s* is true (now, in the present).⁷ And the proposition expressed by *F*(*s*) is true if and only if the proposition expressed by *s* will be true (in the future).

Any proposition expressed by a tensed sentence from ordinary speech can be expressed by a sentence in this alternative language. Thus "My golden chain tree was flowering" has as its translational equivalent "*P* (my

⁵ See the writings of Arthur Prior, especially *Time and Modality* (Oxford University Press, 1957); *Past, Present and Future* (Oxford University Press, 1967); and *Time and Tense* (Oxford University Press, 1968).

⁶ This reflects the fact that the past is what was *present*; the future what will be *present*.

⁷ Thus, strictly speaking, the *T* operator is unnecessary. Attaching *T* to any sentence *s* always yields a sentence which expresses the same proposition as does *s* by itself. This reflects the fact that what is past is *presently* past, what is future is *presently* future, and, of course, what is present is *presently* present.

golden chain tree is flowering).” And “My golden chain tree will have been flowering” has as its translational equivalent “ $F[P$ (my golden chain tree is flowering)].”

Let us now introduce a fourth tense operator, D , defining this one in terms of the preceding three thus:

Def. 2: $D(\dots)$, if and only if $P(\dots)$ or $T(\dots)$ or $F(\dots)$.

And let us read it as: “It was or is or will be the case that ...” Let us call this the *tense-indifferent* tense operator. And, correspondingly, let us call a sentence which has at least one tense operator and all of whose tense operators are tense-indifferent, a *wholly tense-indifferent* sentence. Furthermore, as the ordinary language counterpart to the tense-indifferent operator let us use the verb in its present tense with a bar over it, thus: “My golden chain tree is flowering.” Or “My golden chain tree flowers.”

Finally, let us add to our linguistic stock a certain set of modifiers of these tense operators – modifiers of the form “at t ,” “before t ,” and “after t ,” where t stands in for some expression designating a time which is such that that expression can be used to designate that time no matter whether that time is in the past, present, or future. These modifiers are to be attached to our tense operators, thus: P at 1974 (...). The result of attaching one to an operator is to yield an operator of a new form – what one might call a *dated* tense operator. The proposition expressed by a sentence of the form P at $t(s)$ is true if and only if the proposition expressed by s was true at or within time t . The proposition expressed by T at $t(s)$ is true if and only if the proposition expressed by s is true at or within time t . And the proposition expressed by F at $t(s)$ is true if and only if the proposition expressed by s will be true at or within time t . Thus the proposition expressed by “ P at 1973 (my golden chain tree is flowering)” is true if and only if my golden chain tree was flowering at or within 1973. Similarly, the proposition expressed by a sentence of the form P before $t(s)$ is true if and only if the proposition expressed by s was true before t ; likewise for T before $t(s)$ and F before $t(s)$. And the proposition expressed by a sentence of the form P after $t(s)$ is true if and only if the proposition expressed by s was true after t ; likewise for T after $t(s)$ and F after $t(s)$. Let us call a sentence which has tense operators and all of whose tense operators are dated ones, a *fully dated* sentence.

The assumption underlying a great deal of contemporary philosophy can now be stated thus: every proposition expressed by a sentence that is not wholly tense-indifferent and not fully dated is a proposition that can be expressed by some sentence that is wholly tense-indifferent and fully

dated. Consider, for example, the sentence “*T* (my golden chain tree is flowering)” – the translational equivalent of the ordinary sentence, “My golden chain tree is flowering.” Suppose that I assertively utter this sentence on June 5, 1974. The assumption is that the proposition I assert by uttering this sentence is that which is expressed by “*D* at June 5, 1974 (my golden chain tree is flowering).” And in general, where *s* is some present tense sentence, the assumption is that the proposition asserted by assertively uttering *s* at time *t* is just that which would be asserted by assertively uttering *D* at *t(s)*. Similarly, it is assumed that the proposition asserted by assertively uttering *P(s)* at time *t* is that which would be asserted by assertively uttering *D* before *t(s)*. And it is assumed that the proposition asserted by assertively uttering *F(s)* at time *t* is that which would be asserted by assertively uttering *D* after *t(s)*.

On this view, tense-committed sentences are characteristically used to assert different propositions on different occasions of use. For example, if the sentence “My golden chain tree is flowering” is assertively uttered on June 5, it is being used to assert that it is or was or will be the case on June 5 that my golden chain tree is flowering; whereas, if uttered on June 4, it is being used to assert that it is or was or will be the case on June 4 that my golden chain tree is flowering. Whether this view is correct will be considered shortly. If it is, then tense-committed sentences are in that way different from wholly tense-indifferent sentences. For these latter are used to assert the same proposition on all occasions of utterance.

I think we now have the assumption in question clearly enough before us to weigh its acceptability. It is in fact clearly false. To see this, suppose that I now (June 5, 1974) assertively utter the sentences “My golden chain tree is flowering” and “*D* at June 5, 1974 (my golden chain tree is flowering).” The proposition asserted with the former entails that the flowering of my golden chain tree is something that *is* occurring, *now*, *presently*. But the latter does not entail this at all. In general, if someone assertively utters a present tense sentence *s* at *t*, what he asserts is true if and only if the proposition expressed by “*D* at *t(s)*” is true. Yet *s* and “*D* at *t(s)*” express distinct propositions. So also, if I now assertively utter “My golden chain tree was flowering,” what I assert entails that the flowering of my golden chain tree is something that *did* take place, in the past. Whereas the proposition asserted with “*D* before June 5, 1974 (my golden chain tree is flowering)” does not entail this. And this non-identity of the propositions holds even though it is the case that if someone assertively utters *P(s)* at *t*, what he asserts is true if and only if the proposition *D* before *t(s)* is true.

Just as a wholly tense-indifferent sentence is used to assert the same proposition no matter what the time of utterance, so, too, the proposition asserted with such a sentence does not vary in truth value. If it is ever true, it is always true, that *D at June 5, 1974 (my golden chain tree is flowering)*. And if it is ever false, it is always false. Such a proposition is constant in its truth value. But an implication of the failure of the contemporary assumption is that the same cannot be said for the propositions expressed by tense-committed sentences. At least some of these are such that they are sometimes true, sometimes false. They are variable in their truth value. For example, "My golden chain tree is flowering" is now true; but two weeks ago it was false.

So the situation is not that in successively uttering a tense-committed sentence we are asserting distinct propositions, each of which is constant in truth value and each of which could also be expressed with wholly tense indifferent, fully dated, sentences. The situation is rather that we are repeatedly asserting a proposition that is variable in its truth value. Contemporary philosophers, along with assuming the dispensability of the temporal modes, have assumed that all propositions are constant in truth value. Plato's lust for eternity lingers on.

Though philosophers have ignored the modes of time in their theories, we as human beings are all aware of the past/present/future distinction. For without such knowledge we would be lost in the temporal array. Suppose one knew, for each event x , which events $\overline{\text{occur}}$ simultaneously with x , which $\overline{\text{occur}}$ before x , and which $\overline{\text{occur}}$ after x . (Recall the significance of the bar over a present-tense verb.) Then with respect to, say, Luther's posting of his theses, one would know which events $\overline{\text{occur}}$ simultaneously therewith, which $\overline{\text{occur}}$ before it, and which $\overline{\text{occur}}$ after it. And so forth, for all other temporal interrelations of events. There would then still be something of enormous importance which one would not on that account know. One would not know where we are in the array of temporally ordered events. For one would not know which events are occurring, which were occurring, and which will be occurring. To know this it is not sufficient to know, with respect to every event, which events $\overline{\text{occur}}$ simultaneously therewith, which $\overline{\text{occur}}$ before, and which $\overline{\text{occur}}$ after.

Nor, as we have seen above, is such knowledge gained by knowing what $\overline{\text{occurs}}$ at what time. If all I know with respect to events $e_1 \dots e_n$, is that they all $\overline{\text{occur}}$ at the time, say, of the inauguration of the first post-Nixon president, then I do not yet know whether those events are in the past, in the present, or in the future. And if all my knowledge with respect

to every event and every interval is of that deficient sort, I do not know where we are in the temporal array. For I do not know which events are present, which are past, and which are future.

AN ARGUMENT FOR THE CONCLUSION THAT
GOD IS IN TIME

It might seem obvious that God, as described by the biblical writers, is a being who changes, and who accordingly is fundamentally non-eternal. For God is described as a being who *acts* – in creation, in providence, and for the renewal of humankind. God is an agent, not an impassive factor in reality. And from the manner in which God's acts are described, it seems obvious that many of them have beginnings and endings, that accordingly they stand in succession relations to each other, and that these successive acts are of such a sort that their presence and absence on God's time-strand constitutes changes thereon. Thus it seems obvious that God is fundamentally non-eternal.

God is spoken of as calling Abraham to leave Chaldea and later instructing Moses to return to Egypt. So does not the event of *God's instructing Moses* succeed that of *God's calling Abraham*? And does not this sort of succession constitute a change on God's time-strand – not a change in God's "essence," but nonetheless a change on God's time-strand? Again, God is spoken of as leading Israel through the Red Sea and later sending God's Son into the world. So does not God's doing the latter succeed God's doing the former? And does not the fact of this sort of succession constitute a change along God's time-strand?

In short, it seems evident that the biblical writers regard God as having a time-strand of God's own on which actions on God's part are to be found, and that some at least of these actions vary in such a way that there are changes along the strand. It seems evident that they do not regard changes on time-strands as confined to entities in God's creation. The God who acts, in the way in which the biblical writers speak of God as acting, seems clearly to change.

Furthermore, is it not clear from how they speak that the biblical writers regarded many of God's acts as bearing temporal-order relations to events that are not aspects of God but rather aspects of the earth, of ancient human beings, and so forth? The four cited above, for example, seem all to be described thus. It seems obvious that God's actions as described by the biblical writers stand in temporal-order relations to all the other events in our own time-array.

However, I think it is not at all so obvious as on first glance it might appear that the biblical writers do in fact describe God as changing. Granted that the language they use suggests this. It is not at once clear that this is what they wished to say with this language. It is not clear that this is how they were describing God. Let us begin to see why this is so by reflecting on the following passage from St. Thomas Aquinas:

Nor, if the action of the first agent is eternal, does it follow that His effect is eternal. ... God acts voluntarily in the production of things. ... God's act of understanding and willing is, necessarily, His act of making. Now, an effect follows from the intellect and the will according to the determination of the intellect and the command of the will. Moreover, just as the intellect determines every other condition of the thing made, so does it prescribe the time of its making; for art determines not only that this thing is to be such and such, but that it is to be at this particular time, even as a physician determines that a dose of medicine is to be drunk at such and such a particular time, so that, if his act of will were of itself sufficient to produce the effect, the effect would follow anew from his previous decision, without any new action on his part. Nothing, therefore, prevents our saying that God's action existed from all eternity, whereas its effect was not present from eternity, but existed at that time when, from all eternity, He ordained it.⁸

Let us henceforth call an event that neither begins nor ends an *everlasting* event. And let us call an event that either begins or ends, a *temporal* event. In the passage above, St. Thomas is considering God's acts of bringing about temporal events. So consider some such act; say, that of God's bringing about Israel's deliverance from Egypt. The temporal event in question, Israel's deliverance from Egypt, occurred (let us say) in 1225 BC. But from the fact that what God brought about occurred in 1225 it does not follow, says Aquinas, that God's act of bringing it about occurred in 1225. In fact, it does not follow that this act had any beginning or ending whatsoever. And in general, suppose that God brings about some temporal event *e*. From the fact that *e* is temporal it does not follow, says Aquinas, that God's act of bringing about *e*'s occurrence is temporal. The temporality of the event that God brings about does not infect God's act of bringing it about. God's act of bringing it about may well be everlasting. This can perhaps more easily be seen, he says, if we remember that God, unlike us, does not have to "take steps" so as to bring about the occurrence of some event. God need only will that it occur. If God just wants it to be the case that *e* occur at *t*, then *e* occurs at *t*.

⁸ *Summa contra Gentiles* II, 35; cf. II, 36, 4. I use the edition translated and edited by Anton C. Pegis (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1975).

Thus God can bring about changes in our history without Godself changing. The occurrence of the event of Israel's deliverance from Egypt constitutes a change in our history. But there is no counterpart change among God's aspects by virtue of God bringing this event about.

Now let us suppose that the four acts of God cited above – instructing Moses, calling Abraham, leading Israel through the Red Sea, and sending God's Son into the world – regardless of the impression we might gain from the biblical language used to describe them, also have the structure of God's bringing about the occurrence of some temporal event. Suppose, for example, that God's leading Israel through the Red Sea has the structure of God's bringing it about that Israel's passage through the Red Sea occurs. And suppose Aquinas is right that the temporality of Israel's passage does not infect with temporality God's act of bringing about this passage. Then what is strictly speaking the case is not that God's leading Israel through the Red Sea occurs during 1225. What is rather the case is that Israel's passage through the Red Sea occurs during 1225, and that God brings this passage about. And the temporality of the passage does not entail the temporality of God's bringing it about. This latter may be everlasting. So, likewise, the fact that the occurrence of this passage marks a change in our history does not entail that God's bringing it about marks a change among God's aspects. God may unchangingly bring about historical changes.

It is natural, at this point, to wonder whether we do not have in hand here a general strategy for interpreting the biblical language about God acting. Is it not perhaps the case that all those acts of God that the biblical writers speak of as beginning or as ending really consist in God performing the everlasting event of bringing about the occurrence of some temporal event?

Well, God does other things with respect to temporal events than bringing about their occurrence. For example, God also *knows* them. Why then should it be thought that the best way to interpret all the temporal-event language used to describe God's actions is by reference to God's action of bringing about the occurrence of some event? May it not be that the best way to interpret what is said with some of such language is by reference to one of those other acts that God performs with respect to temporal events? But then if God is not to change, it is not only necessary that the temporality of *e* not infect God's act of *bringing about* the occurrence of *e*, but also that *every* act of God such that God performs it with respect to *e* not be infected by the temporality of *e*. For example, if God

knows some temporal event *e*, God's knowledge of *e* must not be infected by the temporality of *e*.

So the best way of extrapolating from Aquinas' hint would probably be along the lines of the following theory concerning God's actions and the biblical speech about them. All God's actions are everlasting. None has either beginning or ending. Of these everlasting acts, the structure of some consists in God's performing some action with respect to some event. And at least some of the events that God acts with respect to are temporal events. However, in no case does the temporality of the event that God acts with respect to infect the event of God's acting. On the contrary, God's acting with respect to some temporal event is itself invariably an everlasting event. So whenever the biblical writers use temporal-event language to describe God's actions, they are to be interpreted as thereby claiming that God acts with respect to some temporal event. They are not to be interpreted as claiming that God's acting is itself a temporal event. God as described by the biblical writers is to be interpreted as acting, and as acting with respect to temporal events. But God is not to be interpreted as changing. All God's acts are everlasting.

This, I think, is a fascinating theory. If true, it provides a way of harmonizing the fundamental biblical teaching that God is a being who acts in our history, with the conviction that God does not change. How far the proposed line of biblical interpretation can be carried out, I do not know. I am not aware of any theologian who has ever tried to carry it out, though there are a great many theologians who might have relieved the tension in their thought by developing and espousing it. But what concerns us here is not so much what the theory can adequately deal with as what it cannot adequately deal with. Does the theory in fact provide us with a wholly satisfactory way of harmonizing the biblical presentation of God as acting in history with the conviction that God is fundamentally eternal?

Before we set about looking for a refutation of the theory it should be observed, though, that even if the theory were true God would still not be eternal. For consider God's acts of bringing about Abraham's leaving of Chaldaea and of bringing about Israel's passage through the Red Sea. These would both be, on the theory, *everlasting* acts. Both are always occurring. Hence they occur simultaneously. They stand to each other in the temporal-order relation of simultaneity. And since both are aspects of God, God accordingly has a time-strand on which these acts are to be found. Hence God is not eternal. Further, these are surely

change-relevant aspects of God. Hence God is fundamentally non-eternal.⁹

Though I myself think that this argument is sound, it would not be decisive if presented to Aquinas. For Aquinas held that God is simple. And an implication of this contention on his part is that all aspects of God are identical. Hence in God's case there are no two aspects that are simultaneous with each other; for there are no two aspects at all.

A reply is possible. For consider that which is, on Aquinas' theory, God's single aspect; and refer to it as you will – say, as *God's being omnipotent*. This aspect presumably occurs at the same time as itself. Whenever it occurs, it is itself occurring. It is simultaneous with itself. Furthermore, it occurs simultaneously with every temporal event whatsoever. Since God's being omnipotent is always occurring, it "overlaps" all temporal events whatsoever. So once again we have the conclusion: God is non-eternal, indeed, God is fundamentally non-eternal.

It is true, though, that even if Aquinas were to accept this last argument he would not say, in conclusion, that God was non-eternal. For Aquinas defined an eternal being as one that is without beginning and without end, and that has no *succession* among its aspects.¹⁰ Thus as Aquinas defined eternal, an eternal being may very well have aspects that stand to each other in the temporal-order relation of simultaneity. What Aquinas ruled out was just aspects standing in the temporal-order relation of succession. Our own definition of "eternal," which disallows simultaneity as well as succession, is in this way more thoroughgoing than is Aquinas'. For a being at least one of whose aspects occurs simultaneously with some event is not yet, in the most radical way possible, outside of time. However, in refutation of the extrapolated Thomistic theory sketched out above I shall now offer an argument against God's being eternal which establishes that there is not only simultaneity but also succession among God's aspects, and not just succession but also *change*ful succession. This argument will be as relevant to the issue of God's being eternal on Aquinas' definition of eternal as it is on my own definition.

To refute the extrapolated Thomistic theory we would have to do one or the other of two things. We would have to show that some of

⁹ By a similar argument the number 3 can be seen to be fundamentally non-eternal. Surely 3's *being odd* and 3's *being prime* are both change-relevant aspects of 3. If either of these were for a while an aspect of 3 and then for a while not, we would conclude that 3 had changed. But these two aspects occur simultaneously with each other. They stand to each other in the temporal-order relation of simultaneity. Hence 3 is fundamentally non-eternal.

¹⁰ See *Summa Theologiae* I, 10, 1.

the temporal-event language the biblical writers use in speaking of God's actions cannot properly be construed in the suggested way – that is, cannot be construed as used to put forth the claim that God acts in some way with respect to some temporal events. Or, alternatively, we would have to show that some of the actions that God performs with respect to temporal events are themselves temporal, either because they are infected by the temporality of the events or for some other reason.

One way of developing this latter alternative would be to show that some of God's actions must be understood as a response to the free actions of human beings – that what God does, God sometimes does in response to what some human being does. I think this is in fact the case. And I think it follows, given that all human actions are temporal, that those actions of God which are “response” actions are temporal as well. But to develop this line of thought would be to plunge us deep into questions of divine omniscience and human freedom. So I shall make a simpler, though I think equally effective, objection to the theory, arguing that in the case of certain of God's actions the temporality of the event that God acts on infects God's own action with temporality.

Three such acts are the diverse though similar acts of knowing about some temporal event that it is occurring (that it is *present*), of knowing about some temporal event that it was occurring (that it is *past*), and of knowing about some temporal event that it will be occurring (that it is *future*). Consider the first of these. No one can know about some temporal event *e* that it is occurring except when it is occurring. Before *e* has begun to occur one cannot know that it is occurring, for it is not. Nor after *e* has ceased to occur can one know that it is occurring, for it is not. So suppose that *e* has a beginning. Then P's knowing about *e* that it is occurring cannot occur until *e* begins. And suppose that *e* has an ending. Then P's knowing about *e* that it is occurring cannot occur beyond *e*'s cessation. But every temporal event has (by definition) either a beginning or an ending. So every case of knowing about some temporal event that it is occurring itself either begins or ends (or both). Hence the act of knowing about *e* that it is occurring is infected by the temporality of *e*. So also, the act of knowing about *e* that it *was* occurring, and the act of knowing about *e* that it *will be* occurring, are infected by the temporality of *e*.

But God, as the biblical writers describe God, performs all three of these acts, and performs them on temporal events. God knows what is happening in our history, what has happened, and what will happen. Hence, some of God's actions are themselves temporal events. But surely the non-occurrence followed by the occurrence followed by the non-occurrence of

such knowings constitutes a change on God's time-strand. Accordingly, God is fundamentally non-eternal.¹¹

It is important, if the force of this argument is to be discerned, that one distinguish between, on the one hand, the act of knowing about some event e that it occurs at some time t (recall the significance of the bar) and, on the other hand, the act of knowing about e that it is occurring or of knowing that it was occurring or of knowing that it will be occurring. Knowing about e that it occurs at t is an act not infected by the temporality of the event known. *That Calvin's flight from Geneva occurs in 1537* is something that can be known at any and every time whatsoever. For it is both true, and constant in its truth value. But *that Calvin's flight from Geneva is occurring* is variable in its truth value. It once was true, it now is false. And since one can know only what is true, this proposition cannot be known at every time. It cannot be known now. God can know, concerning every temporal event whatsoever, what time that event occurs at, without such knowledge of God's being temporal. But God cannot know concerning any temporal event whatsoever that it is occurring, or know that it was occurring, or know that it will be occurring, without that knowledge being itself temporal.

Similarly, we must distinguish between, on the one hand, the act of knowing about some temporal event e that it occurs simultaneously with events $e_1 \dots e_n$ after events $f_1 \dots f_n$ and before events $g_1 \dots g_n$; and, on the other hand, the act of knowing about e that it is occurring or of knowing that it was occurring or of knowing that it will be occurring. Knowledge of the former sort is not infected by the temporality of the event whose temporal-order relationships are known. Knowledge of the latter sort is. I know now that Calvin's flight from Geneva occurs after Luther's posting of his theses occurs. But once again, I do not and cannot now know that Calvin's flight *is* occurring. Because it is not. So too, God once knew that Calvin's flight from Geneva is occurring. But God no longer knows this. For God, too, does not know that which is not so. Thus, in this respect God's knowledge has changed. But God always knows that Calvin's flight from Geneva occurs after Luther's posting of his theses occurs. Only if

¹¹ This line of argument is adumbrated by Arthur Prior here and there in his essay "Formalities of Omniscience," in *Time and Tense*. It is also adumbrated by Norman Kretzmann, "Omniscience and Immutability," *Journal of Philosophy* 63 (1966): 409–21. The essence of the argument is missed in discussions of Kretzmann's paper by Hector Castaneda, "Omniscience and Indexical Reference," *Journal of Philosophy* 64 (1967): 203–10; and Nelson Pike, *God and Timelessness* (New York: Schocken Books, 1970), ch. 5. Castaneda and Pike fail to take the *modes* of time with full seriousness; as a partial defense of them it should perhaps be admitted as not wholly clear that Kretzmann himself does so.

time lacked modes and only if propositions were all constant in truth value could God's knowledge be unchanging – assuming that God's knowledge comprises temporal as well as everlasting events.

The act of *remembering* that *e* has occurred is also an act infected by the temporality of *e* (remembering is, of course, a species of knowing). For one can only remember that *e* has occurred after *e* has occurred. "P remembers that *e* occurs" entails that *e* has occurred. So if *e* is an event that has a beginning, then the act of remembering that *e* has occurred has a beginning. But some events with beginnings are such that God remembers their occurrence. Consequently this act on God's part is also a temporal event. It, too, cannot be everlasting.

God is also described by the biblical writers as planning that God would bring about certain events which God does. This, too, is impossible if God does not change. For consider some event which someone brings about, and suppose that he planned to bring it about. His planning to bring it about must occur before the planned event occurs. For otherwise it is not a case of planning.

So in conclusion, if God were eternal, God could not be aware, concerning any temporal event, that it is occurring nor aware that it was occurring nor aware that it will be occurring; nor could God remember that it has occurred; nor could God plan to bring it about and do so. But all of such actions are presupposed by, and essential to, the biblical presentation of God as a redeeming God. Hence God as presented by the biblical writers is fundamentally non-eternal. God is fundamentally in time.

ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

As with any argument, one can here choose to deny the premises rather than to accept the conclusion. Instead of agreeing that God is fundamentally non-eternal because God changes with respect to God's knowledge, God's memory, and God's planning, one could try to save one's conviction that God is eternal by denying that God knows what is or was or will be occurring, that God remembers what has occurred, and that God brings about what God has planned. It seems to me, however, that this is clearly to give up the notion of God as a redeeming God; and in turn it seems to me that to give this up is to give up what is central to the biblical vision of God. To sustain this latter claim would of course require an extensive hermeneutical inquiry. But lest someone be tempted to go this route of trying to save God's eternity by treating all the biblical language about God the redeemer as either false or misleadingly metaphorical, let

me observe that if God were eternal, God could not be the object of any human action whatsoever.

Consider, for example, my act of referring to something, X. The event consisting of *my referring to* X is a temporal event. It both begins and ends, as do all my acts. Now the event of *my referring to* X is identical with the event of X's *being referred to by me*. And this event is an aspect both of X and of me. So if X is a being that lasts longer than my act of referring to X does, then for a while X has this aspect and for a while not. And thus X would have *succession* on its time-strand. And so X would not be eternal. Thus if God were eternal, no human being could ever refer to God – or perform any other temporal act with respect to God. If God were eternal, one could not know God. In particular, one could not know that God was eternal, or even believe that God was. Indeed, if God were eternal one could not predicate of God that God is eternal. For predicating is also a temporal act. So this is the calamitous consequence of claiming of God that God is eternal: if one predicates of God that God is eternal, then God is not.

INTERPRETING THE BIBLICAL DECLARATIONS

I have been arguing that God as described by the biblical writers is a being who changes.¹² That, we have seen, is not self-evidently and obviously so, though the mode of expression of the biblical writers might lead one to think it was. Yet it is so nonetheless. But are there not explicit statements in the Bible to the effect that God does not change? If we are honest to the evidence, must we not acknowledge that on this matter the biblical writers contradict each other? Let us see.

Surprisingly, given the massive Christian theological tradition in favor of God's ontological immutability, there are only two passages (to the best of my knowledge) in which it is directly said of God that God does not change. One of these is Malachi 3:6. The prophet has just been saying to the people that God is wearied by their hypocrisy; however (he goes on), God will send God's messenger to clear a path before God; and "God will take his seat, refining and purifying." As a result of this cleansing, the "offerings of Judah and Jerusalem shall be pleasing to the Lord as they were in days of old." And then comes this assurance: "I am the Lord, unchanging; and you, too, have not ceased to be sons of Jacob.

¹² The biblical declarations are treated more fully in chapter 8 of this volume, "Unqualified divine temporality."

From the days of your forefathers you have been wayward and have not kept my laws. If you will return to me, I will return to you, says the Lord of Hosts.”¹³

Surely it would be a gross misinterpretation to treat the prophet here as claiming that God is ontologically immutable. What he says, on the contrary, is that God is faithful to God’s people Israel – that God is unchanging in God’s fidelity to the covenant God has made with them. All too often theologians have ontologized the biblical message. Malachi 3:6 is a classic example of a passage that, cited out of context, would seem to support the doctrine of God’s ontological immutability. Read in context, however, it supports not that but rather the doctrine of God’s unswerving fidelity. No ontological claim whatever is being made.

The other passage in which it is said of God that God is unchanging is found in Psalm 102:27. Again we must set the passage in its context:

My strength is broken in mid course; the time allotted me is short.

Snatch me not away before half my days are done, for thy years last through all generations.

Long ago thou didst lay the foundations of the earth, and the heavens were thy handiwork.

They shall pass away, but thou endurest;

like clothes they shall all grow old;

thou shalt cast them off like a cloak, and they shall vanish;

but thou art the same and thy years shall have no end;

thy servants’ children shall continue,

and their posterity shall be established in thy presence.

Here, too, it would be a gross misinterpretation to regard the writer as teaching that God is ontologically immutable. The Psalmist is making an ontological point of sorts, though even so the ontological point is set within a larger context of religious reflection. He is drawing a contrast between God, on the one hand, and God’s transitory creation, on the other. And what he says about God is clearly that God is without end – “Thy years shall have no end.” He does not say that God is ontologically immutable.

In short, God’s ontological immutability is not a part of the explicit teaching of the biblical writers. What the biblical writers teach is that God is faithful and without beginning or end, not that none of God’s aspects

¹³ Biblical quotations are from the New English Bible.

is temporal. The theological tradition of God's ontological immutability has no explicit biblical foundation.¹⁴

GOD NOT ETERNAL BUT EVERLASTING

The upshot of our discussion is this: the biblical presentation of God presupposes that God is everlasting rather than eternal. God is indeed without beginning and without end. But at least some of God's aspects stand in temporal-order relations to each other. Thus God, too, has a time-strand. God's life and existence is itself temporal. (Whether God's life and existence always was and always will be temporal, or whether God has taken on temporality, is a question we have not had time to consider.) Further, the events to be found on God's time-strand belong within the same temporal array as that which contains our time-strands. God's aspects do not only bear temporal-order relations to each other but to the aspects of created entities as well. And the aspects and succession of aspects to be found on God's time-strand are such that they constitute *changes* thereon. God's life and existence incorporates changeful succession.

Haunting Christian theology and Western philosophy throughout the centuries has been the picture of time as bounded, with the created order on this side of the boundary and God on the other. Or sometimes the metaphor has been that of time as extending up to a horizon, with all creaturely reality on this side of the horizon and God on the other. All such metaphors, and the ways of thinking that they represent, must be discarded. Temporality embraces us along with God.

This conclusion from our discussion turns out to be wholly in accord with that to be found in Oscar Cullmann's *Christ and Time*. From his study of the biblical words for time Cullmann concludes that, in the biblical picture, God's "eternity" is not qualitatively different from our temporality. Cullmann's line of argument (though not his conclusion) has been vigorously attacked by James Barr on the ground that from the lexicographical patterns of biblical language we cannot legitimately make inferences as to what was being said by way of that language.¹⁵ Verbal similarities may conceal differences in thought, and similarities in

¹⁴ "I am that I am" (Exod. 3:14) has also sometimes been used to support the doctrine of God's immutability. However, this is one of the most cryptic passages in all of Scripture; and – to understate the point – it is not in the least clear that what is being proclaimed is God's ontological immutability. There is a wealth of exegetical material on the passage, but see especially the comments by J. C. Murray, *The Problem of God* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1967), ch. 1.

¹⁵ *Biblical Words for Time* (London: SCM, 1962).

thought may be clothed with verbal differences. Barr's objection is apropos. But though we have traveled a very different route from Cullmann's we have come out at the same place. We have not engaged in any word studies. Yet, by seeing that God's temporality is presupposed by the biblical presentation of God as redeemer, we too have reached the conclusion that we share time with God. The lexicographical and philosophical cases coincide in their results.

Though God is within time, yet God is Lord of time. The whole array of contingent temporal events is within God's power. God is Lord of what occurs. And that, along with the specific pattern of what God does, grounds all authentically biblical worship of, and obedience to, God. It is not because God is outside of time – eternal, immutable, impassive – that we are to worship and obey God. It is because of what God can and does bring about within time that we mortals are to render God praise and obedience.

CHAPTER 8

Unqualified divine temporality

God is presented in Scripture as One who has a history of acting and responding. Recall Exodus 3–4. When Moses was tending the flocks of his father-in-law in the wilderness, his curiosity was piqued one day by a bush engulfed in flames but not consumed. He walked over; and as he approached, God addressed him out of the bush: “Moses, Moses!” It’s the narrator who tells us that it was God addressing him; Moses didn’t yet know what to make of what was happening. Moses responded, “Here I am,” whereupon God said, “Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.” Then the speaker in the bush identified himself. “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.”¹ Moses was gripped by fear and, no longer daring to look, covered his face.

God then told Moses that he, God, had seen the affliction of his people, had heard their cry of suffering, and had “come down” to bring them out of servitude into a land where they could flourish. “So come,” said God, “I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.”

What then follows is a series of protests by Moses. *Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and lead my people out?* I’ll be with you, says God. *But if I tell my people that the God of their fathers has sent me to lead them out, they’ll want to know your name.* Tell them that I AM WHO I AM, says God. *But they won’t believe me when I tell them that you appeared and spoke to me.* I’ll enable you to perform a couple of wonders as signs, says God. *But I’m a poor speaker.* I’ll give you the right words when they’re needed, says God. *But I don’t want to do it; pick somebody else.* No, says God, exasperated now, you’re the one. I’ll appoint your brother Aaron to speak for you in public; but you are to be the leader.

¹ All Scriptural quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard translation.

A HERMENEUTIC PRINCIPLE

This episode stands out as one of the great numinous episodes of the biblical narrative. But its representation of God as having a history that can be narrated is not exceptional but typical of Scripture's presentation of God: God responds to what transpires in human affairs by performing a succession of actions, including actions of speaking. An implication of this presentation of God is that there's change in God's life; if a person does one thing at one time and a different thing at a later time, then there's change in that person's life. Behind the change in action there is, in turn, a change in knowledge: God's successive responses to Moses were motivated by God's knowledge, each time, of Moses' new protest; the changes in God's knowledge tracked the changes in Moses' protest. These, I say, are implications of how Scripture presents God: God has a history, and in this history there are changes in God's actions, responses, and knowledge. The God of Scripture is One of whom a narrative can be told; we know that not because Scripture tells us that but because it offers such a narrative. I hold that an implication of this is that God is in time. If something has a history, then perforce that being is in time.

Let me articulate a hermeneutical principle that I have just now been employing and will continue to employ: an implication of accepting Scripture as canonical is that one will affirm as literally true Scripture's presentation of God unless one has good reason not to do so.

I have two reasons for affirming this principle.² In the first place, I hold that the fundamental principle with which we all operate in our interpretation of all discourse is that the discourser is to be taken as speaking literally unless we have good reason, in a given case, to conclude that she is not doing so. To speak literally is to say what one's sentence means in the language. Taking the discourser as speaking literally is the default option; the alternative, taking her as not speaking literally, has to bear the burden of proof if it is to be accepted. If she says, "It's late," then I interpret her as speaking literally, saying what the sentence means in the language, that it's late – unless I have good reason to think that she was not on this occasion speaking literally. If it were always completely up for grabs whether a person was speaking literally, metaphorically, ironically, and so forth, one's interpretation of one's fellows could never get off the ground.

² I defend the principle at much greater length in chapters 11–13 of my *Divine Discourse* (Cambridge University Press, 1995).

My second consideration pertains specifically to the interpretation of Scripture by those who take it as canonical. In a well-known passage in *De Doctrina Christiana*, Augustine remarked that “we must show the way to find out whether a phrase is literal or figurative. And the way is certainly as follows: Whatever there is in the word of God that cannot, when taken literally, be referred either to purity of life or soundness of doctrine, you may set down as figurative. Purity of life has reference to the love of God and one’s neighbor; soundness of doctrine to the knowledge of God and one’s neighbor.”³

Augustine is here clearly taking for granted that the literal interpretation is what I called, above, the *default option*, and saying that when it comes to interpreting what Scripture says about God, we are to interpret the words literally unless doing so cannot “be referred either to purity of life or soundness of doctrine.” If the literal interpretation conflicts with purity of life or soundness of doctrine, then that is a good reason for not interpreting literally.

I do not propose trying to list the sorts of reasons that I myself would regard as good reasons for not construing some biblical presentation of God literally. That’s because I do not have, and do not want to have, any *a priori* typology. I am open to considering on its merits each reason offered. It is my view, however, that Augustine’s two principles, if not exhaustive, are at least fundamental.

The hermeneutic principle that I have enunciated, when conjoined with the point that God is presented in Scripture as having a history, has the consequence that, for Christians, the burden of proof is on those who hold that God is outside of time – on those who hold that God is timeless, eternal.

Until the past century, the Christian theological tradition has so massively affirmed the eternity of God that many assume that the burden of proof lies rather on those who hold that the biblical presentation of God, as One who has a history that can be narrated, is not to be taken as the literal truth of the matter. But not so. The massiveness of the tradition has not shifted the burden of proof; what it does instead is place on those of us who disagree with the theological tradition a weighty obligation. We are obligated to understand as deeply and sympathetically as we can the considerations offered by our predecessors in favor of God’s eternity, placing ourselves open to the possibility that they have discovered decisive

³ III, 10.14. I am using the translation of J. F. Shaw in Philip Schaff, ed., *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1979 reprint).

considerations in favor of their position. But the burden of proof remains on them. They are claiming that we should not accept as literally true this aspect of the biblical presentation of God; for that we need cogent arguments. Otherwise what's left of the church's confession that Scripture, for it, is canonical?

IS GOD PRESENTED AS TIMELESS?

But am I not being tendentiously selective? Granted that Scripture presents God as having a narratable history of acting and responding; are there not also Scriptural passages that tell us that God is immutable and timeless? I think not – with one possible exception. If there were such passages, we would then be faced with the question whether or not to take *these* passages as literally true; it would not just automatically follow from the presence of such passages that the all-pervasive biblical picture of God as having a history of acting and responding has to be interpreted as figurative. But I think that there are no such passages – with, as I say, one possible exception.

Begin with those that have traditionally been cited in support of God's timelessness – all together an exceedingly small number, I might add; and rather than making a complete survey, let's confine our attention to those that the writers who cite these passages would regard as the weightiest. One is Psalm 90:

Lord, you have been our dwelling place
in all generations.
Before the mountains were brought forth,
or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to
everlasting you are God.
You turn us back to dust,
and say, "Turn back, you mortals." For a thousand years in your sight
are like yesterday when it is past,
or like a watch in the night. (Ps 90:1–4)

One is amazed that this passage would ever have been cited in support of divine timelessness. What it says on the face of it is not that God is timeless but that God existed *before* creation, indeed from everlasting to everlasting. How could God exist *before* creation and yet be timeless? The writer adds that, as God sees things, a long time is, in retrospect, like a day, or like a night watch. Rather than supporting divine timelessness this seems, if anything, to do the opposite. When God looks back over a thousand years they seem, to God, to have lasted

no longer than a day or a night: evidently there is a felt temporality in God's experience.

We find a variant on this last point in the New Testament passage, "With the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day" (2 Pet 3:8). Given the use of temporal language to describe God's experience, it again amazes one that this passage should ever have been cited in support of eternity. What it says, on the face of it, is that, with God, experiential duration does not match up with clock time.

Lastly, consider Jesus' declaration in John 8:58, "Before Abraham was, I am." Jesus is here taking onto himself God's self-given name, "I AM"; but rather than affirming thereby that God is outside of time, he tacitly does the opposite. If I AM existed *before* Abraham, how could I AM be timeless?

The conclusion is inescapable: the Scriptural passages traditionally cited as supporting divine timelessness provide no such support whatsoever.

IS GOD PRESENTED AS ONTOLOGICALLY IMMUTABLE?

The three passages traditionally cited in support of God's immutability have more going for them, on the face of it, than those traditionally cited in favor of God's timelessness. When one considers what the writers were likely to have been saying with their words, however, at least two of them prove quite obviously not to be affirming ontological immutability.

Begin with Malachi 3:6: "For I the LORD do not change." To discern what the writer would have been saying we do not, in this case, have to go outside the text of Malachi into the ambient culture; all we need do is consider the passage in context. The prophet has just been saying to his listeners that God is wearied by all their talk. Nonetheless God, after sending a messenger to prepare the way, will purify and refine God's people, like a refiner and purifier of silver. When that has been accomplished, the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will once again be pleasing to the Lord, as they were in the days of old. Then comes this wonderful assurance: "For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, have not perished. Ever since the days of your ancestors you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you" (vv. 6–7). Surely the prophet is not here affirming God's ontological immutability but instead saying that God's fidelity to the covenant God has made with God's people remains unalterable. The passage affirms covenantal fidelity, not ontological immutability.

Consider next the affirmation of the psalmist, addressed to God in Psalm 102:27, that “you are the same.” Again, rather than taking this passage in isolation and then allowing it to stimulate our ontological imaginations, let’s try to discern what the writer was saying. For this it will once again be sufficient to consider the context. Let’s have before us some of the preceding verses, along with the one following:

He has broken my strength in midcourse; he has shortened my days.
 “O my God,” I say, “do not take me away at the midpoint of my life,
 you whose years endure throughout all generations.”
 Long ago you laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are
 the work of your hands. They will perish, but you endure;
 they will all wear out like a garment.
 You change them like clothing, and they pass away; but you are the
 same, and your years have no end. The children of your servants
 shall live secure;
 their offspring shall be established in your presence. (Ps 102:23–28)

The writer is indeed making an ontological – or perhaps better, a cosmological – point; but that point is not ontological immutability. Whereas God’s creation is transitory, God abides. For God, unlike the creature, does not wear out; God’s years are without end. What the writer says is not that God is ontologically immutable but that God is everlasting; God endures. God has years, indeed, but to those years there is no end.

The passage most plausibly cited in support of God’s ontological immutability is no doubt James 1:17, in which it is said that with God “there is no variation or shadow due to change.” Let’s have before us the preceding verse along with the verse following:

Do not be deceived, my beloved. Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures. (Jas 1:16–18)

In place of “no variation or shadow due to change” some ancient manuscripts say, “no variation due to a shadow of turning.” Probably that doesn’t make any difference. The writer appears to be working with the image of a beam of light shining on a rotating object, different parts of the object falling into shadow as the object rotates. God, he says, is not like such an object; God is like the light. The writer has just told his readers that when they are tempted to do evil, they must not ascribe that temptation to God; “God cannot be tempted by evil and he himself tempts no one”

(Jas 1:13). God is the source only of what is good – God is the sole source of good. In that respect God is like a source of light in which there is “no variation or shadow due to change.”

Is the writer of James here affirming God’s ontological immutability? I think the most we can say is that though it’s possible he’s doing that, it’s not likely. It’s likely that what he’s saying is that God is unchangeable in that God is never the source of evil, only and always of good – which falls far short of affirming ontological immutability. Yet the context does not entitle one to dismiss entirely the possibility that the writer was alluding to God’s ontological immutability. That would go beyond what his argument required, yet he might nonetheless have been alluding to it as grounding his argument. But if these considerations are correct – though it’s not likely that the writer was alluding to ontological immutability, the possibility that he was doing so cannot be decisively dismissed – then obviously this passage cannot be used as a proof text for God’s ontological immutability.

I conclude that the situation for God’s ontological immutability is like that for God’s timelessness: there are no passages in Scripture that can be cited as supporting the doctrine.

ON THE NATURE OF TIME

Whether or not we should take Scripture as literally true in its presentation of God as having a narratable history depends, I said, on whether we have good reasons for not so taking it; the burden of proof, for Christians, lies on those who think it should not be so taken. We will want to take note of the reasons that have been offered. But I propose spending the bulk of my time developing some arguments of my own in support of the view that God does have a history, and that God, accordingly, is not timeless – everlasting, and necessarily so, but not eternal. If these arguments are cogent, the effect will be that we will know in advance that the burden of proof will be impossible to bear – or to speak more modestly, that it will be extremely difficult to bear.

My strategy will be first to offer some reflections on the nature of time, then to move on to consider what it would be for something to be outside of time; and then finally to use the results of these inquiries to show why God cannot be outside of time.

It will be asked where I propose to get the knowledge of God to which I will be appealing at that last point of the argument. My answer is: I will be getting it from Scripture; I will be appealing to what we learn about

God from Scripture. I make no pretense of constructing a piece of natural theology.

But then what's the point? We have already learned that Scripture presents God as having a history, from which it is to be concluded that God is not timeless. Why plunge into philosophical reflections on time to establish that God is not timeless when the understanding of God that will be employed in the argument is the understanding presented to us in Scripture? The only thing relevant is a scrutiny of the arguments of those who claim to be able to bear the burden of proof against taking as literally true Scripture's representation of God as having a history.

Let me say again that the reflections on time that follow will not be used to construct an argument independent of Scripture for the conclusion that God is everlasting but not eternal. Their relevance is rather that we will emerge with a deeper understanding of the implications of the biblical presentation of God as having a history. Or to put it the other way round: we will emerge with a deeper understanding of how much of the biblical presentation of God has to be given up if one holds that God is timeless. The discussion will be a specimen of the Anselmian project of faith seeking understanding; the believer seeking to understand something of the "why" of what already he or she believes.

Early in the twentieth century the English philosopher J. M. E. McTaggart made an important advance in our understanding of time by explicitly distinguishing two different ways in which events are ordered within time.⁴ Everybody – non-philosophers and philosophers alike – operated with these two systems of ordering before McTaggart came along; however, it is generally agreed that to McTaggart belongs the honor of first having explicitly and emphatically distinguished them.

All events are ordered in terms of some happening now, some having happened in the more or less distant past, and some going to happen in the more or less distant future; likewise all pairs of events are ordered in terms of one member of the pair preceding the other or being simultaneous with the other. McTaggart called these two orderings the *A-series* and the *B-series*, respectively. Of course there are overlaps in both series: a given event may be partly over, partly happening right now, and partly still to come; and one event may partly precede another and partly be simultaneous with it. Such overlaps won't make any difference to the truth of what I want to say in the following; accordingly, I will make things easier for

⁴ J. M. E. McTaggart, *The Nature of Existence*, vol. II (Cambridge University Press, 1927).

ourselves by talking as if there were none. Taking explicit account of the overlaps would require needless complications in formulation.

McTaggart himself believed that time was not real; the A-series and the B-series alike are nothing more than features of the merely apparent temporality of reality. Few have followed McTaggart on this point; on this occasion I will have to forgo scrutinizing his argument and showing why I too do not regard it as cogent. The discussion in recent years has focused instead on whether the A-series is an objective feature of time. No one disputes that the ordering of events in the B-series is objectively real; the issue under discussion is whether the distinction between past, present, and future marks a difference in ontological status of events.

What would be the alternative? Well, consider the spatial concepts of *here* and *there*. Nobody supposes that these mark a distinction in objective space; nobody supposes that some areas of space have *hereness* and the others have *thereness*. The fact that for each of us, at any time, some areas of space are *here* and the others are *there* is merely a consequence of the fact that each of us has a location in space, by virtue of having bodies. Here is simply where I am. For bodiless angels there's no here and no there.

Perhaps past, present, and future are like that. Just as each of us has a location in space, by virtue of each having a body and those bodies having a location, so also each of our actions and responses has a location in time – that is, in the B-series. Perhaps the present is simply the location in time of my act of writing down these words, and of whatever else is simultaneous with that. The past would then be whatever precedes that, and the future whatever succeeds it. It's only because there are selves having bodies with spatial locations that the concepts of *here* and *there* have applicability; perhaps it's only because there are agents whose actions and reactions have locations in the B-series that the concepts of *past*, *present*, and *future* have applicability.

The thesis that the A-series is not objectively real has come to be called the *tenseless* theory of time; the view that it is objectively real is called the *tense* theory. I am an adherent of the tense theory. Let me give some of my reasons.

To get going, let's have before us the outlines of the two very different pictures of time that the theorists of these two views embrace.

Start with the tense theory. The account sometimes given of the tense theory – usually by those who do not hold it – is that the past, the present, and the future are properties that events possess for a while and then lack. Every event that appears in the B-series is such that for a certain stretch of

time in that series it has the property of being future while lacking those of being present and of being past; then at a certain time in the B-series it loses the property of being future and gains that of being present while continuing to lack the property of being past; then it loses that property and ever after has the property of being past while lacking that of being present or being future.

What's wrong with this picture, as the tense theorist sees things, is that it treats past, present, and future as properties of events and regards the three properties as equal in status. In fact the present is basic, in the following way. What's fundamental in time is the *occurrence* of events – this for the most part having nothing to do with your and my temporal relationship to those events. When an event occurs, that's when it's present; being present at *t* and occurring at *t* come to the same thing. It's only because an event occurs – and it can't occur without occurring at some time – that it has a location anywhere in the B-series. If it's now past, that's because its occurring is now sometime in the past. There's no other way for it to get into the past than that way. Its occurring is now over. What remains now is the *fact that it did occur*. But the *fact that it did occur* is very different from *its occurring*. The distinction between present, past, and future marks a difference in the ontological status of events; and of these, the status of the present is basic.

Does an event that occurred still exist when it *is* past? That depends on what one means by the question. If one means, Does that event continue to occur? the answer is of course, no; its occurring is over. If one means, Can that event be a component of various facts – pre-eminently of the fact that it is past – and can we refer to it? the answer is, yes. If one chooses to use *exist* so that a sufficient condition of something's now existing is that it is now a component of facts and can be referred to, then past events exist.

What about the future? Are future events likewise components of facts, and can we refer to them? Tense theorists divide on this point. My own view, which I won't here defend since it won't make any difference in what follows, is that only when an event is occurring or has occurred can it be a component of facts and can it be referred to. There are lots of general facts about the future, but no facts having particular events as constituents.

Now for the picture with which the tenseless theorist operates: things and events are spread throughout B-series time as they are throughout space, and no event in the series differs from another in ontological status, nor does any event ever change its ontological status. Those whose date is 2099 have exactly the same status as those whose date is 1899 and

as those whose date is 1999 (this last being when this present essay is being written); and of no event is it the case that at a certain time it has the ontological status of occurring and then at a later time the different ontological status of having occurred – after having been nowhere present in the B-series before it occurred.

Past, present, and future enter the picture when agents who do things at times (in the B-series) enter the picture. We all use two distinct ways of specifying the positions of events in the B-series. One consists of picking out some event and then specifying the temporal position of everything else by reference to that event: *the letter arrived a week after he mailed it*. In addition to ad hoc employments of this strategy, we now have a universal system, consisting in part of taking the birth of Christ as the universal reference point and locating all other events by reference to that one; as in, for example, *the stock market crashed in AD 1929*. The other is the indexical strategy. We specify the location of events in terms of their relation to the location of what's now; for example, *the stock market crashed seventy years ago*. The distinction between past, present, and future has no ontological significance. When I say, "The kettle is whistling now," I am making no claim concerning the ontological status of the kettle's whistling; I am simply relating the kettle's whistling to my act of *saying* that it's whistling. What I say is true if the kettle's whistling is simultaneous with my act of saying that it's whistling – if it occurs at the same date. Correspondingly, its whistling is in the past if it precedes my act of saying, and it's in the future if it follows my act of saying.

Now for some of my reasons for holding that the tenseless theory is untenable: most of the discussion of these matters over the past fifty years or so has been conducted in terms of language, propositions, speech acts, truth and meaning. Early on it was the contention of the tenseless theorists that any proposition asserted by assertively uttering a tensed sentence on some date could equally well be asserted with a tenseless sentence in which one specified that date. For example, the proposition I assert by assertively uttering in 1999 the tensed sentence "The stock market crashed seventy years ago" could equally well have been asserted by uttering the dated tenseless sentence "The stock market crashes seventy years before 1999."

Suppose this claim were true; it's not obvious what ontological conclusion should be drawn. The proposition asserted can be expressed with either a tensed date-free sentence or a tenseless dated sentence; how do we get from that to the conclusion of the tenseless theorist that the only *facts* are *tenseless* facts – B-series facts? Be that as it may, however, I argued in an

earlier essay on these matters that the claim is mistaken.⁵ The proposition asserted in the one case is not identical with that asserted in the other; they have different entailments. What I say in assertively uttering "The stock market crashed seventy years ago" entails nothing at all about the date of the crash; what I say in assertively uttering "The stock market crashes in 1929" entails nothing at all about how long ago that was.

The tenseless theorist D. H. Mellor in effect concedes this point – *in effect*, since he conducts his discussion in terms of the meaning of sentences rather than the identity of propositions: he concedes that a date-free tensed sentence does not mean the same as any dated tense-free sentence.⁶ To this he adds the important point that tensed sentences are indispensable in human affairs. Having conceded that no dated tense-free sentence is identical in meaning with a date-free tensed sentence, some tenseless theorist might think to handle the problem in procrustean fashion by proposing to abolish sentences of the latter sort; since they cannot be "reduced" to tenseless sentences, get rid of them. We cannot, Mellor argues; for we cannot do without that indexical system of temporal reference. The alternative non-indexical system is not sufficient.

This leads Mellor to propose, in place of the claim by earlier tenseless theorists about identity of meaning of sentences, a claim about *truth conditions* for tensed sentences. To understand his claim, we must have in hand the distinction between a sentence, on the one hand, and utterances and inscriptions of that sentence, on the other. Mellor marks the distinction with the now-familiar terminology first introduced by C. S. Peirce, "type" and "token." The sentence as such is a *type*; utterances and inscriptions of the type are *tokens*. The account of the truth conditions for tense that Mellor offers is a thesis concerning the truth conditions of *tokens* of tensed sentences. More specifically, since the statement of conditions mentions the token, it is a *token-reflexive* account. More specifically yet, it is, as one would expect, a *tenseless token-reflexive* account. For tokens of present-tense sentences, the account goes as follows:

Any token T of "*E* is occurring now" is true if and only if *E* occurs simultaneously with T.

The thought is this: from the set of all sentence-tokens that ever exist and which are of the form, "*E* is occurring now" (where *E* stands in for a designation of some event), pick any one you wish; that token will be true

⁵ In "God everlasting," chapter 7 in this present collection.

⁶ D. H. Mellor, *Real Time* (Cambridge University Press, 1981).

just in case the event designated occurs simultaneously with – at the same time in the B-series as – the token. (“Occurs” is to be understood as *tenseless*.) The reader can easily figure out for herself the corresponding truth conditions for tokens of past-tense and of future-tense sentences.

The criterion offered seems to me definitely correct; let’s not spend time worrying the matter. The question to consider is what significance that has. There is an a priori reason for expecting that it won’t have much. Sentences of vastly different meaning, and propositions of vastly different content, often have the same truth conditions. Take the proposition *It’s an animal if a cat*, and the proposition $2+3=5$; their truth conditions are exactly the same: they’re both true in all possible worlds. Hence the sentence “It’s an animal if a cat” is true if and only if $2+3=5$.

But let’s go beyond a priori considerations to look at the case before us. Notice, in the first place, that the criterion for the truth of the token entails the existence of the token; the token T cannot occur simultaneously with the event *E* unless T exists. That the criterion should have this entailment seems correct. Mellor takes sentence-tokens to be the bearers of truth and falsehood; and a condition of some bearer of truth and falsehood being true is that the bearer exist. In this regard, the criterion proposed by Mellor is a definite improvement over one proposed around the same time by J. J. C. Smart.⁷ Smart’s account has come to be called the “tenseless date theory” (compared to Mellor’s “tenseless token-reflexive theory”). For present-tense tokens, Smart’s account goes like this:

Any token T of “*E* is occurring now,” uttered or inscribed at time *t*, is true if and only if *E* occurs at *t*.

Smart’s criterion is not sufficient for the truth of the token; what’s needed is not just that the event referred to occur at the time the token was uttered or inscribed, but also that there *be* that token at that time.

Back then to Mellor’s proposal. Notice that the very thing that makes it satisfactory as a necessary and sufficient condition for the truth of a tensed sentence-token – that it entails the existence of the token – makes it unsatisfactory as a specification of the *meaning* of the sentence, and unsatisfactory as a specification of the content of the proposition asserted by the assertive utterance of the sentence. When I assertively utter a sentence of the form “*E* is occurring now,” I am making no claim whatsoever about my act of assertively uttering the sentence, nor about the

⁷ J. J. C. Smart, “Time and Becoming,” in Peter van Inwagen, ed., *Time and Cause: Essays Presented to Richard Taylor* (Dordrecht, Netherlands: D. Reidel, 1980), 3–15.

sentence-token I have thereby produced. Suppose I assertively utter, "The twentieth century is about to end." In doing so I make no claim whatsoever about my act of utterance nor about the token produced. The truth of *what I say* is independent of the existence of my act of utterance and of the token I produce – this in spite of the fact *a condition of that token's being true* is that there be that token. But surely what we require from the tenseless theorist is some account of *what we're saying* when we use the language of tense – a *tenseless* account! Truth conditions do not give us that account.

There is an additional difficulty that is more indicative of what is wrong with the tenseless theory. The situation considered thus far involves picking out some token of a tensed sentence and determining whether its truth condition is satisfied. Consider now the circumstance of resolving to do something when some time or event comes around. One of Mellor's examples will do nicely: resolving to turn on the radio to hear the one o'clock news. To enact this resolution I must turn on the radio when I believe that it is *now* one o'clock. How do I determine that, on the tenseless account? Well, says the tenseless theorist, see to it that your act of turning it on is simultaneous with the event of its becoming one o'clock. Well, yes. But twice a day every day it becomes one o'clock; with which of that multitude of events am I to make my act of turning on the radio simultaneous? And come to think of it, there are also many acts of my turning on this radio, spread out across time. If I somehow come to know which of all those events of its becoming one o'clock is of concern to me, then I still have to know which of all my acts of turning on this radio I am to make simultaneous with that event of its becoming one o'clock.

Of course the answer is that it's this *present* event of its becoming one o'clock that is of concern to me, and this *present* act of my turning on the radio. To operate the indexical system of temporal reference I have to be able to determine which date is now – or which events are happening now. All the references that the system enables are ultimately related to that. The tenseless theorist, for whom all dates and events have exactly the same ontological status, has no way of accounting for how we make that determination. If all events of its becoming one o'clock, and all acts of my turning on this radio, have exactly the same ontological status, how do I get started in implementing my decision that my *present* act of turning on this radio shall coincide with this *present* event of its becoming one o'clock (alternatively: with this present event of the beginning of the one o'clock news)?

Mellor rightly recognizes that the acceptability of his tenseless token-reflexive account of the truth conditions for tensed sentence-tokens does not, by itself, imply that the A-series is not an objective dimension of time; accordingly, after articulating his account of truth conditions he goes on to offer an argument for the non-objectivity of tense by adapting McTaggart's argument for the non-reality of time in general. The argument seems to me fallacious. I judge that on this occasion I can forgo showing that, however, since we already have good reason for concluding that the basic thesis of the tenseless theorist, that tense supervenes on our operation of the indexical system for specifying temporal location, cannot be sustained. Rather than tense supervening on our operation of the system, we cannot operate the system without being able to pick out those events and dates that have the unique ontological status of occurring *now*. Knowing which events occur simultaneously with which falls short of knowing which ones *are occurring now*.

OUTSIDE OF TIME?

What would it be for something to be outside of time – timeless, eternal? Best to begin with what it is for something to be within time. Events are obviously within time. They are that by virtue of occurring within a period (or moment) of time, hence of beginning at a time and of ending at a time; if they endure, they are also within time by virtue of being half over at a certain time, a quarter over, and so forth. And if there are changes within the event, then the event is also within time by virtue of the lapse of time between the two termini of the change.

The situation for things other than events – substances, such as human beings, animals and plants; properties, such as *being quizzical* and *being smart*; numbers; and so on – is different. Such entities, though many of them have spatial parts, do not have temporal parts. Only a small part of that rather long event that is Bill Clinton's occupancy of the office of US president is occurring today; by contrast, our fourteen-year-old cat is all here right now; he's not mostly over, not more than half gone.

In many cases the significance of this difference between events and non-events is considerably diminished by virtue of the fact that for many non-events there is the *history* or *biography* of that entity; and the history or biography of an entity is a complex event. Our cat has a history. That history began at a certain time and will end at a certain time; and since fourteen is already rather old for a cat, his history is by now well more than half over. Furthermore, over the years there have been a lot of new

developments in that history. In short, a story could be told about our cat; a narrative of its history could be composed.

But there's no story to be told about numbers, no narrative to be composed. That's because numbers have no history. They neither come into existence nor go out; nor do they change. For some numbers it happens that they are discovered at a certain time; but the event of a number's discovery is an item in the history of its discoverer, not in the history of the number. Its discovery makes no difference to the number; it represents no change in it.

When it comes to non-events I propose that we take whether or not something has a history as the determinant of whether or not it is in time. What brings it about that you and I are in time? The fact that we each have a history, the fact that about each of us there's a story that can be told, a narrative that can be composed. What brings it about that numbers are not in time – that they are timeless? The fact that none has a history.⁸

DOES GOD HAVE A HISTORY?

So our main question is this: Does God have a history? Is there a story to be told about God, a narrative to be composed? There's nothing to be narrated about God's coming into or going out of existence, since, as we all agree, God doesn't come into or go out of existence, necessarily so. The question comes down to whether there's a history of God's actions and responses, and of the knowledge that lies behind those. Is there a story to be told about God's actions, about God's responses to what transpires in God's creation, and about the flow of God's knowledge that lies behind those?

⁸ One might hold that something is (or was or will be) in time if it's ever true to say of it that it now exists. Then the theist will perforce be committed to the view that God is in time. For the theist holds that God exists. And by *exists* I don't see that one ever has any option but to mean "presently exists" or "did and does and will exist," or "does or did or will exist." In general, our verbs have no truly tenseless sense. The so-called tenseless sense is really the disjunctive sense: *does* or *did* or *will*. My reason for not using the criterion cited just above for determining whether God is in time has to do with the central reason that the tradition offered for holding that God is timeless. That reason is that God must be understood as changeless. It is God's ontological immutability that was of central concern. It appears to me that Anselm did interpret God's timelessness so rigorously that one cannot even say "God presently exists." But I fail to see that he offers any other reason for concluding that God is timeless than that God does not in any way change; and surely it would be a mistake to conclude that numbers, for example, change just because we can say of some number that it presently exists, and did, and will exist.

Scripture offers us such a narrative. I took note of a small bit of it at the beginning of our discussion: after hearing the Hebrews' cry of suffering, God addressed Moses out of an unburnt flaming bush and, upon being asked for his name, told Moses that he was to be called I AM.

Those who hold that God is timeless agree, of course, that Scripture offers us this narrative. They deny, nevertheless, that God has a history. Not only does God not come into or go out of existence, there are also no changes in God: no alterations in action, response, or knowledge. The biblical narrative is not to be interpreted as presenting items in God's history; it is to be interpreted as presenting items in human history. The analogue to numbers is helpful: what appears at first sight to be a history of numbers is in fact a history of human beings dealing with numbers.

Everybody in the orthodox Christian tradition would agree, however, that for the purposes at hand there are some absolutely decisive differences between God and numbers. For our purposes the most important differences to note are that whereas God acts, numbers do not; and whereas God has knowledge, numbers do not.

If one concedes that God acts, how can one nevertheless hold that God has no history, and that the narrative of God's actions presented to us in Scripture cannot be interpreted as a narrative of God's history? The classic solution to this puzzle was articulated by Thomas Aquinas in the following passage:

Nor, if the action of the first agent is eternal, does it follow that His effect is eternal... God acts voluntarily in the production of things... God's act of understanding and willing is, necessarily, His act of making. Now, an effect follows from the intellect and the will according to the determination of the intellect and the command of the will. Moreover, just as the intellect determines every other condition of the thing made, so does it prescribe the time of its making; for art determines not only that this thing is to be such and such, but that it is to be at this particular time, even as a physician determines that a dose of medicine is to be drunk at such and such a particular time, so that, if his act of will were of itself sufficient to produce the effect, the effect would follow anew from his previous decision, without any new action on his part. Nothing, therefore, prevents our saying that God's action existed from all eternity, whereas its effect was not present from eternity, but existed at that time when, from all eternity, He ordained it.⁹

The core of the point Aquinas is making is that one must distinguish between (a) the time at which one enacts one's decision to do what's

⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles* 2, 35; cf. 2, 36a. I use the translation of the English Dominicans (New York: Benzinger Brothers, 1947).

necessary to make something happen and (b) the time at which, so one has decided, it shall happen. I think there are better analogies to illustrate the point than the one Aquinas offers. Most of us will remember those toys from childhood in which one releases a marble at the top of the toy and the marble then descends through a series of loops, springs, trapdoors and the like, until fifteen seconds or so later it emerges at the bottom. Perhaps I am especially fond of that sequence in which the marble opens the trapdoor, falls through it, hits the spring and is tossed up into the air. In order to make that happen, I release the marble at the top at a certain moment; no further decisions are required on my part. Nonetheless, it's not until five seconds after I release the marble that it opens the trapdoor, and not until three seconds later is it tossed up into the air. Perhaps I also decide that it shall be tossed up into the air at the very moment that the clock in the hall begins to strike noon. Then I release the marble precisely eight seconds before the time at which, so I calculate, the clock will begin to strike. And that's all I do; in particular, I don't do anything in addition at noon.

It's along these lines, so Aquinas suggests, that we should think of God's action. From the fact that God decided to bring about a sequence of two events it does not follow that God first enacted the decision to bring about the earlier event and then enacted the decision to bring about the later. For any pair of events that God decided to bring about, no matter how separated in time those events may be, God's enactment of the decision to bring about one of them is simultaneous with his enactment of the decision to bring about the other. The temporal sequence is entirely in the events, not at all in God.

To which the only thing to be added is that there's no such thing as the time before God made the decision and no such thing as the time after God made the decision; were that the case, God would after all have a history. What separates the position of traditional orthodox Christian theology from deism is the insistence, on the part of the former, that there's no time at which God is not yet enacting the decision, nor any at which God is no longer enacting it. The deist holds that God made the decision *and ever since then* has watched it play out.

An implication of the traditional orthodox position is that none of God's actions is a response to what we human beings do; indeed, not only is none of God's *actions* a response to what we do; nothing at all in God's life is a response to what occurs among God's creatures.

Why is that? The traditional theologians had a number of reasons for holding that there is nothing in God that is a response, chief among them

their conviction that responsiveness on God's part would compromise God's aseity, God's unconditionedness. For our purposes there's another reason that's more relevant, however. Responsiveness would require tensed knowledge on God's part; and were God to have tensed knowledge of what happens in human affairs, God would perforce have a history.

One responds to something upon knowing that it is happening, or has happened or is about to happen. I hold my excitement over its turning a new millennium until I see that it is turning a new millennium; I'm saddened by my mother's death upon learning that it *has* happened. If all I know about the time of my mother's death is tenseless facts – B-series facts – then I don't grieve, because I don't know whether her death has yet happened. Likewise if all I know about the event of its turning a new millennium is tenseless facts, then I don't cheer, because again I don't know whether the event has yet happened. Earlier we saw that enacting the decision to act when it becomes a certain time, or when a certain event happens, requires knowledge (or belief) of tensed facts. In their relationship to time, there's a deep similarity between response and such action.

But if God has no history, then God lacks tensed knowledge. For one can know that something is presently happening only when it is; the knowledge that some event is occurring can occur only when that event itself is occurring. The endurance of the knowledge exactly tracks the endurance of the event. So if God has knowledge of present-tensed facts, then there's change in God's knowledge – as indeed there is if God has knowledge of past-tensed facts and future-tensed facts. Since those facts come and go, God's knowledge of them comes and goes. That's why, if God has knowledge of tensed facts, God has a history; there's a story to be told about God's knowledge.

Let me place in center stage the implication, just noticed, of the claim that God has no history and is accordingly out of time, eternal: were God eternal, God's knowledge would be extremely constricted in scope. Of no tensed fact would God have any knowledge; God would not have knowledge of any A-series facts, only of B-series facts. As a consequence, God could neither respond to what transpires in the world nor enact the decision to act at a certain time. If God were eternal, God's action would have to be entirely non-interventionist.

Contrast this with how Scripture presents God. When Moses asks to be given God's name, God knows that Moses is doing so – knows not just the tenseless fact that Moses at some time or other asks for the name, but the tensed fact that Moses is *presently* asking for the name. Hence it is that God can now respond, and does now respond, by now giving the

name; God intervenes. If all God knew was the tenseless fact that Moses at some time or other asks for the name, then God wouldn't know when to offer the name.

In place of this biblical presentation of God as responding and intervening, those who hold that God is eternal think of God as considering in advance all the possibilities and acting accordingly – all of this being timeless. A variation on the child's toy I asked us to imagine earlier may be helpful. Suppose there are various paths that the marble can take, depending on where exactly I release it. But the possibility of monitoring the progress of the marble and then, depending on what I think about it, intervening at certain points – opening or not opening a trapdoor at a certain bend – is not open to me. So what do I do in forming my decision as to where to release the marble? Let's add – this is important – that neither I nor anyone else has ever yet released a marble in this apparatus, or any like it. Well, what I do is figure out which path the marble *would* follow for each position of release, and then evaluate those paths. That is, I figure out the relevant counterfactuals, and I make my appraisals. If I released the marble here it would follow path A; and though that has a stretch that would be glorious, it also has a stretch that would be pretty dull. If, on the other hand, I released the marble there, it would follow path B; and though on B there would be nothing so glorious as that stretch in path A, there would also be nothing as dull. In the light of my discovery of these counterfactuals and my appraisal, I make my decision. I make my decision in the light of the various possibilities and their relative excellences; I don't mindlessly plunge ahead. So there's something like responsiveness in my process of decision: responsiveness to the possibilities. But having chosen one of the options, I don't respond to the actual progress of the marble, and I don't intervene.

Something like that is how the defender of divine eternity thinks of God's action – with the following important addition: if you and I are free agents, then God must also know what you and I would freely do. The toy through which the marble descends is entirely mechanical – no free action there. But human beings are central to God's decisions; and if we are capable of free action, then, so a good many thinkers have held, there must be facts of the matter as to what we would do in various situations, and God must know those facts. There must be "counterfactuals of freedom." For suppose we were capable of free action, but there were no facts as to what we would freely do in all the various situations in which we would find ourselves. Then God would simply have to take a risk. Hence it is that most of those who hold to God's eternity either deny

human freedom or embrace the thesis that there are counterfactuals of freedom.

IN TIME BUT NOT IN SPACE?

Rather often it is objected to those who hold that God's actions have temporal locations that, given the similarities between time and space, they must also hold that God has a spatial location; if one holds that God has a history, then consistency requires holding that God has a location. I hold that God does not have a spatial location; how do I answer the charge of inconsistency?

On the face of it, the charge seems to have very little going for it. An agent has a spatial location on account of having a body; the location of the agent's body being the location of the agent. When the agent speaks of something as *here*, "here" refers to the region of space in which his or her body happens to be located at that time. By contrast, if there's some variation in the acts that an agent performs, then the agent has a history; then it is "in" time. But if one doesn't hold that agents are necessarily embodied, then why shouldn't it be the case that certain agents – God, angels, and so forth – have a history without occupying a place?

In his book *Eternal God*, Paul Helm offers a more specific version of the objection.¹⁰ He insists that to my argument in "God everlasting," that if God were timelessly eternal there would be temporal matters that God could never know, a precisely parallel argument can be constructed for the conclusion that if God has no spatial location, then there would be spatial matters that God could never know. So if one wishes to hold that God lacks spatial location, then one must also hold that God is timeless.

Now if one combined the claim that there would be temporal matters God could never know if God were timelessly eternal, with the claim that the A-series is not a feature of objective time, only the B-series, then it's likely that an argument along these lines would work. But of course that's not what I have done. I have argued that the A-series is a feature of objective time; the temporal matters that God could never know if God were eternal are all the *tensed facts*. But to the A-series there is no counterpart in space. Correspondingly, I have argued that in speaking of some event as happening *now*, I am not just making a claim about the event's relation to my act of speaking – namely, that the two are simultaneous; I am saying that the event has the ontological status of *presently happening*.

¹⁰ Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988, 42–46.

By contrast, when I say that something is here, I am doing no more than making a claim concerning its relation to where my body is (presently).

I have a body, God does not; does that imply that there are some facts I can know that God cannot? For example, I know that the kettle is now boiling here; do I thereby know some fact that God cannot know? Definitely not. God knows that the kettle is presently boiling, and knows where I am, thereby knowing what region of space is here for me. There's nothing more God has to know in order to know that the kettle is boiling here.

DIVINE ACTION

As we have seen, God's action, on the view of the eternalist, consists of timelessly bringing about events that have temporal locations. God's speaking to Moses consists of timelessly bringing about the event consisting of those sounds emerging at that precise time from the unburned flaming bush.

The most important question for the Christian to consider, in reflecting on this understanding of divine action, is whether it is compatible with an orthodox understanding of what happens in the incarnation. So far as I can see, it is not; whatever we may think in general about Aquinas' strategy, at this point it fails. The actions of Jesus were not simply actions by the human being Jesus that were brought about by God, plus actions freely performed by Jesus in situations brought about by God; they were God's actions. In the life and deeds of Jesus it was God who dwelt among us. The narrative of the history of Jesus is not just a narrative concerning events in the history of the relationship of a human being to God; it's a narrative about God. God does have a history; the doctrine of the incarnation implies that the history of Jesus is the history of God.

DOES GOD CHANGE?

In the preceding discussion we have seen that holding that God has no history, and is on that account timeless, requires not only that one depart a long way from Scripture's narrative presentation of God but that one also depart, at various points, from the orthodox theological tradition as well. Accordingly, we will need powerful reasons for holding that God is timeless. In principle there might be such reasons. After all, we all do at certain points depart from Scripture's presentation of God. Scripture occasionally presents God as having wings: none of us believes that God

literally has wings; we all take Scripture's language on this point to be metaphorical. So we have to be open to considering reasons for concluding that Scripture's narrative concerning God is not to be interpreted as a narrative of the history of God but only as a narrative of the history of human beings.

It will have been evident from remarks I have made along the way that I do not judge the reasons that the tradition has offered in favor of divine timelessness to be adequate to the task at hand; those who hold that God has no history have not succeeded in bearing the burden of proof. On this occasion I will not be able to show that; doing so would require another essay of at least the length of this present one. I will have to content myself with displaying where the issues lie and then leaving it there for the present.

It is not infrequently said, by those who oppose the doctrine of God's timelessness, that, in embracing this doctrine, the church fathers were succumbing to the power of Greek philosophical thought and that later theologians, on account of the prestige of tradition, then followed in the footsteps of their predecessors. From this claim I insist on dissociating myself, and that for a number of reasons.¹¹

For one thing, not everything the Greek philosophers said was false; to observe that some Greek philosopher held that the divine is timeless leaves open the question whether he was right about that. More important, the objection distorts what happened in the formation of Christian theology; it represents it as having simply been a matter of resisting or succumbing to cultural power.

No doubt all of us are subject to some degree to the formative power of our ambient culture. What impresses one about the church fathers, however, is how weak had become the cultural power of Greek philosophical thought over their thinking. Rather than simply giving voice to a supposed indoctrination into Greek philosophical thought, they had arguments for their theological convictions concerning God. Some of those arguments were no doubt first formulated by one or another Greek philosopher. But it's obvious to anybody who looks that the church fathers were already sufficiently removed from the cultural power of Greek philosophical thought to be eminently capable of sifting through that part of their inheritance, agreeing with what they judged themselves to have good reason to accept and rejecting the rest.

¹¹ I am here to some extent disagreeing with things I said on this matter in my "God everlasting."

It is to their arguments, then, that we must attend; we cannot content ourselves with announcing that their loyalty to Scripture was subverted by the cultural power over them of Greek philosophical thought. Naturally some premises in their arguments that seemed plausible to them may not seem at all plausible to us; when we probe what accounts for that, we may sometimes conclude that they were at that point reflecting the mentality of the society in which they were reared. Nonetheless, since they gave reasons, it is to those reasons that we must attend; there is no shortcut around that.

I have suggested that the fundamental issue at stake, in the discussion concerning the relation of God to time, is whether God has a history; the defenders of eternalism hold that God has no history, those like myself who instead defend God's everlastingness hold that God does have a history. And I argued that whether or not God has a history depends, in turn, on whether there is any sort of change in God. Change in God is what is really at issue.¹²

What reasons have the theologians and philosophers of the Christian tradition offered for their claim that God is ontologically immutable? So far as I can determine, the arguments come down to three. Mutability is incompatible with God's simplicity, simplicity in turn being grounded in aseity. Mutability is incompatible with God's supreme excellence. And third, to suppose that God changes would blur the distinction between Creator and creature. All three of these reasons are developed, and sometimes blended together, in what is perhaps the most rigorous and sustained defense of God's timelessness in the Christian theological tradition: chapters 17–25 of Anselm's *Monologium*.¹³

Here's how the first line of reasoning goes. God is not in any way composite. "A composite requires, for its existence, its components and owes its being what it is to them. It is what it is through them. They, however, are not what they are through it. A composite, therefore, just is not supreme" (§17). In fact, though, everything derives its existence from God. It follows that God is simple – that is, not in any way composite. But now suppose that God had a history. Then God would be "one thing, at one time, and a different thing at another"; God would have parts "scattered about throughout time" (§21). Given simplicity, that is impossible.

¹² On this issue, I am in full agreement with Helm. See *Eternal God*, 20.

¹³ I am using the translation in Brian Davies and G. R. Evans, eds., *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works* (Oxford University Press, 1998). References are given parenthetically in the text.

In the following passage this reason is hinted at, and blended with, the other two reasons: that whereas God is supremely excellent, mutable things lack a certain excellence, and that the lack of mutability in God is one of the fundamental differences between Creator and creature:

So, we may reasonably say, [the supreme being's] place is no place and its time no time. Now, to have been discovered not to possess time or place, is immediately to have been declared free from the jurisdiction of the time and place. What, therefore, no time or place defines, space and time do not confine. The creator of all substances, the supreme substance, is necessarily free from the natures and laws of everything it has created from nothing. It is not subject to them. Is it then under the rules and regulations of time and place? All rational reflection, for every sort of reason, rules this out. Rather its power – and its power is just its essence – rules over and regulates everything it has made. (§22)

Unlike the creature, no part of God's "eternity [leaks] away with the past into non-existence, or [flies] past, like the scarcely existing momentary present, or, with the future, [waits] pending, in non-yet existence – just because it is, was and will be" (§22).

I think Anselm is right in his contention that if God has a history, then God is not unconditioned *in the way that Anselm understands God to be unconditioned*, and right in his contention that God lacks something *that Anselm regards as an excellence*; likewise he is right in his contention that if God has a history, then the distinction between Creator and creature is not *grounded in the way Anselm thinks it is grounded*. So obviously the questions to consider are whether Anselm's understanding of God's aseity and excellence is compelling, and whether the person who holds that God has a history is inevitably left without an adequate way of marking the distinction between Creator and creature. I hold that the answer to both questions is no. But it would be a disservice to the issues at stake, and a dishonoring of Anselm, to discuss them quickly and superficially. What one says about God's relation to time involves a very great deal of the rest of one's theology.

CHAPTER 9

Suffering love

My heart grew sombre with grief, and wherever I looked I saw only death. My own country became a torment and my own home a grotesque abode of misery. All that we had done together was now a grim ordeal without him. My eyes searched everywhere for him, but he was not there to be seen. I hated all the places we had known together, because he was not in them and they could no longer whisper to me, "Here he comes!" as they would have done had he been alive but absent for a while... My soul was a burden, bruised and bleeding. It was tired of the man who carried it, but I found no place to set it down to rest. (Augustine, *Confessions* IV, 4; IV, 7)¹

It is in passages such as this, where he exposes to full view the grief that overwhelmed him upon the death of his dear friend from Tagaste, that Augustine is at his most appealing to us in the twentieth century. We are attracted both by the intensity of his love and grief, and by his willingness to expose that grief to his friends and the readers of his *Confessions*. To any who may have experienced torments similar to those Augustine here describes, the passage also has the mysteriously balming quality of expressing with delicate precision the grief they themselves have felt. All the places and all the objects that once whispered "Here he comes" or "Here she comes" have lost their voice and fallen achingly mute.

It is a rough jolt, then, to discover that at those very points in his life where we find Augustine most appealing, he, from the time of his conversion onward, found himself thoroughly disgusting. His reason for exposing his grief was to share with his readers his confession to God of the senselessness and sinfulness of a love so intense for a being so fragile that its destruction could cause such grief. "Why do I talk of these things?" he asks. And he answers, "It is time to confess, not to question" (*Confessions* IV, 6).

¹ Translated by R. S. Pine-Coffin (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1961). All my citations from the *Confessions* will be from this translation and given parenthetically in the text.

In the years between the death of his friend and the death of his mother Augustine embraced the Christian faith. That embrace made his response to his mother's death very different from that to his friend's. "I closed her eyes," he says,

and a great wave of sorrow surged into my heart. It would have over-flowed in tears if I had not made a strong effort of will and stemmed the flow, so that the tears dried in my eyes. What a terrible struggle it was to hold them back! As she breathed her last, the boy Adeodatus began to wail aloud and only ceased his cries when we all checked him. I, too, felt that I wanted to cry like a child, but a more mature voice within me, the voice of my heart, bade me keep my sobs in check, and I remained silent. (*Confessions* IX, 12)

On that earlier occasion, tears and "tears alone were sweet to him, for in his heart's desire they had taken the place of his friend" (*Confessions* IV, 4). In his reminiscences he asked why that was so, "why tears are sweet to the sorrowful." "How ... can it be that there is sweetness in the fruit we pluck from the bitter crop of life, in the mourning and the tears, the wailing and the sighs?" (*Confessions* IV, 5). But now, on the occasion of his mother's death, he "fought against the wave of sorrow" (*Confessions* IX, 12).

His struggle for self-control was not successful. He reports that after the burial, as he lay in bed thinking of his devoted mother, "the tears which I had been holding back streamed down, and I let them flow as freely as they would, making of them a pillow for my heart. On them it rested ..." (*Confessions* IX, 12). So now, he says to God, "I make to you my confession ... Let any man read it who will ... And if he finds that I sinned by weeping for my mother, even if only for a fraction of an hour, let him not mock at me ... but weep himself, if his charity is great. Let him weep for my sins to you ..." (*Confessions* IX, 12). The sin for which Augustine wants the person of charity to weep, however, is not so much the sin of weeping over the death of his mother as the sin of which that weeping was a sign. I was, says Augustine, "guilty of too much worldly affection."

Obviously there is a mentality coming to expression here that is profoundly foreign to us. In our own day there are still those who hold back tears – usually because they think it unbecoming to cry, seldom because they think it sinful. But rare is the person who believes that even to *feel* grief upon the death of a friend or one's mother is to have been guilty of too much worldly affection. The mentality expressed not only shapes Augustine's view of the proper place of sorrow and suffering in human life; it also contributes to his conviction that in God there is no sorrow or suffering. God's life is a life free of sorrow – indeed, a life

free of upsetting emotions in general, a life free of passions, a life of apathy, untouched by suffering, characterized only by steady bliss. In thus thinking of God, Augustine was by no means alone. Indeed, the view that God's life is that of blissful non-suffering apathy enjoyed near total consensus until the twentieth century. Among the church fathers, only Origen and Lactantius thought differently – and Origen, only inconsistently so.

But why would anyone who placed himself in the Christian tradition think of God's life as that of non-suffering apathy? The identity of that tradition is determined (in part) by the adherence of its members, in one way or another, to the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. And even those who read while running cannot fail to notice that God is there pictured as one who sufferingly experiences this world and therefore grieves. What was it, then, that led the tradition to "bracket" this dimension of the biblical picture of God? Many of our modern theologians reject the proposition that God acts miraculously in history; if they remain within the Christian tradition, they "bracket" that part of the biblical narrative and picture. But "bracketing" did not begin with the Enlightenment. It was practiced already by the church fathers, on all the passages that spoke of the passions and the suffering of God. In this essay I wish to dig down to the roots of this practice; and having done that, to go on to ask: Were they right in this claim of theirs, that God does not sufferingly experience the world?

We cannot do better than begin with Augustine. But we would be ill-advised to move at once to what Augustine said about emotions and suffering in the life of God. For it was true of Augustine, as it was of most others in the tradition, that his reflections on the place of emotions and suffering in God's life were merely a component within his more comprehensive reflections on the place of emotions and suffering in the ideal life of persons generally – divine and human together. We must try, then, to grasp that totality. Let us begin with what Augustine says about the proper place of emotions and suffering in human experience.

Augustine frames his thought within the eudaemonistic tradition of antiquity. We are all in search of happiness – by which Augustine and the other ancients did not mean a life in which happiness outweighs grief and ennui but a life from which grief and ennui have been cast out – a life of uninterrupted bliss. Furthermore, Augustine aligns himself with the Platonic tradition in his conviction that one's love, one's *eros*, is the fundamental determinant of one's happiness. Augustine never imagined

that a human being could root out *eros* from his existence.² Incomplete beings that we are, we inescapably long for fulfillment. The challenge, accordingly, is to choose objects for one's love such that happiness ensues.

Now it was as obvious to Augustine as it is to all of us that grief ensues when that which we love is destroyed or dies, or is altered in such a way that we no longer find it lovable. Says he, in reflecting on his grief upon the death of his friend, "I lived in misery like every man whose soul is tethered by the love of things that cannot last and then is agonized to lose them ... The grief I felt for the loss of my friend had struck so easily into my inmost heart simply because I had poured out my soul upon him, like water upon sand, loving a man who was mortal as though he were never to die" (*Confessions* IV, 6; IV, 8). The cure is to detach one's love from such objects and to attach it to something immutable and indestructible. For Augustine, the only candidate was God. "Blessed are those who love you, O God ... No one can lose you ... unless he forsakes you" (*Confessions* IV, 9).

What might be called Augustine's "evangelistic strategy" follows straightforwardly. If it is happiness and rest for your soul that you desire – and who does not? – then fix your love on the eternal immutable God. Addressing his own soul, and thereby all others as well, Augustine says: "[In God] is the place of peace that cannot be disturbed, and he will not withhold himself from your love unless you withhold your love from him ... Make your dwelling in him, my soul. Entrust to him whatever you have ... All that is withered in you will be made to thrive again. All your sickness will be healed" (*Confessions* IV, 11).

² No doubt for the reason that is vividly stated in this passage from Plotinus:

And so this being, [Love, Eros] has from everlasting come into existence from the soul's aspiration towards the higher and the good, and he was there always, as long as Soul, too, existed. And he is a mixed thing, having a part of need, in that he wishes to be filled, but not without a share of plenitude, in that he seeks what is wanting to that which he already has; for certainly that which is altogether without a share in the good would not ever seek the good. So he is born of Plenty and Poverty ... But his mother is Poverty, because aspiration belongs to that which is in need. (*Enneads* III, 5, 9; translated by A. H. Armstrong [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967])

For arguments that the *full* notion of *eros* in Plato and Plotinus included some component of self-giving, see A. H. Armstrong, "Platonic Eros and Christian Agape," in A. H. Armstrong, *Plotinian and Christian Studies* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1979), and John M. Rist, *Eros and Psyche: Studies in Plato, Plotinus, and Origen* (University of Toronto Press, 1964).

Part of what obstructs our detachment from the world and attachment to God is illusion as to where happiness can be found. Much of Augustine's endeavor in his early writings was devoted to penetrating his readers' veil of illusions. But a striking feature of Augustine's thought – here he departs decisively from the Platonic tradition – is his conviction that illumination is not sufficient to redirect love. Though we may *know* that only in loving God is abiding happiness to be found, yet the beauties of the world sink their talons so deep into our souls that only by the grace of God and the most agonizing of struggles can we break loose. Nowhere is this anti-Platonic point made more vividly in Augustine's writings than in the brilliant description of his experience in the garden just before his conversion:

I now found myself driven by the tumult in my breast to take refuge in this garden, where no one could interrupt that fierce struggle, in which I was my own contestant, until it came to its conclusion ... I was frantic, overcome by violent anger with myself for not accepting your will and entering into your covenant. Yet in my bones I knew that this was what I ought to do. In my heart of hearts I praised it to the skies. And to reach this goal I needed no chariot or ship. I need not even walk as far as I had come from the house to the place where I sat, for to make the journey, and to arrive safely, no more was required than an act of will. But it must be a resolute and wholehearted act of the will ... I tore my hair and hammered my forehead with my fists; I locked my fingers and hugged my knees; and I did all this because I made an act of will to do it ... Yet I did not do that one thing which I should have been far, far better pleased to do than all the rest and could have done at once ... My lower instincts, which had taken firm hold of me, were stronger than the higher, which were untried. And the closer I came to the moment which was to mark the great change in me, the more I shrank from my purpose; it merely left me hanging in suspense. (*Confessions* VIII, 8; VIII, 11)

I see no reason to interpret Augustine as opposed to all enjoyment of earthly things: of food, of drink, of conversation, of art. Wary, yes; opposed, no. What he says is only that we should root out the *love* of such things – root out all attachment to them such that their destruction would cause us grief. “Let my soul praise you for these things,” he says, “O God, creator of them all; but the love of them, which we feel, through the senses of the body, must not be like glue to bind my soul to them” (*Confessions* IV, 10). To enjoy the taste of kiwi fruit is acceptable provided that one's enjoyment is not such that if it proves unattainable, one grieves. Though we must not love the world, we may enjoy the world. Admittedly Augustine says little by way of grounding the legitimacy of such enjoyment. For example, the theme of the things of the world constituting God's blessing extended to us is subdued in him. In the famous passage

in Book X of the *Confessions* where the things of creation “speak,” what they say is not “Receive us with enjoyment as God’s blessing” but “Turn away from us to our maker.” Nonetheless I think we must allow that for Augustine, the detached life need not be a joyless life.³

But suppose that one has torn oneself loose from love of the things of this world and turned oneself to loving God – detached oneself from the world and attached oneself to God. Has Augustine not overlooked the fact that this is to open oneself to a new mode of grief? When Augustine recommends to us the love of God as the only source of abiding happiness, he is not recommending that we find delight in our own acts of devotion. He is not an arch-Calvinist urging that we delight in our acts of social obedience nor an arch-Orthodox urging that we delight in our celebration of the liturgy. He is urging that we delight in the experience of the presence of God. It was the presence of his friend, he says, that “was sweeter to me than all the joys of life as I loved it then” (*Confessions* IV, 4).

³ I see no other way to make the point in the text than with the word “enjoy” or some near synonym such as “delight.” But to do so is to risk introducing serious confusion into the interpretation of Augustine. For he was fond of drawing a distinction between *use* (*uti*) and *enjoyment* (*frui*), to equate enjoying with loving, and then to say that God alone must be enjoyed – earthly things are only for use. (See the chapter “Marius Victorinus and Augustine,” by R. A. Markus in A. H. Armstrong, ed., *The Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy* [Cambridge University Press, 1970], 389–91.) My point, however, is that the “use” to which earthly things may be put is probably not to be conceived in grimly utilitarian fashion; we may “enjoy” them. On the other hand, Augustine was ever conscious of the fact that *delight* in earthly things may become *love*. See his reflections on the enjoyment of food, music, etc. in *Confessions* X, 31–34.

Here is perhaps also the best place to discuss a terminological point about *love* – *amor*. I think there can be no doubt that most of the time Augustine says that we should love God alone. And to explicate his thought on this, I have taken *love* to be that mode of attachment to a thing which is such that the destruction or change of that thing would cause one grief. But there are also passages in which Augustine, with the great “Chain of Being” in mind, says that we should love things in proportion to their worth. One finds a few such passages in *Of True Religion*. But Markus (*Cambridge History*, 386–87) cites one of the most elaborate of them, taken from *De Doctrina Christiana* I, 27.28: the righteous man is “the man who values things at their true worth; he has ordered love, which prevents him from loving what is not to be loved, or not loving what is to be loved, from preferring what ought to be loved less, from loving equally what ought to be loved either less or more, or from loving either less or more what ought to be loved equally.” Probably all of us, in our first approach to Augustine, are inclined to give such passages as this prominence, rather than those in which he says that God alone is to be loved. They sound so much more humane! But I think there can be absolutely no doubt that Augustine generally meant by “love,” that degree of attachment to something such that the destruction or change of that object will cast one into grief; and that he meant to say that, in that sense, God alone is to be loved. Other things are only to be used, this use including what I have called “enjoyment.” Now naturally use and enjoyment *are* forms of “attachment” to things. Hence it is not inappropriate for Augustine sometimes to speak of a properly tempered love for these things. But the crux of the issue is this: our “love” for such things is not to be such that it can cause us grief. As we shall see shortly, Augustine also says, as one would expect, that each of us is to “love” our neighbor as ourselves. *But* – how are we to “love” ourselves?

This sweetness was to be replaced by the sweetness of God's presence. Augustine knew of that sweetness. Looking out from a window into the courtyard of a house in Ostia, he was discoursing with his mother, shortly before her death, about God. "And while we spoke of the eternal Wisdom," he says, "longing for it and straining for it with all the strength of our hearts, for one fleeting instant we reached out and touched it" (*Confessions* IX, 10). He imagines that blissful experience prolonged.

But it never is prolonged, not in our world. The experience of the saints through the ages is the experience of the sweet presence of God interrupted with long, aching stretches of God's absence. They experience the dark night of the soul, and in that night, they grieve. God "will not withhold himself from your love unless you withhold your love from him," says Augustine (*Confessions* IV, 11). Many of the great mystics would disagree. But in any case, if humanity's greatest lovers of God find their love plunging them into grief, then one cannot recommend turning one's love to God as the way to eliminate grief from one's experience.

In fact Augustine, by the time of writing his *Confessions*, agreed that to reorient oneself toward loving God is to open oneself to a new mode of grief. But the grief he had in mind was not that of which I have just spoken, that of the lover of God grieving because God hides Godself. It was that of the lover of God grieving because her own love proves weak and inconstant. The response Augustine urged to the grief that ensues upon change and decay in the objects we love is that we detach ourselves from such objects and attach ourselves to God in whom there is no shadow of turning. But this newly oriented self never wholly wins out over the old. And over that repetitious reappearance of the old self, the new now grieves. The *passive* grief of negated affection is replaced by the *active* grief of lamenting over the faults of one's religious character – over those persistent habits of the heart that one now recognizes as sin.

Prominent in the ethical philosophy of middle and late antiquity were discussions over the proper place of emotions in life. In those discussions, the Stoic view was famous. Augustine, in *The City of God*, participates in those discussions by staking out his own position on the proper place of emotions in the life of the godly person in opposition to the Stoic position.

Now the Stoics did not say that in the ideal life there would be no emotional coloring to one's experience. They insisted, on the contrary, that in such a life there would be various non-perturbing emotions that they called *eupatheiai*. They regularly cited three of these: joy, wishfulness, and caution. Their thought was that the ideal life, the happy life, is the life

of the wise person – of the person who, by virtue of directing his life by reason, is a person whose character and intentions are morally virtuous. To make it clear that, in their judgment, the only thing good in itself is moral good, they typically refused even to *call* anything else “good.” Certain other things are, at best, *preferable*. The wise person, then, will rejoice over the moral status he has attained, will wish for the continuation of that status, and will be watchful for what threatens it.

The Stoics went on to say, though, that the sage would be without *pathos*, without passion. He would be *apathes*, apathetic. His condition would be that of *apatheia* – apathy, impassibility, passionlessness. What did they mean?

In the interpretation that he offers of their position, Augustine takes a *pathos* to be simply a perturbing, upsetting emotion such as fear, grief, or ecstasy. He does not incorporate into his concept of *pathos* any theory as to the rightness or wrongness of such emotions. And he was of the opinion that, in spite of all the verbal differences between the way in which the Peripatetics expressed their view as to the place of the passions, thus understood, in the life of the moral person, and the way in which the Stoics expressed theirs, there was no substantive difference between them.⁴

The Peripatetics said that though passions may befall the moral person as well as the non-moral, they will not overthrow the rule of reason in his life, while the Stoics said that “the wise man is not subject to these perturbations” (*City of God* IX, 4).⁵ To illustrate why, in his judgment, there was no substantive difference between these two positions, Augustine cited an anecdote from Aulus Gellius. Gellius was once at sea with a famous Stoic when a storm came up and the Stoic became pale with fear of shipwreck. After the storm had passed, Gellius courteously asked the Stoic why he had become fearful. Thereupon the Stoic pulled out a book of Epictetus and pointed to a passage in which the point was made that:

When these impressions are made by alarming and formidable objects, it must needs be that they move the soul even of the wise man, so that for a little he trembles with fear, or is depressed by sadness, these impressions anticipating the work of reason and self-control; but this does not imply that the mind accepts

⁴ Augustine was not alone in antiquity in holding this view. Carneades held it as well – or at least went around asserting it. Cf. J. M. Rist, *Stoic Philosophy* (Cambridge University Press, 1969), 1. My understanding of the Stoics is very much indebted to this book by Rist. Also helpful is F. H. Sanbach, *The Stoics* (New York: W. W. Norton Co., 1975).

⁵ Augustine, *The City of God*, translated by Marcus Dods (New York: Random House, 1950). My citations will be from this edition and given parenthetically in the text.

these evil impressions, or approves or consents to them. For this consent is, they think, in a man's power; there being this difference between the mind of the wise man and that of the fool, that the fool's mind yields to these passions and consents to them, while that of the wise man, though it cannot help being invaded by them, yet retains with unshaken firmness a true and steady persuasion of those things which it ought rationally to desire or avoid. (*City of God* IX, 4)

In short, whatever emotions befall the wise person, his will and judgment remain morally intact.

Augustine goes on to speculate that perhaps the Stoics meant to assert that "the wisdom which characterizes the wise man is clouded by no error and sullied by no taint, but, with this reservation that his wisdom remains undisturbed, he is exposed to the impressions which the goods and ills of this life (or, as they prefer to call them, the advantages or disadvantages) make upon them." And he goes on to remark, somewhat wryly, that even though the Stoic refused to call his bodily safety a "good," preferring some other such word as "thing preferred" or "advantage," his turning pale with fear indicated that he esteemed his bodily safety rather highly – as highly, indeed, as the Peripatetic who was quite willing to call bodily safety a "good" and in the same situation would probably also have turned pale from fear over the threat to it.

But if this is what the Stoics mean, then, says Augustine, all parties agree that though the wise person may well experience such passions as fear and grief, he will not allow them to overthrow the rule of reason in his life – will not allow them to damage his virtue. Though the wise person may not be free *of* passions, he will be free *from* them. Though they may *befall* him, he will not be *subject* to them; they will not influence his intentions and judgments. It is in that sense that the sage is characterized by *apatheia* – by apathy, passionlessness, impassibility.⁶

Since our concern here is with Augustine's formulation of his own view in contrast to that of the Stoics, what is directly relevant is not what the Stoics actually said on the proper place of emotions in life but what Augustine interpreted them as saying. Nonetheless it is worth observing that probably Augustine has described a late, non-standard version of Stoicism.⁷ For it is clear that the founding fathers of Stoicism, Zeno

⁶ It is interesting that Rist gives essentially the same formula in this passage from *Stoic Philosophy*: "The Stoic wise man is a man of feeling, but his feelings do not control, or even influence, his decisions and his actions. In this terminology he is passionless (*apatheis*), but not without rational feelings." From Rist's full discussion it becomes clear, however, that the classic Stoics thought that, in fact, the perturbing emotions never were fully in accord with reason.

⁷ See chapter 3, "Problems of Pleasure and Pain," in Rist, *Stoic Philosophy*.

and Chrysippus, said that a *pathos* is “an excessive impulse,” “a ‘disease’ which affects our basic impulses,” “an irrational movement of the soul,” “an unnatural movement of the soul which is contrary to reason,” etc. And by such sayings they meant to imply, among other things, that a *pathos* is based on, or is even to be identified with, a judgment that is false and contrary to reason. Passions are based on (or identical with) erroneous judgments of evaluated fact that lead to (or are) irrational feelings and excessive impulses. But if this is one’s understanding of a *pathos*, then obviously one will hold that passions will in no form whatsoever appear in the life of the fully wise person. And that in fact is what the mainline Stoics claimed when they said that the wise person will be characterized by *apatheia*.

In principle the question remains open, however, whether all emotional disturbances – with fear, grief, and ecstasy as prime examples – are *passions* on this concept of passion. It is clear that the classic Stoics thought they were. One grieves, they would have said, only over what one evaluates as evil; but the sage, finding no trace of moral evil in himself, has nothing over which to grieve. So too, one fears what one evaluates as an evil threatening; but for the sage, who is steady in virtue, there are no threatening evils. And one goes into ecstasy over something that happens to come one’s way that one evaluates as good. But for the sage, there are no goods that just happen to come his way; that which is the only thing good for him, namely, his own moral character, is entirely of his own making. It was, thus, the contention of the classic Stoics that as a matter of fact the upsetting emotions are all passions, and will, on that account, have no place in the life of the wise person. The true sage experiences no emotional disturbances.⁸

⁸ In the above I follow A. C. Lloyd, “Emotion and Decision in Stoic Psychology,” in John M. Rist, ed., *The Stoics* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1978). Compare the summary by A. A. Long, *Hellenistic Philosophy* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1974), 206–207:

The Stoic sage is free from all passions. Anger, anxiety, cupidity, dread, elation, these and similar extreme emotions are all absent from his disposition. He does not regard pleasure as something good, nor pain as something evil... The Stoic sage is not insensitive to painful or pleasurable sensations, but they do not “move his soul excessively”. He is impassive towards them. But he is not entirely impassive... His disposition is characterized by “good emotional states”. Well-wishing, wishing another man good things for his sake; joy: rejoicing in virtuous actions, a tranquil life, a good conscience...; and “wariness”, reasonable disinclination.

Augustine himself, in various scattered passages, uses the classic Stoic concept of *pathos*. He speaks, for example, of “that state which the Greeks call *pathos*, whence our word passion is derived; *pathos*, and passion, being a motion of the mind against reason” (*City of God* VIII, 16). Using this definition, one would have to express Augustine’s interpretation of the Stoic position as that such a perturbing “phenomenon” as fear or grief might or might not, in a given case, be a

The dispute between the classic Stoics and the late Gellius-type Stoics was thus a subtle one: Does one become emotionally upset only over what one judges as evil or also over what one judges as non-preferable? Can there be emotional disturbances not based on false evaluations? That dispute we need not enter. However, a decision on terminology is necessary. It will be far and away most convenient for our purposes here to use the word *pathos* in its neutral sense. A *pathos*, in the remainder of my discussion, will simply be an emotional upset, an emotional disturbance. (And probably most of us would not even speak of those phenomena that the Stoics called *eupatheiai*, and that were thought to lack any element of disturbance, as *emotions*.)

His own position, says Augustine, is that the Stoics and Peripatetics were correct in their central contention: a life free “from those emotions which are contrary to reason and disturb the mind ... is obviously a good and most desirable quality...” (*City of God* XIV, 9). The context makes clear that Augustine means to say something much stronger: a life *entirely* free of passions (emotional upset) is to be desired. For ideal existence is incompatible with being “overcome” in the way in which one is overcome by emotions. And beyond that, it is incompatible with the suffering, the “vexation,” that is a component in such “negative” emotions as fear and grief.

However, Augustine’s main emphasis does not fall on this point of agreement between himself and the Stoics. It falls instead on his insistence that *in this present life* a person who desires to live in truly godly fashion will *not* try to live a life devoid of *pathos*, of passion, of emotional upset. She will not be apathetic. If “some, with a vanity monstrous in proportion to its rarity, have become enamoured of themselves because they can be stimulated and excited by no emotion, moved or bent by no affection, such persons rather lose all humanity than obtain true tranquility,” says Augustine (*City of God* XIV, 9).

The reason is that none of us avoids sin. And the godly person will grieve over the sins into which she has fallen as well as fear falling into new ones. She will grieve over the state of her soul. If *apatheia* be understood as “a condition ... in which no fear terrifies nor any pain annoys, we must in this life renounce such a state if we would live according to

pathos. It would be so if it overthrew the rule of reason in the person experiencing it; otherwise it would not be. And then to say that the wise person is characterized by apathy would be to say that such perturbing phenomena as fear and grief would not function in him as passions; it would not be to say that he never experiences these.

God's will..." (*City of God* XIV, 9). An ethic for the perfect sage is not an ethic for the imperfect lover of God. Such a person will not just let the emotions of fear and grief take their natural course in her life, merely seeing to it that they do not lead to bad intentions and false judgments. Nor will she try to root them out entirely. She will *cultivate* fear and sorrow – fear and sorrow over the right things, however; namely, over sin. The decisive point in Augustine's departure from the classic Stoics lies in his conviction that some fear and some sorrow is based on *correct* evaluation. The issue, he says, is "not so much ... whether a pious soul is angry, as why he is angry; not whether he is sad, but what is the course of his sadness; not whether he fears, but what he fears" (*City of God* IX, 5; cf. XIV, 8). The eudaemonistic ideal of antiquity begins to creak and crack before our eyes. Though we are to *long* for eudaemonia, says Augustine, it would be wrong in *this* life to pursue it.

Now most certainly the Stoics did not recommend the cultivation of passion in the life of the non-sage, not even in the life of the person *committed* to becoming a sage who falls prey every now and then to weakness or temptation. Yet it is hard to see how they could object in principle to adopting in their own way what Augustine here holds. Augustine has argued that *eros* must be turned away from the things of this world to God, on the ground that we must abolish the grief that follows upon the change or destruction of objects of *eros*. Yet this does not mean for him the elimination of grief and fear from life. We struggle now to reorient our love to God. But the self does not turn freely on its axis. And so we grieve – grieve over not being able to turn right round. We grieve over our persistent failure to achieve the project of reorientating our love.⁹ Now the Stoics said that the sage would both rejoice over his moral perfection and be wary of the temptations that lie in wait. But, having said that, it is hard to see what grounds they could have for resisting admitting the propriety of *grief over moral failure* by the person struggling to become a sage. For such an emotional upset would be based on a true, not a false,

⁹ This is the theme of chapter 15, "The Lost Future," in Peter Brown's superb biography, *Augustine of Hippo* (London: Faber & Faber, 1967). Consider especially this passage on p. 156:

Augustine is a man who has realized that he was doomed to remain incomplete in his present existence, that what he wished for most ardently would never be more than a hope, postponed to a final resolution of all tensions, far beyond this life. Anyone who thought otherwise, he felt, was either morally obtuse or a doctrinaire. All a man could do was to "yearn" for the absent perfection, to feel its loss intensely, to pine for it... This marks the end of a long-established classical ideal of perfection: Augustine would never achieve the concentrated tranquility of the supermen that still gaze out at us from some mosaics in Christian churches and from the statues of pagan sages.

evaluation. In the classic Stoic sense of *pathos*, it would not be a *pathos*. It is true that Augustine stood in the Platonic tradition of seeing happiness as lying in the satisfaction of *eros* while the Stoics saw happiness as lying in the elimination of *eros* and the achievement of the project of being a fully moral self. Yet grief over one's moral failure seems as appropriate in the Stoic universe as does grief over one's religious failure in the Augustinian.

It is in what Augustine went on to say next that he burst outside not only what any Stoic *said* but what any Stoic *could possibly* have said – indeed, what any ancient pagan ethicist could have said. Augustine says that we are not only to grieve over *our own* sins and be fearful of falling into new ones. We are also to grieve over the sins of others and to rejoice in their repentance (*City of God* XIV, 9). And, motivated by pity, we are to work for their deliverance. We are to be merciful.

We must understand Augustine aright here. He is not suddenly bringing *eros* back in. He is not saying that our lives are incomplete unless they are attached by *eros* to our fellows. *Eros* is to remain fixed on God. Yet we are to grieve over the religious condition of the souls of all humanity – or, more concretely, of all those whom we know.

What is Augustine's thought here? He never quite spells it out. I see no alternative, however, but to interpret it along the following lines: each of us is to be joined in a solidarity of joy and grief with all humanity – joy and grief over the right things, be it added: namely, over the state of our souls. I am to rejoice and grieve over the religious condition of my soul and, in the very same way, to rejoice and grieve over the condition of yours. In the most strict of senses, I am to love my neighbor as myself – as if he *were* myself. The idea is not that I am to recognize some value in *you* that fulfills *me*; that would be the snake of earthly *eros* slinking back in. Rather, I am to live in emotional solidarity with you. Instead of my project being simply to achieve my own true happiness, my project must be to achieve *our* true happiness. My happiness is not to be achieved without yours being achieved. Often this solidarity will consist in bearing your grief and sharing your joy. But the identification Augustine has in mind goes beyond even such sympathy. For it may be that you are not grieving over your soul when you should be. Then I will grieve on your behalf, grieving even over your not grieving.

Implicit in this vision is a recognition of the worth of each human self. If one aims exclusively at happiness for one's own self, the tacit attribution of a certain kind of worth to one's self that this project presupposes scarcely comes to light. But if one exists in a solidarity of grieving and

rejoicing with all humanity, then it is clear that one is thereby ascribing a certain worthiness to each and every human being that one is not ascribing, say, to any animal.¹⁰ Human beings are worthy of being caught up in one's solidarity of grieving and rejoicing. One is to honor every human soul by grieving and rejoicing over its religious failures and successes just as one honors one's own soul by grieving and rejoicing over its failures and successes. The worthiness thereby tacitly ascribed to each and every human soul is not the worthiness that consists in a person's degree of godliness; after all, one grieves most intensely over those who are least godly. Rather, if it be asked why it is appropriate to exist in this mysterious honoring solidarity with all human beings, the answer Augustine gave, all too cryptically, is this: because we are all icons of God.¹¹

¹⁰ Thus we see in Augustine, and in all those who accept with "Augustinian seriousness" the biblical injunction to love one's neighbor as one's self, the seed of that plant that eventually blossomed into the recognition of natural human rights, a blossom that, in the opinion of some, has gone to seed, destroying that sense of human solidarity from which it sprang. I have subsequently explored Augustine's relation to rights in part II of *Justice: Rights and Wrongs* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).

¹¹ This whole line of interpretation is confirmed, I judge, by a fascinating and, to most of us, astonishing and even offensive, passage in Augustine's *Of True Religion*, written at virtually the same time as the *Confessions*:

Only he is overcome who has what he loves snatched from him by his adversary. He who loves only what cannot be snatched from him is indubitably unconquerable... He cannot lose his neighbour whom he loves as himself, for he does not love even in himself the things that appear to the eyes or to any other bodily sense. So he has inward fellowship with him whom he loves as himself.

The rule of love is that one should wish his friend to have all the good things he wants to have himself, and should not wish the evils to befall his friend that he wishes to avoid himself. He shows this benevolence towards all men. ... If a man were to love another not as himself but as a beast of burden, or as the baths, or as a gaudy or garrulous bird, that is for some temporal pleasure or advantage he hoped to derive, he must serve not a man but, what is much worse, a foul and detestable vice, in that he does not love the man as a man ought to be loved. ...

Man is not to be loved by man even as brothers after the flesh are loved, or sons, or wives, or kinsfolk, or relatives, or fellow citizens. For such love is temporal. We should have no such connections as are contingent upon birth and death, if our nature had remained in obedience to the commandments of God and in the likeness of his image... Accordingly, the Truth himself calls us back to our original and perfect state, bids us to resist carnal custom and teaches that no one is fit for the kingdom of God unless he hates these carnal relationships. Let no one think that is inhuman. It is more inhuman to love a man because he is your son and not because he is a man, that is, not to love that in him which belongs to God, but to love that which belongs to yourself. ...

If we are ablaze with love for eternity we shall hate temporal relationships. Let a man love his neighbour as himself. No one is his own father or son or kinsman or anything of the kind, but is simply a man. Whoever loves another as himself ought to love that in him which is his real self. Our real selves are not bodies. ... Whoever, then, loves in his neighbour anything but his real self does not love him as himself. ...

Why should not he be unconquered who in loving man loves nothing but the man, the creature of God, made according to his image? ... It is never improper to live aright. Whoever does this and loves it, not only does not envy those who imitate him, but also treats them with the greatest

Thus in the Augustinian universe there is a quadripartite distinction among modes of worth and valuing. God has one mode of worth; we express our recognition of that worth by loving God and God alone. Human beings as icons of God have another kind of worth; we exhibit our recognition of that mode of worth by rejoicing and grieving over the religious health of their souls. The morally admirable person has another mode of worth, one that the morally despicable person lacks. And the things of the world have yet a different kind of worth; we value them as useful and, perhaps, as enjoyable.

The Stoic universe was profoundly different – at least as interpreted by that fine scholar of late antiquity, J. M. Rist. The Stoic, says Rist, regarded only human beings as of value, and regarded the value of human beings as determined entirely by their moral status. The Augustinian split between *their worth as persons* and *their moral status* has no counterpart in the Stoics. Marcus Aurelius, observes Rist, “tells us that each man is worth as much as what he is concerned with ... The implication is clear: those whose character is preoccupied with right reason and virtue are of value, those whose tastes are lower can be graded accordingly. Some people are presumably worth nothing at all; and these should be treated accordingly.”¹² And Epictetus remarked that “neither the nose nor the eyes are sufficient to make a man, but he is a man who makes properly human judgments. Here is someone who does not listen to reason – he is an ass. Here is one whose sense of self-respect has become numbed: he is useless, a sheep, anything rather than a man.”¹³

It is true that such Stoics as Epictetus and Marcus praised *philostorgia*, benevolence.

possible kindness and good will. But he does not stand in any need of them. What he loves in them he himself completely and perfectly possesses. So when a man loves his neighbour as himself, he is not envious of him any more than he is envious of himself. He gives him such help as he can as if he were helping himself. But he does not need him any more than he needs himself. He needs God alone, by cleaving to whom he is happy. No one can take God from him. He, then, is most truly and certainly an unconquerable man who cleaves to God... (in the edition translated by J. H. S. Burleigh [Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1959], xlvii, 86–xlvii, 90).

In his *Retractions* Augustine discusses this passage and says that he should not have said, “hate temporal relationships”; if our forebears had done this, we their descendants would never have been born and God’s company of the elect would not have been filled up. So hating is inappropriate. And of course in the text I have not interpreted Augustine as proposing “hatred.” The thing remarkable about the *Retractions* passage, for my purposes, is that Augustine does not retract the doctrine of *love* expounded in this passage from *Of True Religion*.

¹² John M. Rist, “The Stoic Concept of Detachment,” in John M. Rist, ed., *The Stoics* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1978), 261–62.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 264.

Yet along with their emphasis on *philostorgia* these writers are inclined to point out that the wise man is not concerned over the death of a child. . . . Marcus expressly points out both that the wise man is benevolent (*philostorgos*) and that he is the most devoid of passions contrary to reason. . . . Hence we have to conclude that *philostorgia* neither confers nor recognizes value in its objects, nor does it think of its objects as unique and irreplaceable, nor does it demand any overwhelming emotional commitment in those who exhibit it.¹⁴

"It is clearly incumbent on each man to be emotionally committed to one human being, or rather one human phenomenon alone, namely, one's own moral character and moral dignity."¹⁵ For the only good is moral character. And the only moral character any of us can be responsible for is our own. Hence if I come across another moral character I can respect it; but it cannot be for me a good. The sole good for me is my own moral character. "Each man has one and only one object of value to be cherished, namely, his own higher self. By a law of nature he is not able to love others as he loves himself. Only another individual can love *himself*, just as only I can love myself. There is only one canon by which the wise man is able to judge his own behavior: Is it conducive to my own virtue, or does it risk compromising the moral self which it is my unique prerogative to preserve?"¹⁶

A Stoic, then, would put to Augustine this fundamental challenge:¹⁷ your recommended solidarity of grief and joy is incoherent. You cannot bear to the religious character of others the relation you bear to your own. It makes no sense to grieve and rejoice over theirs as you do over yours. To this deep challenge Augustine might well have made two responses: even if it is true that I cannot constitute anyone else's religious character in the same way that I can constitute my own, it does not follow that the only thing good in my universe is my own character. For it is not true that only what is in a person's control is of value for that person. And second, the assumption of self-reliance must be replaced by a doctrine of co-responsibility. We are social creatures capable of influencing each other; it is on that account that we are responsible for the religious condition of others as well as for that of ourselves. Religious character is not formed by isolated self-determining individuals.

I would be doing a disservice to Augustine if I did not mention, before concluding this section of our discussion, that now and then he indicates

¹⁴ Ibid., 263. ¹⁵ Ibid., 264. ¹⁶ Ibid., 265.

¹⁷ A Plotinian would do the same. See chapter 12: "The Self and Others," in J. M. Rist, *Plotinus: The Road to Reality* (Cambridge University Press, 1967).

that it is also appropriate to grieve over the innocent misfortunes that come our way – over things like hunger and physical pain. “What is compassion,” he asks in one passage, “but a fellow-feeling for another’s misery, which prompts us to help him if we can? And this emotion is obedient to reason, when compassion is shown without violating right, as when the poor are relieved, or the penitent forgiven” (*City of God* IX, 5). But just as it would have been a disservice not to have mentioned this point, so also it would be a disservice to give it any more emphasis than Augustine himself gave it – which is, very little.

We have been speaking of the place of the passions in the life of the imperfectly godly person in this imperfect world of ours. But, we must be reminded that Augustine also points us away from life in this world to a perfected life in a perfected world – a life not earned or achieved but granted. In that life there will be no such emotional disturbances as grief and fear. For that will be a life of uninterrupted bliss; and “who that is affected by fear or grief can be called absolutely blessed?” Even “when these affections are well regulated, and according to God’s will, they are peculiar to this life, not to that future life we look for” (*City of God* XIV, 9). Augustine’s argument, as we have seen, is not the Stoic argument that the passions are always based on false evaluations; they are not. His argument is that having emotions always involves *being overcome*, and that the pain embedded within such emotions as grief and fear is incompatible with full happiness. Grief and fear are not as such incompatible with *reason*. They are as such incompatible with *eudaemonia*. Hence the abolition of those passions from our lives will not occur by way of illumination as to the true nature of things. It will occur by way of removal from our existence of that which it is appropriate to fear or grieve over.

So our perfected existence will exhibit not only *eros* attached entirely to God, but also apathy. For attachment to God and detachment from the world, we struggle here and now. For *apathy*, we merely long, in the meanwhile fearing and grieving over the evil worth fearing and grieving over. Struggle and longing, aiming and hoping, pull apart in the Augustinian universe. It is not, though – let it be repeated – a feelingless apathy for which we long. We long for a life of joy and bliss. If *apatheia* be understood as the condition “where the mind is the subject of no emotion,” says Augustine, “then who would not consider this insensibility to be worse than all vices? It may, indeed, reasonably be maintained that the perfect blessedness we hope for shall be free from all sting of fear or sadness; but who that is not quite lost to truth would

say that neither love nor joy shall be experienced there?" (*City of God* XIV, 9).¹⁸

And now the eternal life of God, as understood by Augustine, can be very simply described: God's life satisfies the eudaemonistic ideal implicit in all that has preceded. God's life is through and through blissful. Thus God too is free of negative *pathe*. Of *Mitleiden* with those who are suffering, God feels nothing, as also God feels no pain over the shortfall of godliness in God's errant creatures. God's state is *apatheia* – an *apatheia* characterized positively by the steady non-perturbing state of joy. God dwells eternally in blissful non-suffering *apatheia*. Nothing that happens in the world alters God's blissful unperturbed serenity. Certainly God is not oblivious to the world. There is in God a steady disposition of benevolence toward God's human creatures. But this disposition to act benevolently proceeds on its uninterrupted successful course whatever transpires in the world.

In sum, the Augustinian God turns out to be remarkably like the Stoic sage: devoid of passions, unfamiliar with longing, foreign to suffering, dwelling in steady bliss, exhibiting to others only benevolence. Augustine fought free of the Stoic (and neo-Platonic) vision when it came to humanity; when it came to God, he succumbed.

The result, as one would expect, was unresolved tension in his thought. What difference is there between God and us which brings it about that, for us, authentic existence in the presence of evil is a suffering awareness whereas, for God, it is a non-suffering, perpetually blissful, awareness? Augustine never says. Sometimes he suggests that when reality is seen whole as God sees it, then nothing appears evil but everything is seen to make its contribution to the goodness of the whole. Thus God has no suffering awareness of evil because there is no evil of which to be aware. But if this were Augustine's steady conviction, then he would seek to illuminate us as to the illusoriness of evil rather than urging us to cultivate suffering over evil.

Augustine does indeed make clear that in one important respect God's life is not to be identified with our eudaemonistic ideal. In humanity's

¹⁸ Augustine saw that if the bliss of our perfected existence is to be entirely unalloyed, regret will have to be eliminated by forgetfulness. In its perfected existence, the soul will enjoy "an everlasting pleasure of eternal joys, forgetful of faults, forgetful of punishments, but not therefore so forgetful of her deliverance, that she be ungrateful to her deliverer" (*City of God* XXII, 30). There is another issue in the region that, so far as I know, Augustine does not consider. Presumably the solidarity in which we are to exist with our fellows continues into our perfected existence. But if some souls are lost from God's abiding Kingdom, then the absence of grief and the presence only of joy, which is to characterize our perfected existence, can be achieved only by lack of awareness by those who are rejoicing of those who are lost.

perfected existence *eros* is fixed steadily on God. God, in contrast, has no *eros*. Since there is in God no lack, God does not reach out to what would fulfill him. God reaches out exclusively in the mode of benevolence, not in the mode of *eros*. But this difference, though real, does nothing to relieve the tension.

Are we to say, then, that in his picture of God as dwelling in blissful non-suffering apathy Augustine shows that, whatever be the qualifications he wishes to make for human beings, he still embraces the late antique, Stoic notion of what constitutes perfect existence? Is that the bottom line? Yes, I think we must indeed say this – not only for Augustine but also for the tradition in general. Shaped as they were by the philosophical traditions of late antiquity, it was inconceivable to the church fathers that God's existence should be anything other than perfect and that ideal existence should be anything other than blissful. But though this must be said, perhaps one or two more things must be said as well.

I have suggested that in his reflections on how we human beings should live in this present fallen condition of ours, Augustine not only departed from the Stoics but even drove a splintering wedge into the eudaemonistic framework of antiquity. Though we long for eudaemonia, we are not, while surrounded by evil, to pursue it. So long as evil is present among us we are to cultivate suffering over evil. I suggest that, in addition to the grip on him of the late antique picture of ideal existence, two additional considerations prevented Augustine from saying a similar thing about God. For one thing, Augustine and the church fathers in general believed that the longing of our hearts for eudaemonia will be satisfied by sharing in the life of God – a conviction that lies at the heart of that long-enduring tradition of contemplative Christianity to which Augustine helped give birth. But if the goal of our existence is happiness, and if our ultimate happiness consists in sharing in the life of God, then that life must itself be a life of peace and joy. If, upon entering into the life of God, we there find vexation and disturbance and suffering, then our own eudaemonia remains unattained. And second, it was agreed by almost everyone in the tradition that God is immutable. Thus it was impossible for them to say that the divine joy, in the sharing of which lies our own eudaemonia, is a joy that God does not fully enjoy until the coming of God's perfected Kingdom. I suggest, in short, that what leaped to Augustine's eye when he surveyed the picture he had drawn was this feature of it: in God's eternal life is to be found the joy and peace in the sharing of which lies our own true end. To that feature of the picture, he was deeply attached.

It is possible, however, to be struck by quite a different aspect of the picture; namely, God remains blissfully unperturbed while humanity drowns in misery. When looked at in this way the picture's look is startlingly reversed, from the compelling to the grotesque. It is this grotesque look of the picture that has forcefully been called to our attention by various contemporary thinkers as they have launched an attack on the traditional picture of the apathetic God – with the foremost theologian, of recent years, being Jürgen Moltmann.¹⁹

One of the arguments, more purely theological than the others and developed most elaborately by Moltmann, is that if one grants both that Jesus suffered and that Jesus is the second person of the Trinity, then one cannot avoid concluding that in Jesus' suffering, God was suffering – or to speak more amply, that the second person of the Godhead was suffering. Moltmann reviews the struggles of the church fathers and the early church councils to avoid this conclusion and judges them all to be failures.²⁰ In my discussion I shall have to neglect entirely this theological argument for the suffering of God.

Far and away the most commonly used argument in the contemporary discussion is that if God truly loves God's suffering children, then God will feel their misery with them. God's love must include that mode of love which is sympathy, *Mitleiden*. Perhaps the most vivid statement of this argument was composed by an English writer, Maldwyn Hughes, early in the last century in his book, *What is Atonement? A Study in the Passion of Christ*. Hughes says:

We must choose whether or not we will accept the Christian revelation that "God is love." If we do, then we must accept the implications of the revelation ... It is an entire misuse of words to call God our loving Father, if He is able to view the waywardness and revelation of His children without being moved by

¹⁹ An important and highly influential book in biblical studies has been Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962). Heschel argues that the theology underlying the Old Testament prophets was that of the *pathos* of God. For biblical studies, see also Terence E. Fretheim, *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984). In between biblical studies and systematic theology is Kazoh Kitamori, *Theology of the Pain of God* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1958). Also see Dorothee Solle, *Suffering* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975). An important overview of the discussion is to be found in J. K. Mozley, *The Impassible God* (Cambridge University Press, 1926). In addition to surveying the discussions affirming God's passibility by a number of English theologians in the first quarter of this century, Mozley surveys the long tradition in Christian theology of divine impassibility from its beginnings. Also very useful is Richard E. Creel, *Divine Impassibility* (Cambridge University Press, 1986).

²⁰ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981); and *The Trinity and the Kingdom* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981).

grief and pity ... It is of the very nature of love to suffer when its object suffers loss, whether inflicted by itself or others. If the suffering of God be denied, then Christianity must discover a new terminology and must obliterate the statement "God is love" from its Scriptures.²¹

It is clear that between this view of the life of God and the Augustinian view there is a deep clash of ideals: the ideal divine life for Augustine was that of uninterrupted suffering-free bliss; the ideal divine life for the moderns is a life of sympathetic love. In effect the moderns insist that the solidarity of grieving and rejoicing that Augustine recommends for humanity on this earth is to embrace God as well. How can we adjudicate between these profoundly different visions?

Little will be gained by the moderns simply citing biblical passages about God as loving. For Augustine and the other church fathers who defended the non-suffering apathy of God had not overlooked the fact that the Bible speaks of God loving. And they too were committed to the teachings of the prophets and apostles. It was their conviction, however, that all the statements about God's love could be, and should be, interpreted in a manner consistent with God's apathy and God's freedom from suffering.

Augustine's proposal became classic.²² Scripture everywhere witnesses that God is pitiful, he says. But the pity of God differs from human pity.

²¹ Quoted in Mozley, *The Impassible God*, pp. 165–66. Compare these passages from Charles Hartshorne: "The lover is not merely the one who unwaveringly understands and tries to help; the lover is just as emphatically the one who takes unto himself the varying joys and sorrows of others, and whose own happiness is capable of alteration thereby ... Love is joy in the joy (actual or expected) of another, and sorrow in the sorrow of another" (*Man's Vision of God* [New York: Harper & Brothers, 1941], 111, 116). "Sympathetic dependence is a sign of excellence and waxes with every ascent in the scale of being. Joy calls for sympathetic joy, sorrow for sympathetic sorrow, as the most excellent possible forms of response to these states. The eminent form of sympathetic dependence can only apply to deity, for this form cannot be less than an omniscient sympathy, which depends upon and is exactly colored by every nuance of joy or sorrow anywhere in the world" (*The Divine Relativity: A Social Conception of God* [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1964], 48).

²² See, for example, Anselm in *Proslogion* 8: "How art Thou at once pitiful and impassible? For if Thou art impassible, Thou dost not suffer with man; if Thou dost not suffer with man, Thy heart is not wretched by compassion with the wretched, which is the meaning of being pitiful. But if Thou art not pitiful, whence can the wretched gain so great comfort? How then art Thou, and art Thou not pitiful, Lord, except that Thou art pitiful in respect of us, and not in respect of Thyself? Truly Thou art so in respect of our feeling, and art not in respect of Thine. For when Thou lookest upon us in our wretchedness we feel the effect of Thy pity, Thou feelest not the effect. And therefore Thou art pitiful, because Thou savest the wretched, and sparest the sinners who belong to Thee; and Thou art not pitiful, because Thou art touched by no fellow-suffering in that wretchedness" (from the translation by S. N. Deane [La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1964]). And Aquinas in *Summa Theologiae* I, 19, 11, *resp.*: "When certain human passions are predicated of the Godhead metaphorically, this is done because of a likeness in the effect. Hence a thing that is in us a sign of some passion is signified metaphorically in God under the name of that passion.

Human pity brings "misery of heart"; whereas "who can sanely say that God is touched by any misery?" "With regard to pity, if you take away the compassion which involves a sharing of misery with whom you pity, so that there remains the peaceful goodness of helping and freeing from misery, some kind of knowledge of the divine pity is suggested."²³ In short: the love that we are to attribute to God is not the love of sympathy, of *Mitleiden*, in which one shares the feelings of the other; it is the love of well-doing, of benevolence, of *agape*.

And in general, as to the predication of the language of the emotions to God: this must all be interpreted as attributing to God those *effects* of God's agency that are similar to the effects of the perturbing emotions in us:

God's repentance does not follow upon error, the anger of God carries with it no trace of a disturbed mind, nor his pity the wretched heart of a fellow-sufferer ... nor His jealousy any envy of mind. But by the repentance of God is meant the change of things which lie within His power, unexpected by man; the anger of God is His vengeance upon sin; the pity of God is the goodness of His help; the jealousy of God is that providence whereby He does not allow those whom He has in subjection to Himself to love with impunity what He forbids.²⁴

The conclusion is that "when God repents He is not changed but He brings about change; when He is angry He is not moved but He avenges; when He pities He does not grieve but He liberates; when He is jealous He is not pained but He causes pain."²⁵

So it is clear that the classical tradition of the apathetic God will not come crashing down simply by observing that the Scriptures speak of God as loving and then adding that if God loves God's suffering human creatures, then Godself must suffer. The tradition interpreted the biblical passages in question as speaking of God's non-suffering benevolence. We seem to be at an impasse.

Perhaps some advance can be made if we pause to reflect a bit on the nature of the emotions; for these, after all, are central in the discussion. Let me here make use of the results of some probing discussions on the nature of emotion to be found in the philosophical literature of the past fifteen years or so, results skillfully pulled together and amplified by William Lyons in his book, *Emotion*.²⁶ The upshot of the philosophical discussions

Thus with us it is usual for an angry man to punish, so that punishment becomes an expression of anger. Therefore punishment itself is signified with anger, when anger is attributed to God" (from the translation by the English Dominicans [New York: Benzinger Brothers, 1947]).

²³ Quoted in Mozley, *The Impassible God*, 105.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 106.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 106–07.

²⁶ William Lyons, *Emotion* (Cambridge University Press, 1980).

is decisively in favor of the so-called *cognitive* theory of emotion – a theory already prominent, in its essentials, among the ancients and the medievals.

The cognitive theory holds, in the first place, that every episode of emotion incorporates a *belief* that such and such a state of affairs has occurred or is occurring or may well occur, along with an *evaluation* of that state of affairs (proposition). Every emotion has, in that way, a doxastic/evaluative component, and thereby a propositional content. Of course the belief that the emotion incorporates may well be mistaken: emotions may be either veridical or non-veridical. Suppose, for example (to take one of Lyons' illustrations) that I am afraid that the large dog approaching will attack me. The proposition (state of affairs) that the large dog will attack me is then the propositional content of the emotion; and a central component of the emotion will be my believing and evaluating, be it negatively or positively, that state of affairs.

The reference to evaluation is important and must not be lost from view. The propositional content of an emotion is not only believed but evaluated. If I were indifferent to being attacked by the large dog, rather than evaluating such an attack with distinct negativity, I would feel no emotion in that regard. Or if I evaluated this state of affairs positively, out of exhibitionism or a desire for martyrdom, I would feel not fear but exhilaration.

The propositional content of an emotion, along with one's negative or positive evaluation of that content, plays a central role in the identification of an emotion. But it is not the whole of the emotion. There is no emotion unless the belief and evaluation cause a physiological disturbance in the person (the sympathetic nervous system being central here), along with certain characteristic feelings that are, in part, awareness of one's physiological disturbance. What proves to be the case is that the physiological disturbance and the accompanying feelings differ remarkably little from one kind of emotion to another. One cannot, for example, differentiate anger from fear on this basis.

Lastly, many if not all emotions incorporate a characteristic appetitive component – a desire to do something or other so as, for example, to eliminate the state of affairs in question or to continue it, etc. The person afraid that the large approaching dog will attack him is strongly desirous of doing something to avert the attack – though it may happen that his physiological disturbance becomes so severe that, instead of running like a gazelle so as to implement his desire to avoid attack, he sinks down helpless as a jellyfish. It is the appetitive component in emotions

that accounts for the fact that emotions can function as motives for intentionally undertaken actions: a person may run away *out* of fear, may send a blistering letter *out* of anger, etc.

Now if this schematic analysis of the nature of emotions is correct in its main outlines, it follows directly that God has no emotions: no grief, no anger, no fear, and so forth. For a person can have an emotion only if that person is capable of being physiologically upset. And God, having no physiology, is not so capable. I am not aware that Augustine ever used this argument for God's *apatheia*: he had other arguments. But Aquinas, for example, makes explicit use of it in *Summa Theologiae*, Book I, 20, art. 1; and in *Summa contra Gentiles* I, 89, 3. In the sense of *pathos* that we have been using in our discussion, we can conclude that God is lacking in *pathos*. The tradition was right: God is apathetic. God does not grieve, neither in sympathy nor, as it were, on God's own.

But we must not conclude from this that the contest is over and that the ancients are victorious in their combat with the moderns. For though the issue of whether God suffers is regularly blurred with the issue of whether God has passions, I suggest that suffering is in fact a distinct phenomenon from grief and the other "negative" emotions, and that the conclusion that God has no passions still leaves open the question whether God suffers. It remains an open question whether God's apathy is a *suffering* apathy.

A person grieving over some loss is suffering. It will be recalled that the recognition that grief has a component of suffering is what led Augustine to conclude that God does not experience the passion of grief. But human suffering is by no means confined to emotional states. There is also the suffering caused by physical pain, the suffering caused by mental depression, the suffering caused by the desperate wish that one's sexual orientation were different from what it is, and so forth. Furthermore, it is often the case that even when the emotional state of grief subsides, the suffering continues.

What then are the connections among the belief that some loss has occurred, the emotional state of grieving over that loss, and the suffering comprised in that grieving? Well, clearly the cause of the suffering that one experiences in grieving is not the physiological disturbance or the accompanying feelings. These are not to be thought of as one of the sources of suffering in our existence, on a par with physical pain and mental depression. For as we have seen, the actual feelings involved in grief are little different from those in great joy. There are tears of joy as well as tears of grief. And it is worth recalling Augustine's observation that the grieving person may even find sweetness in the tears of his grief.

One is tempted to conclude, then, that the cause of the suffering that one experiences when grieving is the event over which one is grieving: the death, the maiming, the defeat, whatever. But this too cannot be correct. For there may be no such event! One may *believe* that the death, the maiming, the defeat, occurred when it did not. There may in fact be no event such that one grieves over it and it caused one's grief. And conversely, if some event occurred but one does not believe it did, the event causes no grief.

The conclusion must be, I think, that the cause of one's suffering, when grieving over loss, is simply *one's believing* that a loss occurred. For whether or not a loss of the sort in question occurred, the *believing* definitely exists. When someone suffers from physical pain, eliminating the pain eliminates the suffering. When someone suffers over mental depression, getting rid of the depression gets rid of the suffering. So too, the suffering one experiences when grieving over loss is eliminated by elimination of the belief that the loss occurred. When the prodigal son, thought to be dead, returns home alive, the father's tears of grief are transmuted into tears of joy. Physical pain and mental depression and unsatisfied desire cause suffering. But so also do certain of our ways of representing reality. And it makes no difference whether those ways be faithful to reality or unfaithful – veridical or non-veridical.

We speak naturally of the suffering *caused* by pain, of the suffering *caused* by mental depression, etc. But we must not think of the connection between some facet of our experience, on the one hand, and joy or suffering, on the other, as the connection of efficient causality. The suffering *caused* by pain is not some distinct sensation caused by the pain sensation. Suffering and joy are, as it were, adverbial modifiers of the states and events of consciousness. Pain and depression and the belief that someone we love has died are episodes of consciousness that occur sufferingly. The experience of art and the taste of good food and the belief that one of our projects has succeeded are episodes of consciousness that occur joyfully. A fundamental fact of consciousness is that the events of consciousness do not all occur indifferently. Some occur unpleasantly, on a continuum all the way to suffering; some occur pleasantly, on a continuum all the way to joy; and some, indeed, occur in neither mode.

Suffering, when veridical, is an existential No-saying to something in reality. With one's very existence one says "No" to the pain, "No" to the mental depression. But when that state of consciousness that causes the grief is one that has a propositional content, then that to which one

existentially says “No” pulls apart from the cause of the suffering. One existentially says “No” to the loss, not to the believing; “No” to the desire’s being unfulfilled, not to the desiring. (The suffering may of course lead one to say “No” to the desire itself.)

Earlier we spoke of emotions as including an evaluative component. But quite clearly there is no emotion if we just coolly evaluate something as meeting or not meeting some criterion that we happen to embrace. The evaluation must be an existential *valuing* of which we have just now been speaking. At the core of an emotion will be our *valuing* of the facts and supposed facts of the world. And that valuing may continue even though the emotion subsides.

One more observation is relevant: the fact that suffering consists of the (intensely) aversive occurrence of some state or event of consciousness is compatible with the fact that often we choose to do what we anticipate will cause us suffering. We choose the surgery knowing that pain will follow. In this there is nothing complex or mysterious. To understand it, we need only remind ourselves that, as means to achieving what one desires, one may do that which (as such) one does not desire. Truly mysterious, however, is the fact that one may get *joy out of suffering* – as, for example, the person of intense religiosity who shares in the sufferings of Christ and “counts it all joy.” In such a case, the person joyfully experiences his sufferingly experiencing pain.

And now back to the issue: Let us suppose that God knows what transpires in this world. The question before us then is whether some of that knowledge is sufferingly experienced and some of it joyfully. And notice that the issue of whether God sufferingly experiences some of what transpires in this world does indeed join hands with whether God also experiences some of it joyfully. Unless it be the case that everything in this world is good to the eye of God or everything bad, whatever be the answer we give to one of these questions must also be the answer we give to the other.

Our answer must be postponed for a few pages, however, so as to introduce into the discussion a new and distinct line of thought, also embraced with near unanimity by the patristics and medievals, leading to the same conclusion as the perfection argument that we have thus far considered. This additional argument for the conclusion that God experiences neither passions nor suffering may be called the *ontological* argument. The fact that the perfection argument and the ontological argument join to yield the same result is what made the tradition of God’s non-suffering apathy so enormously powerful. There is more that divides the moderns from

the ancients than a clash of moral ideals – though to this “more,” the moderns rarely give any attention.

Suppose that God suffered on account of the pain experienced by the people in Stalin’s Gulag camps and of the evil in the heart of Stalin who put them there. Then it would be the case that what one human being did, and what happened to other human beings, would determine the quality of God’s life. Stalin’s acting as he did would bring about God’s suffering awareness of the evil in Stalin’s heart. The victims’ experience of pain would bring about God’s suffering knowledge of their pain. Or to take another example: if God suffered on account of humanity’s destructive impact upon the earth, then again what transpires in the world would determine the quality of God’s life.

But to imagine that what transpires in the world could in this way determine the quality of God’s life is to bump up against an assumption that, ever since Plotinus, has been deeper than any other in classical Christian theology; namely, the assumption that God is unconditioned. “The Supreme,” says Plotinus, “can neither derive its being nor the quality of its being. God Himself, therefore, is what He is, self-related, self-tending; otherwise He becomes outward-tending, other-seeking – He who cannot but be wholly self-poised.”²⁷

On most Christian theologians this deliverance of Plotinus has had the grip of obvious and fundamental truth. From it has been extracted a truly astonishing list of conclusions: that God is simple, thus having no nature as we would nowadays understand “having a nature”; that God is immutable; that God is eternal; that God is entirely lacking in potentialities, thus being pure act; that God exists necessarily, since God’s essence and God’s existence are identical; that no predicate correctly predicated of something other than God can with the same sense be correctly predicated of God; and – to break off the listing – that God has no passions.²⁸ Of course, these conclusions were not all derived *directly* from God’s status as unconditioned. Chains of argument were used. John of Damascus, for example, takes it that God is “without flux because He is passionless and incorporeal,” and that he is by nature passionless “since he is simple

²⁷ *Enneads* VI, viii, 17. I use the edition translated by A. W. Armstrong (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967).

²⁸ In “God everlasting” (chapter 7 in this present volume), I discuss the issue of whether God is eternal and immutable. Alvin Plantinga, in *Does God Have a Nature?* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1980), has discussed another dimension of the Plotinian concept of God – namely, the contention that God has no properties, in particular, no nature.

and uncompound.”²⁹ But the classic argument for God’s simplicity, in turn, came from Plotinus, whose key premise was that reality must comprise a being that is entirely unconditioned.

Beyond a doubt it was Aquinas who, after Plotinus, worked out most profoundly the implications of the assumption that God is the unconditioned condition of everything not identical with Godself. No doubt he saw it as rendering the biblical teaching of God’s sovereignty. At the same time it was he who struggled most intensely to construe the teachings of the Scriptures as a whole in the light of this assumption and its implications. Let us, then, follow him in his thought.

In *Summa contra Gentiles* I, 89, 9, Aquinas says that the passion of *sorrow* or *pain* has for its “subject the already present evil, just as the object of *joy* is the good present and possessed. Sorrow and pain, therefore, of their very nature cannot be found in God.”³⁰ No doubt in this particular formulation Aquinas is alluding to the perfection argument.³¹ But what has already brought him to this conclusion is an elaborate development of the ontological argument and its ramifications.

Aquinas has just argued that God has no passions at all. And in addition to offering as ground for this conclusion that God lacks the “sensitive appetites” and the bodily physiology necessary for experiencing passions (*ScG* I, 89, 2–3), he argued, more relevantly to our purposes here, that “in every passion of the appetite the patient is somehow drawn out of his usual, calm, or connatural disposition. . . . But it is not possible for God to be somehow drawn outside His natural condition,

²⁹ John of Damascus, *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith* I, 8 in Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. IX (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1983). As to what he means by “passion,” John says this in *Exposition* II, 22:

Passion is a sensible activity of the appetitive faculty, depending on the presentation to the mind of something good or bad. Or in other words, passion is an irrational activity of the soul, resulting from the notion of something good or bad. For the notion of something good results in desire, and the notion of something bad results in anger. But passion considered as a class, that is, passion in general, is defined as a movement in one thing caused by another.

³⁰ My citations from the *Summa contra Gentiles* are from the version translated by Anton Pegis (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975). Citations from the *Summa Theologiae* are from the English Dominican translation (New York: Benzinger Brothers, 1947). References to both these works are given parenthetically in the text.

³¹ Aquinas uses the perfection argument more explicitly in *Summa Theologiae* I, 20, 1, 2. It is interesting to note that one of Augustine’s reasons for regarding our human emotions as part of “our present infirmity” is that the *being acted upon* that they involve is something from which we should look forward to being delivered in our perfected existence: “We are often over-pressed by our emotions. A laudable desire of charity may move us: yet shall we weep whether we will or not. For we have them by our human infirmity, but so had not Christ; for He had His infirmity itself from His own power” (*City of God* XIV, 9).

since He is absolutely immutable, as has been shown" (*ScG* I, 89, 4). This argument, of course, militates as much against God's suffering as against God's passion.

But if God cannot be "drawn outside his natural condition" of unalloyed abiding bliss, does it not follow that God is either ignorant of the suffering and evil that transpire in the life of God's human creatures, or is indifferent to their plight? Yet the former is incompatible with God's omniscience. And as to the latter, how would indifference to the plight of humanity be compatible with the love of God?

Though God does not sorrow over evil, yet God *knows* evil, says Aquinas. To understand in what way Aquinas thinks this to be true, we must first understand in what way, as he sees it, God knows anything at all other than Godself.

It must be granted, says Aquinas, "that primarily and essentially God knows only Himself." For this conclusion, Aquinas gives several arguments, most of which consist in spinning out the implications of the doctrine of divine simplicity. He says, for example, that "the operations of the intellect are distinguished according to their objects. If, then, God understands Himself and something other than Himself as the principal object, He will have several intellectual operations. Therefore either His essence will be divided into several parts, or He will have an intellectual operation that is not his substance. Both of these positions have been proved to be impossible" (*ScG* I, 48, 4).

From this argument it would seem to follow not merely that God "primarily and essentially" knows only Godself but that, *without qualification*, God knows only Godself. Yet Aquinas immediately goes on to argue that "God understands things other than Himself." His reason is that "an effect is adequately known when its cause is known. So 'we are said to know each thing when we know the cause' [Aristotle]. But God Himself is through His essence the cause of being for other things. Since He has a most full knowledge of His essence, we must posit that God also knows other things" (*ScG* I, 49, 2). Thus it is simply *in* knowing God's own simple undifferentiated self that God knows all other things – on the two principles that God is the cause of all things other than Godself, and that in knowing a thing's cause one knows the thing.³²

³² Cf. *ScG* I, 68, 3: "In knowing His essence, God knows other things in the same way as an effect is known through a knowledge of the cause. By knowing his essence, therefore, God knows all things to which his causality extends." And *ScG* I, 70, 2: "God knows things not by receiving anything from them, but, rather, by exercising His causality on them."

And how is God the *cause* of other things? God is the cause by virtue of God's will, says Aquinas. Yet it must be granted that "the principal object of the divine will is the divine essence." For if we allowed that God directly willed things other than Godself, the principle of divine simplicity would again be violated.³³ "If ... God should principally will something other than Himself, it will follow that something other is the cause of His willing. But His willing is His being, as has been shown. Hence, something other will be the cause of His being – which is contrary to the nature of the first being" (*ScG* I, 74, 4).³⁴

But if the divine self is the principal object of the divine will, how does God cause other things? In *Summa contra Gentiles* I, 74, 4, Aquinas says that in every case of willing something "the principle object" is just the *ultimate end* for which the thing is willed. But that is misleading for the case before us. We are not to think of God as willing other things as means to the end of Godself. Rather, Aquinas' thought is this: "God wills and loves His essence for its own sake." Now "the things that we love for their own sake we want to be most perfect, and always to become better and be multiplied as much as possible." But "the divine essence cannot be increased or multiplied in itself." There is only one way in which the divine self can be enriched or enhanced, namely, by way of there being other entities that resemble it. The divine essence "can be multiplied solely according to its likeness, which is participated by many," says Aquinas. It is in that way, then, that *in* "willing and loving His own essence and perfection" God "wills the multitude of things." If we look at the multitude of beings other than God and ask, what is the ultimate ground of their existence, our answer is this pair of phenomena: that this whole array of beings, each in its own way and degree resembling God (including their being "ordered to God as their end") is a sort of enhancement of the divine perfection; and that God wills the enhancement of God's own self.

We have been looking at Aquinas' construal of God's knowing and willing of things other than Godself. Before we move on we should also consider his construal of the love of God for things other than Godself, since all the relevant phenomena are already before us. God wills Godself. Now to will something is perforce to regard it as good; "the understood

³³ Also the principle of perfection would be violated: "If ... the principal object of the divine will be other than the divine essence, it will follow that there is something higher than the divine will moving it. The contrary of this is apparent from what has been said" (*ScG* I, 74, 3).

³⁴ And always, in addition, there was *this* Plotinian thought haunting medieval reflections on God's creation: "That ... which does not want to generate suffices more to itself in beauty, but that which desires to create wants to create beauty because of a lack and is not self-sufficient" (Plotinus, *Enneads* III, 5, 1).

good is the proper object of the will, the understood good is, as such, willed" (ScG I, 72, 2). And in turn, it "belongs properly to the nature of love, that the lover wills the good of the one he loves" (ScG I, 91, 2). But we have also found it appropriate, says Aquinas, to speak of God as willing other things. Now we have just seen that it is a necessary truth about willing that one wills what one judges good. So God wills the good of those other things. And since, as we have also seen, to love something is to will the good of the thing – Aquinas, be it noted, construes love simply as benevolence – it follows straightforwardly that God loves things other than Godself.³⁵

But now, is it not stretching the sense of the words beyond their breaking point to call "knowledge of other things" those phenomena in the Plotinian God to which Aquinas applies that phrase; and so, similarly, for "willing of other things" and "loving of other things"? Consider: God knows Godself, and God is the cause of all things other than Godself: this pair of phenomena is what Aquinas calls *God's knowing of things other than Godself*, on the principle that to know the cause of a thing is to know the thing. And consider: God wills God's perfection, and the ensemble of things other than God enhances God's perfection by resembling God: this pair of phenomena Aquinas calls *God's willing of things other than Godself*. He furthermore proposes calling this last pair of phenomena, *God's loving of things other than Godself*, on the grounds that one only wills what one regards as good, and that to love something is to will its good. But is not the former of these so distant from the knowledge of things as not to deserve the title? And is not the latter so distant from the intentional making and the loving of things as also not to deserve those titles? What is missing throughout is any awareness of, any acquaintance with, things other than Godself by God. God has no concept nor anything like a concept of anything other than Godself. "Our intellect knows singular things through singular species that are proper and diverse," says Aquinas. By acquiring such "singular species," we actualize our potentials for knowledge. Not so for the divine intellect. "If it knew something

³⁵ In *ST* I, 20, 2, *resp.*, Aquinas' argument would seem to run just a bit differently: God wills the existence of all things; and since a thing's existence is good, God wills the existence of all things. But to love something is to will good to that thing. Hence God loves all things. This is the text: "God loves all existing things. For all existing things, in so far as they exist, are good, since the existence of a thing is itself a good; and likewise, whatever perfection it possesses. Now it has been shown above ... that God's will is the cause of all things. It must needs be, therefore, as it is willed by God. To every existing thing, then, God wills some good. Hence, since to love anything is nothing else than to will good to that thing, it is manifest that God loves everything that exists."

through a species that is not itself, it would necessarily follow that its proportion to that species would be as the proportion of potency to act. God must therefore understand solely through the species that is his own essence" (*ScG* I, 71, 11–12). (Aquinas might, of course, have reached the same conclusion from the premise of God's simplicity.)

It appears that Aquinas himself regarded the point to which I have objected as one of the weak points in his theory; for when he returned to the topic of God's knowledge in his later work, *Summa Theologiae*, he reworked his thought on the topic of "whether God knows things other than himself by proper knowledge?" (*ST* I, 14, 6). He still holds, of course, that God has a proper and not merely a general knowledge of things other than Godself, his reason being that "to know a thing in general and not in particular, is to have an imperfect knowledge of it" (*resp.*). But now he attempts in a somewhat different way than before to meet the challenge of explaining how it can be that the Plotinian God has a proper knowledge of things other than Godself.

Everything whatsoever other than God bears to God a unique relation or resemblance with respect to its perfections. Not only do human beings, for example, resemble God with respect to their perfections in a way different from horses, but also Socrates resembles God with respect to his perfections in a way distinct from Plato. Furthermore, a thing's unique resemblance to God can be thought of as the nature of the thing. "The nature proper to each thing consists in some degree of participation in the divine perfection" (*ibid.*). But the multiplicity of ways in which God can be resembled is, in turn, a necessary and not an accidental feature of God. "His essence contains the similitude of things other than Himself" (*ST* I, 14, 5, *resp.*). But if so, then "God could not be said to know Himself perfectly unless He knew all the ways in which His own perfection can be shared by others" (a. 6, *resp.*). Hence, says Aquinas, "it is manifest that God knows all things with proper knowledge, in their distinction from each other" (*ibid.*).

I think it is clear, however, that this argument will not do. Aquinas assumes that to know the "proper nature" of a thing is to know the thing. Perhaps we can grant that assumption – though, of course, its truth depends on how we construe "proper nature." He also assumes that a thing's particular way of resembling God constitutes the nature of the thing. That seems more controversial; but let us not contest the matter. He further assumes, in classic Chain of Being fashion, that for every possible mode of resemblance to God, there is (or was, or will be) something that actually bears that mode of resemblance to God. That assumption is

even more controversial; but let us still not boggle. It is because of these three assumptions that Aquinas can say that in God's knowing of all the particular ways in which God's perfection *can* be shared, God knows all the particular ways in which it *is in fact* shared; and in God's knowing of all the particular ways in which it is in fact shared, God knows all the particular things of the world. Let us, on this occasion, content ourselves with questioning Aquinas on the move that he makes before these three: the move from God's knowledge of God's essence to God's knowledge of the distinct and multiple ways in which things can resemble God's essence.

Now it is indeed true that the ways in which a thing can be resembled belong to its essence. But it is not sufficient for Aquinas' purposes to hold that a perfect knowledge of God's essence implies a knowledge of all the ways in which God can be resembled. The demands of the simplicity doctrine are such that he must say that God's knowing of God's essence just *is* God's knowing of the various ways in which God can be resembled. Perhaps, indeed, the demands of the simplicity doctrine are even more stringent than that. For someone might contend that one's knowledge of *x* may be identical with one's knowledge of *y* even though *x* is not identical with *y*. But if that is indeed true, then what must be said is that the doctrine of divine simplicity requires not only that God's *knowing* is single but also that *what God knows* is single.

But now consider some one of the ways in which God can be resembled. Is that way of resemblance identical with God's essence? Surely not. For Aquinas identifies a way of resembling God with the nature of some thing other than God; and if such a way of resembling was identical with God's essence, the nature of some thing other than God would be identical with God's essence – from which it would follow that that thing that was other than God was identical with God. The conclusion must be that Aquinas' adherence to the simplicity doctrine makes untenable this attempt at explaining how God knows things other than Godself.

Aquinas' struggle to find in the Plotinian God something that might appropriately be called "knowledge of other things" becomes even more transparently a struggle when it comes to God's knowledge of evil. I will not here rehearse all his arguments; he gives some seven of them. But the basic line of thought running through all of them is evident from the first: "When a good is known, the opposite evil is known. But God knows all particular goods, to which evils are opposed. Therefore God knows evils" (*ST I*, 71, 2). God, Aquinas would say, knows that particular human evil that is blindness because God knows that "particular good"

that is human sight to which this evil of blindness is “opposed.” Now it is obscure in Aquinas’ argument whether he means to say that God knows, of some particular human being, that she enjoys the good that is sight, or whether he means to say that God just knows abstractly what is the good that is human sight. But suppose he means the former. At most what can be said is that anyone who has such knowledge will also know what blindness is. That leaves such a person well short of knowing, say, that some particular elderly woman has gone blind – which is what all of us would regard as knowing one of the actual evils of our world.

The conclusion is unavoidable: Aquinas does not find, in the Plotinian God, anything that could appropriately be called *knowing the suffering and evil that transpire in our world*. But if God does not know the suffering and evil that transpire in our world, then God does not *sufferingly* know it. Now suppose we assume, as seems reasonable, that Aquinas has done as well as can be done by way of finding in the Plotinian God something that could be called “knowledge of things other than Godself” and “knowledge of the suffering and evil of our world.” Then we must conclude that on the Plotinian concept of God, God does indeed not have a suffering awareness of the world. God does not have such an awareness because God does not have an awareness of the world at all.

So we are faced with a choice. If one adopts the Plotinian concept of God, the conclusion falls out that God does not suffer, and, of course, does not have passions. But one gets the conclusion by paying the price of removing from God all knowledge of, and love for, the particular things of this world. The question, then, is whether this price is too high. Virtually the entire Christian tradition would say it is. The Christian cannot surrender the conviction that God knows and loves God’s creation. Or to put it differently: to pay the price charged by the Plotinian concept of God is to move away from Christianity toward some other form of religion.

We are back to where we were: Does God sufferingly experience what transpires in the world? The tradition said that God does not. The moderns say that God does – specifically, that God sufferingly experiences our suffering. Both parties agree that God loves the world. But the tradition held that God loves only in the mode of benevolence; it proposed construing all the biblical passages in the light of that conviction.³⁶ The moderns

³⁶ So when Aquinas speaks of God’s *mercy* (*misericordia*), he has no choice but to turn it into mere benevolence: “Mercy is especially to be attributed to God, provided it be considered in its effect, but not as an affection to passion. In proof of which it must be observed that a person is said to be merciful [*misericos*] as being, so to speak, sorrowful at heart [*miserum cor*]; in other words, as being affected with sorrow at the misery of another as though it were his own. Hence it follows

insist that God's love includes love in the mode of sympathy. The moderns paint in attractive colors a moral ideal that is an alternative to that of the tradition, and point to various biblical passages speaking of God's suffering love – passages that the tradition, for centuries, has construed in its own way. The tradition, for its part, offered essentially two lines of defense. It argued that the attribution of emotions and suffering to God was incompatible with God's unconditionedness, an argument that, so we have concluded, should be rejected. And second, it offered a pair of what it took to be obvious truths: that suffering is incompatible with ideal existence, and that God's existence is immutably ideal. We saw that the supposition that those truths are obvious was endangered in Augustine's case by his insistence that we human beings are to cultivate a solidarity of grieving over evil and rejoicing over repentance. But we did not ourselves offer any argument directly against those supposed truths.

How can we advance from here? Perhaps by looking more intently than we have thus far at that claim of the tradition that God's love consists exclusively of benevolence. Benevolence in God was understood as God's steady disposition to do good to God's creatures. And since as long as there are creatures – no matter what their condition – there is scope for God's exercise of that disposition, and since God's exercise of that disposition is never frustrated, God endlessly takes joy in this dimension of Godself. God does not take joy – let us carefully note – in God's awareness of the condition of God's creatures. God does not delight in beholding the creaturely good that God has brought about. If that were the case, God's joy would be conditional on the state of things other than Godself. What God joyfully experiences is simply God's own exercise of benevolence. God's awareness of our plunge into sin and suffering causes God no disturbance; God's awareness of the arrival of God's perfected Kingdom will likewise give God no joy. For no matter what the state of the world, there is room for God's successful exercise of God's steady disposition to do good; and it is in *that* exercise that God finds delight.

An analogue that comes to mind is that of a professional health-care specialist. Perhaps when first she entered her profession she was disturbed by the pain and limping and death she saw. But that is now over. Now she is neither perturbed nor delighted by the condition of the people that she sees. What gives her delight is just her inner awareness of her own

that he endeavors to dispel the misery of this other, as if it were his; and this is the effect of mercy. To sorrow therefore, over the misery of others does not belong to God; but it does most properly belong to Him to dispel that misery, whatever be the effect we call misery" (*ST I*, 21, 3, *resp.*).

well-doing. And always she finds scope for well-doing – so long, of course, as she has clients. To those who are healthy she gives reassuring advice on health maintenance. To those who are ill she dispenses medicine and surgery. But it makes no difference to her whether or not her advice maintains the health of the healthy and whether or not her proffered concoctions and cuttings cure the illness of the ill. What makes a difference is just her steadiness in well-doing; in this and in this alone she finds her delight. If it falls within her competence she will, of course, cooperate in pursuing the elimination of smallpox; that is doing good. But should the news arrive of its elimination, she will not join the party; she has all along been celebrating the only thing she finds worth celebrating – namely, her own well-doing. She is a Stoic sage in the modern world.

I daresay that most of us find such a person thoroughly repugnant; that shows how far we are from the mentality of many of the intellectuals in the world of late antiquity. But beyond giving vent to our feelings of repugnance, let us consider whether the picture I have drawn is even coherent. Though this person neither rejoices nor suffers over anything in the condition of her patients, nonetheless she rejoices in her own doing of good. But what then does she take as *good*? What does she *value*? The health of her patients, one would suppose. Why otherwise would she give advice to the one on how to maintain his health, and chemicals to the other to recover his, and all the while rejoice, on account of thus acting, in her own doing of good? But if she does indeed value the health of her patients, then perforce she will also be glad over its presence and disturbed by its absence (when she knows about these). Yet we have pictured her as neither happy nor disturbed by anything other than her own well-doing. Have we not described what cannot be?

Perhaps in his description of moral action that great Stoic philosopher of the modern world, Immanuel Kant, can be of help to us here. In the moral dimension of our existence, the only thing good in itself is a good will, said Kant. Yet, of course, the moral person will do such things as act to advance the health of others. Insofar as she acts morally, however, she does not do so because her awareness of health in people gives her delight and her awareness of illness proves disturbing. She may indeed be so constituted that she does thus value health and sickness in others and act thereon. But that is no moral credit to her. To be moral she must act not out of delight over health nor out of disturbance over illness but out of duty. She must act on some rule specifying what one ought to do in her sort of situation – a rule to which, by following it, she accords “respect.” That is what it is to value a good will: to act out of respect for the moral

law rather than out of one's natural likings and dislikings, rejoicings and grievings. And the moral person is the person who, wherever relevant, thus values the goodness of her will. Her valuing of that will mean, when her will is in fact good, that she will delight therein. But if she acts out of a desire to delight in having a good will, that too is not moral action; she must act out of respect for the moral law.

Suppose then that our health-care specialist values the goodness of her will and acts thereon by dutifully seeking to advance the health of her patients – delighting in thus acting. She may or may not also value the health of her patients, being disturbed by its absence and delighted by its presence. But if she does not in that way value her patients' health, that does not in any way militate against her delighting in her own well-doing.

We have here, then, a way of understanding how it can be that God delights in God's doing good to human beings without either delighting in, or being disturbed by, the human condition. God acts out of duty. Thus acting, God values God's own good will without valuing anything in God's creation. If we interpret God's benevolence as God's acting out of duty, then the traditional picture becomes coherent.

But of course it buys this coherence at great price. For to think thus of God is to produce conflict at a very deep level indeed with the Christian Scriptures. These tell us that it is not out of duty but out of love that God blesses us, not out of obligation but out of grace that God delivers us. To construe God's love as purely benevolence and to construe God's benevolence along Kantian-Stoic lines as God's acting out of duty, is to be left without God's love.

So we are back with the model in which God values things other than God's own good will – values positively some of the events and conditions in God's creation, and values negatively others. To act out of love toward something other than oneself is to value that thing and certain states of that thing. And on this point it matters not whether the love be erotic or agapic. If one rejects the duty-model of God's action, then the biblical speech about God's prizing of justice and shalom in God's creation will have to be taken at face value and not construed as meaning that God has a duty to work for justice and shalom.

These reflections place us in a position to see better than we could before the cause of tension in Augustine's thought. Augustine urged us to value the religious condition of our fellow human beings. But, as we saw, he does not hold that our *eros* is to be attached to our fellows. Rather it was his assumption that the religious condition of our fellow human

beings has its own mode of value, distinct from the mode of value that those things have for us that satisfy our need, our *eros*. We are to love our fellow human beings without being attached to them. But if we are indeed to value in this non-erotic way the religious condition of our fellows, why would God not do so as well? Or conversely, if God does not do so, why is it nonetheless appropriate for us to do so? The tension in Augustine's thought is due to the fact that our (non-erotic) valuing and God's valuing arbitrarily part ways.

In my argument I have assumed that if, believing some state of affairs to be occurring, one *values* that occurrence, whether negatively or positively, then one is correspondingly delighted or disturbed. I have assumed that one's believing is then either a delightedly believing or a disturbedly believing, an avertive believing or an "advertive" believing. Some might question this assumption. Can valuing not be existentially colorless? Can God not value justice and shalom in God's creation while yet God's awareness of its presence gives God not a flicker of delight nor God's awareness of its absence a twinge of unhappiness? My answer is that I do not know how to envisage such a possibility. The Kantian duty-model gives us a way of understanding how one might act intentionally to bring about some state of affairs without valuing that state of affairs. But even Kant, along with the ancient Stoics, assumed that valuing displays itself in the aversive and adverse qualities of our experience. It is true, of course, that one can *evaluate* things coolly and impartially. One can work in a farmer's shed evaluating potatoes without valuing positively those to which one gives top grade or negatively those that one tosses out. But that is a different matter. Evaluating is not valuing.

I come then to this conclusion: the fact that the biblical writers speak of God as rejoicing and suffering over the state of the creation is not a superficial eliminable feature of their speech. It expresses themes deeply embedded in the biblical vision. God's love for this world is a rejoicing and suffering love. The picture of God as a Stoic sage, ever blissful and non-suffering, is in deep conflict with the biblical picture.³⁷

³⁷ For a full consideration of our topic, there is an argument of Charles Hartshorne which would have to be considered. He argues that God's *benevolence* must itself be understood as a suffering love – or strictly speaking, as a love that yields suffering. For God in God's benevolence wants human creatures to be happy. Yet so often they are not. God suffers, then, from the frustration of God's benevolent intention. This, of course, is something that the tradition would never have granted: that God's benevolent intention could be frustrated. Theologians, says Hartshorne:

sought to maintain a distinction between love as desire, with an element of possible gain or loss to the self, and love as purely altruistic benevolence; or again between sensuous and spiritual love, *eros* and *agape*. . . . Benevolence *is* desire for the welfare of others. . . . Of course it

But are we entitled to say that it is a *suffering* love, someone may ask – a love prompted by a *suffering* awareness of what goes on in the world? An unhappy awareness, Yes; but does it reach all the way to suffering?

What the Christian story says is that God the Father, out of love for human beings, delivered God's only begotten Son to the suffering, abandonment, and death of the cross. In the light of that, I think it grotesque to suggest that God's valuing of our human predicament was so mildly negative as to cause God no suffering. But in any case, nothing of substance hangs on degrees. The claim of the tradition was that God's knowledge of the world causes God no vexation *at all*, no disturbance, no unhappiness. We have found reason to think that that claim is false.

In closing let me observe that if we agree that God both sufferingly and joyfully experiences this world of ours and of God's, then at once there comes to mind a question that the tradition never asked, namely: What in our world causes God suffering and what in it causes God joy? And then at once there also comes to mind a vision of the relation between *our* suffering and joy and *God's* suffering and joy that is profoundly different from that to be found in the tradition. In the tradition the relation was simply that here in this life we long to share in that uninterrupted bliss that God enjoys from eternity. What now comes to mind instead is the vision of *aligning ourselves* with God's suffering and with God's joy: of delighting over that which is such that God's awareness of our delight gives God delight and of suffering over that which is such that God's awareness of our suffering causes God suffering.

The embrace of this new vision will then lead us to look once again at the content of the Augustinian vision, according to which the only thing in our earthly lives of sufficient worth to merit suffering is the religious condition of our souls. The company of friends and relatives is to become

must be a superrationally enlightened, an all-comprehending, never wearying desire for others' good, that is attributed to God. But still desire, so far as that means partial dependence for extent of happiness upon the happiness of others... Lincoln's desire that the slaves might be free was not less desire because it was spiritual, or less spiritual because it was desire – that is, a wish, *capable of being painfully disappointed or happily fulfilled*. ...

To hold that God "wills" or purposes human welfare, but is absolutely untouched by the realization or non-realization of this or that portion of the purposed goal (due, for instance, to human sins or unfortunate use of free will), seems just non-sense. ...

Does this not introduce the tragedy of unfulfilled desire into God? Yes, it does just that. (Charles Hartshorne, *Man's Vision of God*, 116, 135, 294)

Compare Fretheim, in *Suffering of God*, p. 134: "In terms of Jeremiah 45, we need to speak in some sense of a temporary failure in what God has attempted to do in the world. Because of this, the mourners should take up a lamentation for God as well."

to us as kiwi fruit that we enjoy while we have it but whose disappearance causes us no suffering. And so too for whatever else one wants to mention – justice, for example. We are to grieve over the souls of those who perpetrate injustice with evil heart; but over the violation of our rights as such we are not to grieve. Our rights we are to enjoy if we have them, but not grieve over if we do not.

In short, what one finds in Augustine and in that long tradition of Christian piety that he helped to shape is a radical and comprehensive lowering of the worth of the things of this world. In the presence of all those griefs that ensue from the destruction of that which we love, Augustine pronounces a “No” to the attachments rather than a “No” to the destruction – not a “No” to death but a “No” to love of what is subject to death. Thereby he also pronounces a “Not much” concerning the worth of the things loved. Nothing in this world has worth enough to merit an attachment that carries the potential of grief – nothing except the religious state of souls. The state of my child’s soul is worth suffering love; the child’s company is not.³⁸

But there is another way to go. To some of the things in this world one can pay the tribute of recognizing in them worth sufficient to merit a love that plunges one into suffering upon their destruction. In one’s love one can say a “Yes” to the worth of persons or things and in one’s suffering a “No” to their destruction. To friends and relatives one can pay the tribute of loving them enough to suffer upon their death. To justice among one’s people one can pay the tribute of loving it enough to suffer upon its tyrannical denial. To the delights of music and voice and birdsong one can pay the tribute of loving them enough to suffer upon going deaf. One can pay to persons and things the existential tribute of suffering love. “The world is better,” says Richard Swinburne in a fine passage,

if agents pay proper tribute to losses and failures, if they are sad at the failure of their endeavours, mourn for the death of a child, are angry at the seduction of a wife, and so on. Such emotions involve suffering and anguish, but in having such proper feelings a man shows his respect to himself and others. A man who feels no grief at the death of his child or the seduction of his wife is rightly branded by us as insensitive, for he has failed to pay the proper tribute of feeling to others, to show in his feeling how much he values them, and thereby

³⁸ “Love [Eros] is an activity of soul reaching out after good,” says Plotinus in *Enneads* III, 5, 4. Augustine would agree. His argument is that the things of this world do not have sufficient good to be worth reaching out after – or strictly, the good they have does not outweigh the grief they cause sufficiently to make it worth reaching out after them.

failed to value them properly – for valuing them properly involves having proper reactions of feeling to their loss.³⁹

Suffering is an essential element in that mode of life that says not only “No” to the misery of our world but “Yes” to its glories.

And if one does pay to friends and relatives the tribute of a love that may suffer, then also one will struggle to prolong their lives rather than to reorient a self cast into suffering by the snuffing out of their lives. If one does pay to justice among one’s people the tribute of a love that may suffer, then also one will struggle to overthrow the tyrant rather than to reconstruct one’s self so as to be content under tyranny. Suffering contributes to changing the world. Suffering must sometimes be cultivated. We are indeed to live in a solidarity of grieving and rejoicing – but of grieving and rejoicing over the absence and presence of that mode of human flourishing that the biblical writers call *shalom*; not just over the religious condition of our souls.

This, I said, was a different way to go – the way of “No” to death rather than to love of that which dies, the way of “No” to injustice rather than to love of justice, the way of “No” to poverty rather than to the struggle to alleviate poverty – and yes, the way of “No” to our distance from God rather than to love of God. It is also, in my judgment, a better way. For it is in line with God’s suffering and with God’s joy. Instead of loving only God we will love what God loves, including God. For it is in the presence of justice and *shalom* among God’s human creatures that God delights, as it is for the full realization of justice and *shalom* in God’s perfected Kingdom that God works. To love what is of worth in this world and to suffer over its destruction is to pay to that Kingdom the tribute of anguish over its delay. “Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee, O Lord,” said Augustine. What must be added is that our hearts will not find their full rest and *should not* find their full rest until the heart of our Lord is itself fully at rest in God’s perfected Kingdom.

³⁹ Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Oxford University Press, 1979), 192.

CHAPTER 10

Is God disturbed by what transpires in human affairs?

The Hebrew and Christian Scriptures present God as disturbed by the sufferings we human beings undergo and the wrongs we wreak upon each other – and by the way we treat God.

God is of incomparable excellence. That excellence requires of us due acknowledgment in the form of praise, thanksgiving, love, obedience, and the like. “Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name,” says the Psalmist (96:8). But we fail to render to God what due acknowledgment of God’s worth requires. The Hebrew and Christian Scriptures present God as disturbed by this, angry. They also present God as forgiving. In presenting God as angry about, yet forgiving of, how we treat God, the Scriptures presuppose that we have wronged God. One can forgive someone only if he has culpably wronged one, and only *for* the wrong he has done one.

With near uniformity, the tradition of Christian theology has held that in presenting God as disturbed by what transpires in human affairs, Scripture is speaking figuratively. There is no negativity in God, none whatsoever, nor is there any passibility. Thus God is not wronged, and so is not angry at being wronged. God is invulnerably and imperturbably joyful.

Some theologians have recognized that if it is not literally true that God is wronged, then it is also not literally true that God forgives, since forgiveness is of the person who wronged one. Others failed to notice the connection; they have talked as if it could be literally true that God forgives while only figuratively true that God has been wronged and is

This essay is a substantial revision of my “Could God not Sorrow if We Do?” in Christopher Wilkins, ed., *The Papers of the Henry Luce III Fellows in Theology* (Pittsburgh, PA: The Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada, 2002). I thank Terence Cuneo for comments on the earlier essay that instigated some of the revisions.

on that account angry, disturbed. They held that though there is neither negativity nor passibility in God, nonetheless God forgives.

Nowadays one hears it said in many quarters that God suffers. Often the persons who say this, though Christian, seem unaware of the near-unanimity of the Christian tradition in favor of the opposite view; and those who are aware of the tradition often do not genuinely engage it but content themselves with offering reasons against the traditional view that the philosophers and theologians of the tradition would find ludicrously simplistic. For example: since God loves human beings, since empathy is an important part of love, since there is suffering among human beings, and since empathy with the suffering is itself a mode of suffering, God must suffer.

I, too, hold that God is disturbed by what transpires in human affairs. But rather than ignoring the tradition or brushing it aside, I propose engaging it at its best. It is my judgment that Aquinas' case for the traditional view is as powerful as anyone's. So in this essay my project is to engage his argument. Though Aquinas' argument is relevant to the general issue of whether there is negativity or passibility in God, my discussion will be focused on the narrower issue of whether God experiences anger. Aquinas' way of developing the claim that God does not experience anger implies that God cannot be wronged.

AQUINAS' FRAMING OF THE ISSUE

In order to understand Aquinas' argument for the conclusion that God experiences no anger, we must first get hold of the conceptuality that he employs in framing his argument. In the course of his discussion of God's love in Question 20 of Part I of his *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas distinguishes between love, joy, and delight as *passions*, and love, joy, and delight as *acts of the intellectual appetite*.¹ With this distinction in hand, he observes that though love, joy, and delight are not present in God as *passions*, they are present in God as aspects of God's intellectual appetite (*ST* 1, *ad* 1). Then he goes on to say that:

As regards the formal element of certain passions, a certain imperfection is implied, as in desire, which is of the good we have not, and in sorrow (*tristitia*), which is about the evil we have. This applies also to anger, which

¹ I will be using the translation of *Summa Theologiae* by the Fathers of the English Dominicans (New York: Benzinger Brothers, 1947). The translation of *Summa contra Gentiles* that I will be using is that by Anton C. Pegis (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1975).

supposes sorrow. Certain other passions, however, as love and joy, imply no imperfection. Since therefore none of these can be attributed to God on their material side. ... neither can those that even on their formal side imply imperfection be attributed to Him; except metaphorically, and from likeness of effects ... Whereas those that do not imply imperfection, such as love and joy, can be properly predicated of God, though without attributing passion to him. (ST I, ad 2)

Before I explain the philosophical psychology that Aquinas is employing here, let me state his main point. Having distinguished between love, joy, and delight as *passions* and love, joy, and delight as *acts of the intellective appetite*, Aquinas now asserts that the same distinction applies to desire, sorrow, and anger. We must distinguish between desire, sorrow, and anger as passions and desire, sorrow, and anger as acts of the intellective appetite. And his thesis is that whereas love, joy, and delight as acts of the intellective appetite can be “properly” predicated of God, though not as passions, desire, sorrow, and anger cannot be properly predicated of God either as acts of the intellective appetite or as passions. They can only be predicated of God “metaphorically.” For whereas love, joy, and delight as acts of the intellective appetite “do not imply imperfection,” desire, sorrow, and anger as acts of the intellective appetite do inherently “imply imperfection.”²

Appetite, for Aquinas, is the faculty for wanting that something should be. It will do no harm also to speak of actualizations of the faculty as appetites – appetites for some particular thing. Appetites in this latter sense are not to be identified with desires. Desires are appetites for “some good we have not.” But not all appetites are for goods we have not; one may *possess* some good for which one has appetite. If so, one then experiences joy or delight, the object of the joy being “the good present and possessed.”³

² In *Summa contra Gentiles* I, 89, 8–9 and 90, 1–3, Aquinas reaches the same conclusion using a somewhat different conceptuality. I analyze both passages together, that from *Summa Theologiae* and that from *Summa contra Gentiles*, in “Could God not Sorrow if We Do?”

³ The “first change wrought in the appetite by the appetible object is called *love*, and is nothing else than complacency (*complacentia*) in that object; and from this complacency results a movement towards that same object, and this movement is *desire*; and lastly, there is rest which is *joy*. Since, therefore, love consists in a change wrought in the appetite by the appetible object, it is evident that love is a passion; properly so called, according as it is in the concupiscible faculty; in a wider and extended sense, according as it is in the will” (ST I–II, 26, 2, *resp.*).

I myself would distinguish, as Aquinas does not, between joy in the satisfaction of one’s appetite for something, and the joy one sometimes experiences in the occurrence of the object of one’s appetite. For example, there’s a difference between the joy of one’s longing to see Prague being satisfied, and one’s joy in seeing Prague. Either can occur without the other.

When the object of an act of appetite is apprehended by sense, the appetite is *sensitive* appetite; when it is apprehended (solely) by the intellect, the appetite is *intellective* appetite (*ST I*, 80, 2, *resp.*). An example of an act of sensitive appetite would be a person's desire for some food that she sees; examples of acts of intellective appetite would be desire for such things as knowledge and virtue.

Having drawn this distinction between sensitive and intellective appetite, Aquinas then makes the crucial move of identifying sensitive appetites with passions (see especially *ST I–II*, 22, 2). Passions, he says, “are movements of the sensitive appetite” (*ST I–II*, 23, 1, *sed contra*). What Aquinas has in mind by “movement” here includes not only sensory perception but also such changes as “the contraction or distension of the heart, or something of the sort” (*ScG I*, 89, 3). “Acts of the sensitive appetite, inasmuch as they have annexed to them some bodily change, are called passions” (*ST I*, 20, 1, *ad 1*).⁴ Given Aquinas' way of structuring the terrain, the question of whether God has passions, that is, sensitive appetites, is of no interest. Passions involve sensory perception and bodily changes. But God has no body; so obviously God has no passions; “in God and the angels there is no sensitive appetite” (*ST I–II*, 24, 3, *ad 2*).

Of equal importance with Aquinas' identification of acts of the sensitive appetite with passions is his identification of the intellective appetite with the will (see especially *ST I*, 82). The “intellective appetite ... is called the will,” he says (*ST I*, 82, 2, *obj.* 3).

Aquinas distinguishes will as such from *free* will. Will as such is that faculty whereby we desire that something apprehended through the intellect should be, it being understood that desiring it to be presupposes that we judge it to be good. Free will is a special type of will, that is, a special type of intellective appetite. The capacity or power of free will “is nothing else but the power of choice” (*ST I*, 83, 4, *resp.*); and “to choose something is to desire something for the sake of obtaining something else” (*ibid.*). Accordingly, an *act* of free will is the desiring of something one has chosen – that is to say, the desiring of something for the sake of obtaining something else. An act of free will presupposes a judgment concerning means to desired ends.

We have already seen that God and the angels have intellective appetite. Aquinas is explicit in affirming that they thus have will:

⁴ Cf. *ST I–II* 24, 2, *ad 2*: “In every passion there is an increase or decrease in the natural movement of the heart, according as the heart is moved more or less intensely by contraction and dilation; and hence it derives the character of passions.”

Love, concupiscence, and the like can be understood in two ways. Sometimes they are taken as passions – arising, that is, with a certain commotion of the soul. ... [I]n this sense they are only in the sensitive appetite. They may, however, be taken in another way, as far as they are simple affections without passion or commotion of the soul, and thus they are acts of the will. And in this sense, too, they are attributed to the angels and to God. (*ST* I, 82, 5, *ad* 1)

It is now clear how Aquinas was thinking when he said that joy or delight “is properly in God” and that love and joy “can be properly predicated of God.” Though God has no passions, God does have intellectual appetite; so “when love and joy and the like are ascribed to God or the angels, or to man in respect of his intellectual appetite, they signify simple acts of the will having like effects, but without passion” (*ST* I–II, 22, 3, *ad* 3). Joy occurs when the object of appetite is “a good present and possessed,” whereas sorrow occurs when the object of appetite is an “already present evil” (*ScG* I, 89, 9). The good that is an object of God’s intellectual appetite is “present and possessed.” It follows that God experiences the joy that ensues upon satisfied intellectual appetite. (See especially *ScG* I, 90, 3.)

WHY NO SORROW IN GOD?

We are ready for the question: Why does Aquinas hold that there is no sorrow, no anger, no desire, in God – no negativity of any sort in God’s intellectual appetite? Just by virtue of knowing that God has no body, we know that anger and sorrow *qua* passions have no place in God’s experience. But Aquinas holds that they also have no place *qua* acts of the intellectual appetite. Sorrow by its “very nature cannot be found in God” (*ScG* I, 89, 9). Why is that?

Sorrow implies an “imperfection”; that is why it cannot “be properly predicated of God” (*ST* I, 20, 1, *ad* 2). Sorrow “is caused by a present evil; and this evil, from the very fact that it is repugnant to the movement of the will, depresses the soul, inasmuch as it hinders it from enjoying that which it wishes to enjoy” (*ST* I–II, 37, 2, *resp.*). The “mere fact of a man’s appetite being uneasy about a present evil, is [thus] itself an evil, because it hinders the repose of the appetite in good” (*ST* I–II, 39, 1, *resp.*). And evil is, of course, “the opposite of good. But the nature of the good consists in perfection, which means that the nature of evil consists in imperfection. Now, in God, who is universally perfect ... there cannot be defect or imperfection. Therefore evil cannot be in God.” “Evil, which is the opposite of good could have no place in God” (*ScG* I, 39, 5 and 3). Hence

sorrow in general, and anger, indignation, and the like in particular, have no place in God.⁵

Aquinas sometimes presents this line of thought as if it were a good argument, all by itself, for the conclusion that in God there is no sorrow. In one passage, however, he points out why it is not. Though sorrow implies the existence somewhere of a deficiency in excellence, in order to determine whether someone's sorrowing over something represents a deficiency in excellence of *that* person, one has to consider whether perhaps the person is sorrowing over an evil that calls to be sorrowed over. If so, then the sorrowing constitutes an *excellence* in that person, not a deficiency – even though sorrow *as such* is a diminution in well-being. *Failure* to sorrow over that evil would be an evil in the person. A thing may be good or evil, says Aquinas, not just “considered simply and in itself” but “on the supposition of something else: thus shame is said to be good, on the supposition of a shameful deed done. . . . Accordingly, supposing the presence of something saddening or painful, it is a sign of goodness if a man is in sorrow or pain on account of this present evil. For if he were not to be in sorrow or pain, this could only be either because he feels it not, or because he does not reckon it as something unbecoming, both of which are manifest evils. Consequently it is a condition of goodness that, supposing an evil to be present, sorrow or pain should ensue” (ST I–II, 39, 1, *resp.*). “Sorrow is a good inasmuch as it denotes perception and rejection of evil” (ST I–II, 39, 2, *resp.*).

The main point bears repeating, since it is of crucial importance to our subsequent argument. If a person does not sorrow over some evil present to him, that indicates a deficiency in him of either cognition or moral discernment. Either he is not aware of the evil, even though it is present to him, or he is aware of it but does not regard it as an evil. When some evil is present to a person, then anger, sorrow, indignation, and the like are an *excellence* in that person, not a *deficiency* in excellence – even though his life would be better were there no sorrow in him because there was no evil present to him over which it was right to sorrow.

⁵ It is worth noting that Aquinas distinguishes two ways in which an act of appetite may “imply” an imperfection: the object of the act may be an evil, or, if the object is a good, one may be related to that good in an imperfect way. Hope is an example of the latter. Explaining why there is no hope in God, he says that “the notion of the object of a given passion is derived not only from good and evil, but also from the fact that one is disposed in a certain way towards one of them. For it is thus that *hope* and *joy* differ. If, then, the mode itself in which one is disposed towards the object that is included in the passion is not befitting to God, neither can the passion itself befit him, even through the nature of its proper species. Now, although hope has as its object something good, yet it is not a good already possessed, but one to be possessed. This cannot befit God, because of his perfection, which is so great that nothing can be added to it. *Hope*, therefore, cannot be found in God, even by reason of its species” (ScG I, 89, 10).

It follows that if there is no sorrow in God, no anger, indignation, and the like, then there is for God no “present evil,” nothing to sorrow over. For if there were an evil present to God but God did not sorrow over that evil, that would indicate that God was either unaware of that evil or did “not reckon it as unbecoming [i.e., did not reckon it as evil].” But both of these would themselves be “manifest evils” in God’s life.

IF THERE ARE EVILS IN THE WORLD, WHY NO
SORROW IN GOD?

Given all the ways in which we human beings fail to honor and obey God, and more generally, given all the evils in the world, how can Aquinas possibly hold that there is nothing for God to sorrow over? Might it be that evils are such that God cannot have knowledge of them? Aquinas remarks that “just as two things are requisite for pleasure; namely, conjunction with good and perception of this conjunction; so also two things are requisite for pain; namely, conjunction with some evil (which is in so far evil as it deprives one of some good), and perception of this conjunction” (*ST* I–II, 35, 1 *resp.*).

Aquinas does not dismiss out of hand the suggestion that God lacks knowledge of evils. He takes it seriously enough to discuss it with care in the course of his treatment of God’s knowledge, both in the *Summa Theologiae* and in the *Summa contra Gentiles* (*ST* I, 14, 10; *ScG* I, 71). His answer is the same in both cases: God does know evils.⁶ Not to do so would itself be a defect in God.

The only other option available to Aquinas for holding that there is no sorrow in God is to hold that there is nothing over which it is right for God to sorrow. But we have just taken note of Aquinas’ contention that God knows evils, which of course implies that there are evils and that they are present to God. So how can Aquinas hold that there is nothing over which it is appropriate for God to sorrow, given his contention that it is an imperfection not to sorrow over the evils present to one?

In Part I of the *Summa Theologiae*, Question 19, Article 9, *respondeo*, Aquinas explains his position:

Since evil is opposed to good, it is impossible that any evil, as such, should be sought for by the appetite, either natural, or animal, or by the intellectual appetite which is the will. Nevertheless evil may be sought accidentally, so far as it

⁶ I discuss Aquinas’ thought on this point in “Suffering love,” included as chapter 9 in this present collection.

accompanies a good, as appears in each of the appetites. For a natural agent intends not privation or corruption, but the form to which is annexed the privation of some other form, and the generation of one thing, which implies the corruption of another. Also when a lion kills a stag, his object is food, to obtain which the killing of the animal is only the means. Similarly, the fornicator has merely pleasure for his object, and the deformity of sin is only an accompaniment. . . . Now God wills no good more than He wills his own goodness; yet he wills one good more than another. Hence He in no way wills the evil of sin, which is the privation of right order towards the divine good. The evil of natural defect, or of punishment, He does will, by willing the good to which such evils are attached.

Let me paraphrase. Pain as such is an evil in one's life, a diminution in one's well-being; and nobody, or almost nobody, desires pain as such. Nonetheless pain, as we all know, is sometimes an unavoidable accompaniment to the achievement of some great good – the good of having a malignant tumor removed, for example. In such cases the whole package is not an evil but a good; and you and I choose the pain in choosing the package. So too for God's ordering of the ecology of nature. An event that is an evil in the life of one living organism may be, or result in, a good in the life of another. Aquinas' example is that of a lion's killing a stag for food. This event is an evil in the life of the stag but a good in the life of the lion.

Now within nature there is a hierarchical ordering of goods; God "wills one good more than another" in accord with this hierarchy. Thus behind God's ordering of the ecology of nature in such a way that lions kill stags (and other animals) for food, we are to see God's recognition that lions killing stags (and other animals) for food is a greater good than whatever were the options. The whole package is a good, even though the death of the stag as such is an evil. In designing the ecology of nature, God did not choose the death of the stag as such but chose the whole package consisting of the stag serving as food for the lion. And that whole package is a good. God does not choose as such anything that is an evil in the life of some animal, but chooses it only as part of a package that is a good.

In the moral domain there are also certain evils that God wills as means to, or as accompaniments of, goods – punishment for sin, for example. The hard treatment that the punishment inflicts on the wrongdoer is, as such, an evil in that person's life; and God does indeed will that evil. God does not will it as such, however, but for the sake of the good to which this evil is "attached." The package as a whole, imposition of the evil of hard treatment on someone as punishment for their sin, is a good.

Aquinas makes clear that sin itself is to be thought of differently. Though God wills “the evil of natural defect [and] punishment . . . by willing the good to which such evils are attached,” God “in no way wills the evil of sin.” Obviously God does not will sin for its own sake and as such; but neither – and this is crucial – does God will sin as a necessary accompaniment to some good that God wills. Instead, “some things . . . happen, not because God wills, but because He permits them to happen – such as sins” (*ST* I–II, 39, 2, *ad* 3). Though God permits the evil of moral wrongdoing for the sake of some greater good achieved by that permission, and though God even has foreknowledge of that wrongdoing, nonetheless God does not will that evil as a necessary attachment to that larger good. God “neither wills [moral] evil to be done, nor wills it not to be done, but wills to permit [moral] evil to be done; and this is a good” (*ibid.*). God does not bring about moral evil as part of a larger package that God brings about; rather, by God’s permission, it is up to human beings to decide whether or not to commit moral evil.

Let it be granted that God permits sin rather than actively willing it – that is, rather than bringing it about. How does this help Aquinas? Isn’t it still the case that sin is out of accord with God’s will – out of accord with God’s intellective appetite? Aquinas’ answer comes as a surprise: yes, sin is indeed out of accord with God’s will: “all evil of sin, though happening in many ways, agrees in being out of harmony with the divine will” (*ST* I, 19, 12, *ad* 4).

Doesn’t this undercut everything that Aquinas has said thus far? Recall that both in our case and God’s, Aquinas identifies will – not *free* will but will as such – with intellective appetite. Accordingly, if something is out of accord with God’s will, then perforce it is out of accord with God’s intellective appetite. And sin, we have just heard Aquinas say, is out of accord with God’s will. But given the earlier account of sorrow, if things happen that are out of accord with God’s intellective appetite, then there is sorrow in God. It follows, so it would seem, that there is sorrow in God.

I know of no passage in which Aquinas explicitly addresses this problem in his line of thought. But let’s look at a passage that is rather often cited as containing Aquinas’ answer. It’s a passage in which Aquinas distinguishes between God’s *antecedent* and *consequent* will, and then says that whereas God’s consequent will is always fulfilled, what God “wills antecedently may not take place.” The application to the issue at hand would be that when Aquinas said, in the passage quoted above, that sin is out of accord with God’s will, he meant that it is out of accord with God’s

antecedent will, not that it is out of accord with God's consequent will; and that only if something were out of accord with God's consequent will would it be appropriate for God to sorrow over it.

Here is the passage:

[E]verything, in so far as it is good, is willed by God. A thing taken in its primary sense, and absolutely considered, may be good or evil, and yet when some additional circumstances are taken into account, by a consequent consideration may be changed into the contrary. Thus that a man should live is good; and that a man should be killed is evil, absolutely considered. But if in a particular case we add that a man is a murderer or dangerous to society, to kill him is a good; that he live is an evil. Hence it may be said of a just judge, that antecedently he wills all men to live; but consequently wills the murderer to be hanged. In the same way God antecedently wills all men to be saved, but consequently wills some to be damned, as His justice exacts. Nor do we will simply, what we will antecedently but rather we will it in a qualified manner, for the will is directed to things as they are in themselves, and in themselves they exist under particular qualifications. Hence we will a thing simply inasmuch as we will it when all particular circumstances are considered; and this is what is meant by willing consequently. Thus it may be said that a just judge wills simply the hanging of a murderer, but in a qualified manner he would will him to live, to wit, inasmuch as he is a man. Such a qualified will may be called a willingness (*velleitas*) rather than an absolute will (*absoluta voluntas*). Thus it is clear that whatever God simply wills takes place; although what He wills antecedently may not take place. (*ST* I, 19, 6, *ad* 1)

This passage comes from the same question of the *Summa* that the one quoted just previously comes from, and makes the same substantive point, the only significant difference between the two passages being that here Aquinas introduces the terminology of "antecedent will" and "consequent will." One antecedently wills some event when, considered as such, one wants it to happen – when one wants it to happen other things being equal, *ceteris paribus*. One consequently wills some event to happen when, all things considered, one wants it to happen. This distinction in types of willing is obviously a straightforward counterpart to the distinction drawn in the previous passage between something's being evil considered as such and something's being evil all things considered.

But given that the distinction between God's antecedent and consequent will is a straightforward counterpart to that earlier distinction, it is of no help in explaining and defending Aquinas' claim that God does not sorrow over sin – nor, let us note, does Aquinas himself employ it for that purpose. Were the distinction to apply to incidents of moral evil, what the distinction would tell us is that whereas it was God's antecedent will that the person not commit the sin, it was God's consequent

will that the person commit the sin – presumably as part of the larger good consisting of the good of the person's being permitted to commit the sin plus the evil of the person's committing the sin. But that was not Aquinas' view. The good that God willed was not the package consisting of the person's being permitted to sin plus the person's sinning; the good that God willed was solely the good of the person's being permitted to sin. For the sin is not "attached" to God's permission of the sin in the way that the evil of pain is attached to the good of surgery; the permission of the sin can occur without the sin occurring. God "in no way wills the evil of sin." Human beings don't have to sin when permitted to sin. Sin is opposed to both the antecedent and the consequent will of God.

Consider an analogy from human affairs. Imagine a father who strongly disapproves of something his son is inclined to do; and suppose that the father nonetheless gives the son the freedom to do this thing, permits him to do it. Does the father's permitting his son to do this thing imply that he has changed his mind about it and no longer disapproves of it? Of course not. Suppose that the son actually uses his freedom to do that very thing. Does that imply that the father now no longer disapproves of the act in question? Of course not. Does it imply that the father now, in retrospect, thinks it was not a good thing to permit his son to do that? No, not that either. The father believes, both before and after, that the package consisting of his permitting his son to do that bad thing and the son's doing it is better than his forbidding or preventing him from doing it; but what the father hoped for, when he gave his son permission, was that the yet better package would come about consisting of his permitting his son to do that bad thing and the son's not doing it. The father sorrows over the fact that his son's action prevented that better package from coming about. He sorrows over what his son used his freedom to do.

It is Aquinas' view that sin is opposed to the consequent will of God. But why then does God not sorrow over sin? When we lay out Aquinas' full line of thought, we see that to this, the crucial question, he gives no answer.

THE IMPORT OF METAPHORICAL ATTRIBUTIONS OF PASSIONS TO GOD

In the course of discussing the thesis that God loves all things, in *Summa Theologiae* I, 20, 2, Aquinas remarks that "nothing prevents one and the

same thing being loved under one aspect, while it is hated under another. God loves sinners in so far as they are existing natures; for they have existence, and have it from Him. In so far as they are sinners, they have not existence at all, but fall short of it; and this in them is not from God. Hence under this aspect they are hated by God" (*ad 4*). Does this not contradict, at the most fundamental level, the interpretation of Aquinas that I have been developing? If God hates the sinner with respect to his sinful act, then God sorrows, for hate is a species of sorrow. So, on Aquinas' view, God does sorrow.

The passage does not contradict my interpretation. In *Summa contra Gentiles*, Aquinas notes that, in Scripture, affections are regularly predicated of God that are "in their species ... repugnant to the divine perfection" (*ScG I*, 91, 5). But given the line of thought sketched out above, Aquinas holds that such predications are to be interpreted as "metaphorical" rather than "proper." Augustine had already developed the thought that the ground of such metaphorical attributions is "a likeness in effects." Though Aquinas does not mention Augustine, he embraces this principle of analysis, adding the qualification that in a few cases the ground may instead be "some preceding affection" (*ibid.*).

Explaining the main, Augustinian, line of analysis, Aquinas says that "the will at times, following the order of wisdom, tends to that effect to which someone is inclined because of a defective passion; for a judge punishes from justice, as the angry man punishes from anger. Hence God is at times called *angry* in so far as, following the order of His wisdom, He wills to punish someone, according to a Psalm (2:12): 'for his wrath is quickly kindled'" (*ScG I*, 91, 16). In short, though there is no anger in God, God does sometimes do the sort of thing that a human being would do out of anger, doing it out of love, however, not out of anger. When the biblical writers predicate "is angry" of God, they have to be understood as claiming about God that God performs that sort of action.

The same point is made in *Summa Theologiae*. After remarking, in the course of his discussion of God's will, that "some things are said of God in their strict sense; others by metaphor," Aquinas goes on to observe that "when certain human passions are predicated of the Godhead metaphorically, this is done because of a likeness in the effect. Hence a thing that is in us a sign of some passion, is signified metaphorically in God under the name of that passion. Thus with us it is usual for an angry man to punish, so that punishment becomes an expression of anger. Therefore punishment itself is signified by the word anger, when

anger is attributed to God" (*ST* I, 19, 11, *resp.*). It is not *anger* that is signified by the word "anger" when predicated of God but a certain act that, in human beings, is typically an *expression* of anger, namely, the act of punishment.

Concerning the qualification that he adds to the Augustinian line of analysis, Aquinas explains that:

I say *in some preceding affection* since love and joy, which are properly in God, are the principles of the other affections, love in the manner of a moving principle and joy in the manner of an end. Hence, those likewise who punish in anger rejoice as having gained their end. God, then, is said to be saddened in so far as certain things take place that are contrary to what He loves and approves, just as we experience sadness over things that have taken place against our will. (*ScG* I, 91, 17)

The point is that just as we do not predicate "is angry" of God on the ground of there actually being anger in God's life, literally speaking, so also we do not predicate the more general term "is sad" of God on the ground of there actually being sadness in God's life, literally speaking. In both cases the predicate applies metaphorically. The ground of the metaphorical predications is different in the two cases, however. The predicate "is angry" applies metaphorically to God by virtue of the resemblance between certain of God's actions and those actions characteristic of how human beings express anger; the predicate "is sad" applies metaphorically to God by virtue of the fact that some things take place that are contrary to what God loves and approves. We take the "preceding affection" of God's love – an affection that God does truly and properly have; we look to see whether anything goes contrary to it, since we human beings are sad over what goes contrary to our desires; and if we find something of that sort, the predicate "is sad" applies metaphorically to God.

Now suppose it was Aquinas' position that things go contrary to God's antecedent but not to God's consequent will. Then the application of this line of thought concerning metaphorical attributions would be that the predicate "is sad" applies metaphorically to God by virtue of the presence of something in the world that is contrary to God's antecedent will.

Two points must be made in response. First, if it were Aquinas' position that things go contrary to the antecedent but not to the consequent will of God, then the right analysis would be not that the predicate "is sad" applies metaphorically to God but that it is either literally true or literally false of God, depending on whether one is speaking about

the antecedent or the consequent will of God. If speaking about God's antecedent will, it is literally true; if speaking about God's consequent will, it is literally false. But second, as we saw above, Aquinas' thought has the implication that sin is contrary not just to the antecedent will but also to the consequent will of God. So whether we are speaking of God's antecedent will or of God's consequent will, it follows from Aquinas' line of thought that the predicate "is sad" applies literally to God.

THE UPSHOT

Aquinas has not found a way of holding conjointly that sin does occur, that sin is contrary to God's will, and that God is not disturbed by the sin that occurs. There is in fact moral evil in the world, and Scripture presents God as disturbed by this. Aquinas has not offered a coherent reason, let alone a compelling reason, for rejecting that presentation.

Add to this the two following considerations. Scripture presents God not only as disturbed by evil but also as the savior of humankind from evil; Christianity is a salvation religion. If there were nothing in human affairs that God desired to be otherwise, talk of salvation would make no sense.

Second, Aquinas holds that God does actually and literally punish human beings for their wrongdoing. In one of the passages already quoted he says that since in human affairs it is usual "for an angry man to punish," the punishment being an "expression" of the anger, when Scripture attributes anger to God, "punishment itself" is to be understood as what is "signified by the word anger" (*ST I*, 19, 11, *resp.*). The thought is that the reality that the word "anger" indicates, when predicated of God, is God's act of punishing the one with whom it is said, metaphorically, that God is angry.

Now I take it to be a conceptual truth that hard treatment inflicted by one person on another is *punishment* of the latter only if the inflicter inflicts the hard treatment because the subject has done something that the inflicter judges wrong and hence disapproves of. But if there were nothing that God judged wrong and hence disapproved of, God could not punish anyone. It is not punishment, let alone *just* punishment, if God inflicts hard treatment on someone without judging that that person could have and should have acted otherwise, and without thus disapproving of what that person has done and desiring that he not have done it.

DISCREPANCY BETWEEN SORROW IN
HUMAN AND IN DIVINE LIFE

Let me close by highlighting the discrepancy between the role that Aquinas assigns to sorrow in human life and his rejection of any such role in God's life. In Question 39, Article 2, of *Summa Theologiae* I-II, Aquinas asks "whether sorrow can be a virtuous good?" In his answer he first observes that he has already established that sorrow can be a good; the passage he has in mind is the one I quoted earlier, in which he observed that though sorrow always implies some evil, nonetheless sorrow over the evil that is present to a person is an excellence in the person; in Aquinas' words, "sorrow is a good inasmuch as it denotes perception and rejection of evil." As to whether sorrow is a *virtuous* good, he then says this:

These two things [perception and rejection of evil], as regards bodily pain, are a proof of the goodness of nature, to which it is due that the senses perceive, and that nature shuns, the harmful thing that causes pain. As regards interior sorrow, perception of the evil is sometimes due to a right judgment of reason; while the rejection of the evil is the act of the will, well disposed and detesting that evil. Now every virtuous good results from these two things, the rectitude of the reason and the will. Wherefore it is evident that sorrow may be a virtuous good. (*resp.*)

Aquinas then asks whether it can be a virtuous good on our part to be opposed to sin when God, after all, permits it. His answer is that "a will that is opposed to sin, whether in oneself or in another, is not discordant from the divine will" (*ST* I-II, 39, 2, *ad* 3). The reason that a human will opposed to sin is not discordant from the divine will is, of course, that sin is opposed to the divine will, opposed both to the antecedent and to the consequent will of God; God "in no way wills the evil of sin." But if the fact that sin is opposed to the divine will, even though permitted, makes it virtuous for us to sorrow over sin, why does not that same fact make it virtuous for God to sorrow over sin?

As I read the history of Christian thought, it was especially two convictions that drove the theologians and philosophers of the tradition to the conviction that God experiences no disturbance. One was the conviction that God is the ultimate condition of everything not identical with God and is in no way conditioned. The other was the conviction that God is the sole intrinsic good and is in no way deficient in excellence. Though the first of these played some role in the traditional argumentation for the

thesis that God experiences no disturbance, the dominant role was played by the second. Aquinas rests his argument entirely on the second. A full treatment of the topic would consider whether arguments for God's non-disturbance that start from God's aseity fare any better than arguments that start from God's excellence. An implication of Alvin Plantinga's discussion of the traditional case for God's unconditionedness in *Does God Have a Nature?*⁷ is that they do not fare better. God is disturbed over our wronging of God and our wronging of each other.

⁷ Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1980.

CHAPTER II

The silence of the God who speaks

Silence is of many sorts. There's the silence of the countryside on a still winter's night, when all the animals are sleeping and all the insects hibernating. There's the silence of Amsterdam on the eve of the fifth of May, when the entire old city halts for two minutes to memorialize those who fell in the war and were silenced. There's the silence of the mute, and the silence of rocks, hills, and valleys. There's silence in music, silence as essential to the music as the sounds. There's the silence of the audience chamber when the imminent entrance of the queen is announced. And there's the hush of the cosmos that the Psalmist enjoins when he announces: "The Lord is in his holy temple, let all the earth keep silence before him."

The silence of which I will be speaking is unlike all of those. It's the silence of the biblical God – the biblical God being a God who is not only capable of speaking but also has on many occasions spoken. More specifically, I will be speaking of the *biblical* silence of the biblical God. The biblical silence of God is the non-answering silence of God. It's like the silence of the parent who doesn't answer when the child asks "Why? Why did it happen? Where were you?" It's the silence that the poet of Psalm 83 pleads with God to break: "O God, do not keep silence; do not hold thy peace or be still, O God!"

BIBLICAL SILENCE

The Bible – both the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Bible – presents God as having spoken. In addition, there's a long tradition within both Judaism and Christianity of regarding the Bible itself as a medium of divine speech. When I began composing this essay, I had just finished putting the final touches to a book of philosophical reflections on the claim that God speaks. *Divine Discourse*, I titled it. I argued that if we take speaking to consist in the performance of what J. L. Austin called

illocutionary actions, then there is nothing incoherent or impossible in the claim that God speaks – that is, *literally* speaks. Nothing incoherent or impossible in the claim that God performs such actions as commanding, assuring, promising, asserting, and so forth. The silence of God is not an ontologically necessitated silence. It's not like the silence of the rocks and the hills, of which it is only metaphorically true that they speak. If God were impersonal – the “ground of being” or something of that sort – then God's silence would be ontologically necessitated. The silence of the biblical God is the silence of a God who speaks.

Though the biblical God – by which I mean, God as presented in the Bible – though the biblical God does indeed speak, nonetheless, on most matters, God chooses not to say anything. Most matters God leaves it to us to find out about, by observation and inference. And that's wonderful. Who wants to be told everything? The silence of God – the *biblical* silence of God – does not consist in the fact that on many matters, God says nothing.

The biblical silence of God is the failure or refusal of God to answer a question put to God. Not the failure or refusal to answer any question you please, however. Some of the questions put to God are questions that, given what God has already said, are misguided questions. Questions that one wouldn't ask if one has heard and genuinely listened to what God has already said. The biblical silence of God is the non-answering silence of God in the face of those questions that take into account what God has already said.

There are many such questions, and of many sorts. I shall focus all my attention on just one sort. The sort I have in mind are questions that we find ourselves incapable of answering on our own. At least, we have been unsuccessful thus far in answering them on our own. Yet they are questions to which the person who believes in the biblical God wants an answer with all his or her soul. They are questions which, unanswered, put biblical faith at risk. The risk has proved too great for many; faith has succumbed. Yet God does not answer the questions. Strange and disturbing. Though one poses the questions in the context of having listened to God, to ask them is to find oneself standing alongside the Psalmist before the non-answering silence of God.

LOCATING THE SILENCE

Let me begin by locating the sort of questions I have in mind, thus locating the silence. Strange forked creatures, we human beings: animalic

persons, personic animals. Persons indeed, but also animals. Animals indeed, but also persons: creatures endowed with consciousness and free agency, reflective of God, meant to enjoy and tend the earth and to live in fellowship with other persons, both those of our own kind and God. Placed in a spatio-temporal physical world along with lots of other forms of life, including other kinds of animals.

Upon inspecting this curious forked creature that he had made, God pronounced the workmanship good; by which God no doubt meant, in part, that our design plan was a good one for our situation. Inspection completed and passed, God sent us on our way with various instructions for conduct, and a blessing: may you flourish, said God. May you flourish as a species. When one reads the report of God's blessing of humanity in the context of the other Genesis blessings, that's the natural interpretation. But as the Bible proceeds it becomes clear that the Genesis report of God's blessing of humanity had a latent meaning. What God had in mind was not just that we flourish as a species but that we flourish as individual members of the species. That we each live until "full of years" – the three score years and ten built into our design plan; and that during those years we flourish. Flourish *qua* the animalic persons, the personic animals, that we were created as being. And flourish in the earthly and social environment in which we have been placed. In Genesis, God was not pronouncing a blessing on disembodied souls about to enter an immaterial heaven.

But things have gone awry, terribly awry, with respect to God's creating and providential intent for these creatures. The divine experiment has not worked out: the experiment of creating this species of forked creatures, placing and maintaining the species in this physical universe along with other forms of life, giving the species instructions for conduct, and doing this creating and maintaining with the intent that each member of the species should flourish on earth in society until full of years. The blessing has not been fulfilled. Some do not flourish; some do not live until full of years; some neither flourish nor live until full of years.

Prominent among the things that have gone awry in human existence are life-duration and suffering. The lives of many do not endure as they were meant to endure. And suffering does not serve the function it was meant to serve. Neither do affection and volition function as they were meant to function; they do not measure up to God's instructions. But on this occasion, I shall concentrate on the malfunctioning of suffering.

To see in what way suffering malfunctions, we must reflect on the nature of suffering and on its *proper* function. For it does indeed have a

proper function. In turn, to reflect on those matters we must attend to a dimension of our constitution so deep and pervasive that neither ordinary speech nor the language of psychology and philosophy provides us with a conceptuality apt for describing it. My best will thus be fumbling.

Built into the constitution of all of us are two distinct systems of suffering and delight. "System" is an inept word for what I wish to point to; but I can think of none better. One of these systems pertains to experience; the other pertains to belief. Let me begin with that system of suffering and delight which pertains to experience. And let me take *joy*, or synonymously for my purposes, *delight*, as the opposite of suffering.

Pass quickly before your mind's eye samples of human experience in all its rich variety: sensations, moods, perceptions, emotions, desires, pains, believings, and so forth. And then notice this fundamental fact about our way of having such experiences: though some are such that our having them is a matter of indifference to us, many are ones we *like* having, and many others we *dislike* having. Many of our experiences are, as it were, valorized, charged – some positively, some negatively – while others remain neutral, with the charges coming in varying degrees of intensity, from intensely positive to intensely negative. There is thus in the life of each of us a continuum of valorization, with each of our experiences having a place on the continuum. As one moves out from the neutral center toward the positive end, one reaches a point where everything beyond is experienced joyfully. As one moves out from the neutral center toward the negative end, one reaches a point where everything beyond is experienced sufferingly.

Physical pain, for example, is experienced by most of us most of the time with a negative charge. When that charge is sufficiently intense, we experience it sufferingly; we suffer from the pain. Apparently, though, there are cases in which even fairly intense physical pain is experienced with a positive charge. I do not have in mind those cases in which a person puts up with some pain – may even be glad to have it – because she believes that some good will ensue; such cases bring belief into the picture, and we will get to that shortly. Rather I have in mind those cases in which the person just likes having the pain. This makes clear that we must beware of identifying strong negative valorization with pain. Though we sometimes speak of suffering as pain, to speak thus is to speak metaphorically. A good deal of suffering, even of experiential suffering, has nothing to do with pain; witness those who suffer from mental depression. And conversely, as we have just seen, pain can be experienced with a positive rather than a negative charge.

We regularly speak of someone suffering *from* the pain, of someone's suffering being *caused by* mental depression, of someone getting delight *from* the music, and so forth. In short, we regularly use causal language, and causal-sounding language, to describe the relation between suffering or delight, on the one hand, and the experience of pain, mental depression, or hearing music, on the other. But we must not think of the connection between suffering or delight, and some experience, as the connection of efficient causality; for the suffering which we describe as "caused" by pain is not a sensation *in addition to* the pain sensation, causally evoked by it. The only sensations are the pain sensations. When the operative system is the experiential system, then suffering and joy are, as it were, adverbial modifiers of the states and events of consciousness which are the experiences. They are not distinct experiences but *ways of having* experiences. Pain and depression are among the experiences that we normally have sufferingly; the perception of art and the taste of good food are among the experiences that we often have joyfully. Suffering is an existential No-saying to some experience; delight, an existential Yes-saying.

What I have been describing thus far is just one of the two systems of suffering and delight that I claimed to identify in us human beings – the *experiential* system. Let us move on to consider the other system – that which pertains to belief, the *belief* system. When I learned of the death of my son, I was cast into suffering. What caused my suffering was not his death; for in the interim between his death and my learning of it, I did not suffer. What caused my suffering was my coming to believe that he was dead. If things had gone in the opposite way, if I had come to believe that he was dead when he was not, then too I would have been cast into suffering by my belief that he was dead, not by his death; for in this case there would not even have been his death. So our beliefs have the power of casting us into suffering; and they have that power whether or not they are true.

Yet what I suffered over was not the experience of my actively believing that my son was dead; it was, rather, that my son was dead. And that was not an experience of mine. It wasn't even an object of my experience; it was something of which I had only a belief. It's *what I believed to be the case* that I suffered over, not my experiential state of *believing* it. I suffered over that which was the content of my belief, namely, that my son was dead, not over my believing it. The suffering that occurs when the experiential system is operating is the suffering that consists of sufferingly having some experience. By contrast, the suffering that occurs when

the belief system is operating is an emotion caused by coming to believe something, the emotion having as its object that which one believes to be the case.

It's true that there are cases in which we sufferingly or joyfully experience a believing. People wracked by religious doubt who finally come to believe confidently in their salvation not only rejoice over their salvation; they also experience rejoicingly their confident believing. But my case was not like that. My suffering was not my existential No-saying to my *believing* that my son was dead, but my existential No-saying to his being dead.

We are all created with these two systems of valorization. They're part of the design plan of our constitution. And in all of us, this part of our design plan gets activated by our life in this world. Sometimes my throat does actually feel unpleasantly parched. Sometimes I do actually feel unpleasantly hungry. Sometimes I do actually feel a distinctly unpleasant burning sensation in my finger. Just as one cannot imagine a human being whose constitution does not incorporate those two systems, so one cannot imagine a human life here on earth in which these two systems of our constitution are not activated in such a way as to yield not only positively but also negatively valorized experiences, and beliefs concerning occurrences about which the person feels negatively.

And now for the point about proper functioning. Being constituted as we are in this regard serves our flourishing as animalic persons in the world in which we are placed. That we need water, food, and intact flesh if we are to remain alive is a direct consequence of our animalic constitution. Accordingly, it's conducive to our endurance as animalic persons that we have feelings of thirst when in need of water, feelings of hunger when in need of food, feelings of pain when our flesh gets burned, and that we experience these sensations negatively. In some cases we experience them with such intense negativity that we *suffer* from parched throat sensations, *suffer* from hunger pang sensations, *suffer* from burn sensations. Our endurance as animalic persons would be vastly more precarious than it is if we didn't experience thirst, hunger, and the pain of burned flesh, or if we didn't experience them negatively.

The examples I have given, of the proper functioning of unpleasantness and suffering, were all taken from the animalic side of our existence; examples of the same point from the personal side of our existence can also easily be given. Our dislike of loneliness leads us to establish families and communities. Our dislike of intellectual bewilderment leads us to

pursue knowledge. Our dislike of disappointment over unachieved goals leads us to try harder. And our dislike of a wide range of things makes them candidates for functioning as means of appropriate punishment and chastisement.

The conclusion is unavoidable that suffering in particular, and negative valorizations in general, often serve our flourishing as the animalic persons that we are. Of course the person suffering doesn't *like* the suffering. But that's exactly the point. We draw back from the experiences we dislike, do what we can to alleviate and forestall them. It's the combination of our being so constituted as to feel pain upon being burned and our not liking that pain that makes it much easier for us to survive than would otherwise be the case; witness the precarious existence of those rare human beings who do not feel such pain. The suffering serves our flourishing.

Dislike and suffering are existential No-saying to that from which, and over which, we suffer. But when a human being placed in this world has a constitution that includes such capacities for existential No-saying as ours typically does, we must pronounce a judgmental Yes on that aspect of our constitution itself. For we cannot imagine creatures such as ourselves flourishing, or even surviving, in environments such as ours without such capacities as we have for existential No-saying. Part of what God found good about the way God created us was surely that we were capable of suffering. The point is made with poetic eloquence by Karl Barth in his discussion of the menace to human life and flourishing that he calls *das Nichtige*:

We must indicate and remove a serious confusion which has been of far reaching effect in the history of theology. ... [T]here is a positive as well as a negative aspect of creation and creaturely occurrence. ... Viewed from its negative aspect, creation is as it were on the frontier of *das Nichtige* and orientated towards it. Creation is continually confronted by this menace. ... Yet this negative side is not to be identified with *das Nichtige*, nor must it be postulated that the latter belongs to the essence of creaturely nature and may somehow be understood and interpreted as a mark of its character and perfection ... [I]n creation there is not only a Yes but also a No; not only a height but also an abyss; not only clarity but also obscurity; not only growth but also decay; not only opulence but also indigence; not only beauty but also ashes; not only beginning but also end; not only value but also worthlessness. ... [I]n creaturely existence ... there are hours, days and years both bright and dark, success and failure, laughter and tears, youth and age, gain and loss, birth and sooner or later its inevitable corollary, death. ... Yet it is irrefutable that creation and creature are good even in the fact that all that exists in this contrast and antithesis. In all this, far from being null, it

praises its Creator and Lord even on its shadowy side, even in the negative aspect in which it is so near to *das Nichtige*.¹

All true. Yet to say it once again, things have gone terribly awry with respect to the function of suffering in our lives – and with respect to life-duration. It was and is the intent behind God's creation and maintenance that with the constitution God gave us we would each and all flourish until full of years in the environment in which God placed us. But with reference to that intent, things have gone terribly awry. Sometimes a person's constitution itself becomes disordered in such a way that the person does not flourish; one lives in severe depression or intractable pain. More often, the fit between our constitution and our environment does not serve our flourishing. The food I need to maintain my animal existence isn't available; so I die long before full of years, suffering intensely from starvation. You fall. If you merely break an arm, that doesn't significantly inhibit your flourishing, since the break soon heals and the suffering caused by the break nicely exemplifies the design plan functioning properly. Life would be far more precarious than it is if breaking bones produced no pain. But if your fall brings about your early death, I can expatiate as long as I have breath on the fact that this is just a natural consequence of your doing what you did with the animal body that you have in the physical universe which is ours; that doesn't address the fact that things have gone awry with reference to God's intent that you should live until full of years. Again, rather than flourishing in the company of your fellow human beings you may be subjected to indignity and even torture. Your human constitution operating in your social and physical environment does not bring about your flourishing until full of years.

The divine experiment has not worked out: the experiment of creating these forked creatures with the constitution that they have, placing them in this physical and social situation, and doing that, as well as maintaining and instructing them, with the intent that each and every one should flourish until full of years. Suffering and life-duration have gone agonizingly awry with reference to that intent.

Why have they gone awry? The very speech of God invites us to pose the question. It invites us to pose the question for this case and for that case, and for all the cases in general. Why was the life of this person snuffed out when young? Why did that person suffer years of intractable suffering

¹ *Church Dogmatics III/3: The Doctrine of Creation*, translated by G. W. Bromiley and R. J. Ehrlich (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1961), 296–97. I discuss Barth's concept of *das Nichtige* in detail in "Barth on evil," included as chapter 12 of this present volume.

that not only went beyond all proper functioning but from which nothing redemptive could any longer be extracted? Why all this brevity of life and why all such suffering? But no answer is forthcoming. Listen as we may, we hear no further speech. Only silence. Non-answering silence.

OBJECTION: THE WORLD HAS BEEN MISDESCRIBED

Most philosophers and theologians in the Christian tradition would deny that I have rightly located the silence of God. My location of the silence is predicated on the claim that things have gone awry with reference to God's creating and maintaining intent – in particular, that suffering and life-duration have gone awry. They would insist that that is not so.

Some would say that I have misdescribed the world. I said that in this world of ours we are confronted – not just now and then but over and over – with malfunctioning suffering and suffering that we prove incapable of making redemptive. The tradition of “soul-making theodicy,” initiated by Irenaeus, would deny this. Let me quote Calvin as an example. He says in one passage that: “Whether poverty or exile, or prison, or insult, or disease, or bereavement, or anything like them torture us, we must think that none of these things happens except by the will and providence of God, that he does nothing except with a well-ordered justice.”²

Coming to the surface in this passage is Calvin's inclination toward radical occasionalism – toward the view that God is the only true causal agent in reality. As to the character of God's agency, Calvin was persuaded that God acts always out of justice or love. Thus we get this other passage: “All the suffering to which human life is subject and liable are necessary exercises by which God partly invites us to repentance, partly instructs us in humility, and partly renders us more cautious and more attentive in guarding against the allurements of sin for the future.”³

The thought is clear: all suffering is sent by God. Partly out of retributive justice, but mainly *out of love*. Suffering is God's gift to us: God's medicine, God's surgery. We don't like the medicine and the surgery; who does like medicine and surgery? But suffering is for our moral and spiritual welfare. It prods us, provokes us, into reorienting and deepening our moral and spiritual selves. The experience of suffering may

² *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, translated by Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1960), III.viii, 11.

³ *Commentary on the First Book of Moses, called Genesis*, translated by J. King (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1948 reprint). The commentary is on Genesis 3:19.

even, in mysterious ways, provide us with the material *necessary* for such deepening. As I put it in a passage in my *Lament for a Son*:⁴

Suffering is the shout of “No” by one’s whole existence to that over which one suffers – the shout of “No” by nerves and gut and gland and heart to pain, to death, to injustice, to depression, to hunger, to humiliation, to bondage, to abandonment. And some times, when the cry is intense, there emerges a radiance which elsewhere seldom appears: a glow of courage, of love, of insight, of selflessness, of faith. In that radiance we see best what humanity was meant to be. . . . In the valley of suffering, despair and bitterness are brewed. But there also character is made. The valley of suffering is the vale of soul-making. (96–7)

Soul-making theodicy points to something deep and true. Yet if we judge ourselves answerable to the biblical speech of God, then we cannot accept its claim that, with reference to God’s creating and maintaining intent, suffering and life-duration have not gone awry in our world – cannot accept its assumption that only our affections and volitions have gone awry. It may well be that the suffering of a parent over the death of a child provides opportunity for the spiritual growth of the parent, or that the wrongdoing of the parent merits some suffering. But what about the child? What about the benediction God pronounced over the child: May you flourish until full of years? Or to move to a totally different scale: it may be that the suffering of the survivors of the Jewish Holocaust provided an opportunity for their spiritual growth, or that their wrongdoing merited some suffering. But what about the victims? What about the benediction God pronounced over each and every one of them: May you flourish until full of years?

Soul-making theodicy speaks only of the survivors, not of the victims. Either that, or it links victims with survivors by saying that the chastisement or opportunity for spiritual growth provided to the survivors outweighs in its goodness the evil of the early death and suffering of the victims. In so speaking, it displays its obliviousness to that “each-and-every” note in the biblical speech of God. The biblical God is not a nineteenth-century English utilitarian concerned only with the greatest flourishing of *the greatest number*. The God who kills children for the sake of the chastisement or spiritual growth of parents, the God who kills millions of Jews for the sake of the chastisement or spiritual growth of the survivors, is a grotesque parody of the biblical God. And should someone suggest that the early death of the child represents the punishment of the child for the child’s own sins, and that the early death of the

⁴ Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1987, 96–97.

victims of the Holocaust represents the punishment of the victims for the victims' own sins, we must, emboldened by God's own book of Job, reject this suggestion as blasphemy against the justice of God and grotesquely libelous of those we loved.

OBJECTION: THE DIVINE INTENT MISDESCRIBED

To suggest that God trades off the suffering and early death of victims for the opportunity provided to survivors for chastisement or spiritual growth is to imply that I have not so much misdescribed the world as misdescribed the divine intent. Probably that is the more common objection to the picture I have drawn.

The most common form of the objection holds that it is essential to distinguish between, on the one hand, God's creating and maintaining intent and, on the other hand, God's desires. Nothing goes awry with reference to God's intent. Yet it would be profoundly mistaken to say that God is indifferent as between a life of seventy seconds and a life of seventy years, indifferent as between a life of malfunctioning and unredemptive suffering and a life absent of such. God desires, for each and every human being, that that human being flourish on earth in the community of persons until full of years.

From this point onward, the objection is developed along two distinct lines. Call the one, the *Leibnizian* position. The Leibnizian holds that what must be distinguished from God's creating and maintaining intent is God's *ceteris paribus* desires. With reference to God's intent, everything happens exactly as God plans: early death, unredemptive suffering, everything. Nonetheless it remains true that God desires, *other things being equal*, that each human being flourish on earth in the community of persons until full of years. But other things are not equal – so much so that it's not possible for God to bring about a world in which that *ceteris paribus* desire is satisfied for each and every human being. We can be assured that in choosing to create this actual world, from among all possible worlds, God was choosing the best possible – or if there isn't any best possible, that God was choosing as good a world as any. But the only reasonable conclusion, given the nature of God and the way the world is, is that any such world incorporates trade-offs; not even God can achieve everything that God desires, other things being equal. That's why we cannot equate what God desires *ceteris paribus* with God's creating intent. Though suffering and life-duration certainly go awry with reference to the former, nothing goes awry with reference to the latter.

Call the other way of developing the objection, the *free will* position. The person who embraces this position holds that suffering and life-duration, and other things as well, go awry with reference to God's *actual* desires, not just with respect to God's *ceteris paribus* desires. Not, though, with reference to God's creating and maintaining intent; on this central point he agrees with the Leibnizian. The root of the disagreement between the two lies in the fact that the person espousing the free will position holds – as the name suggests – that human beings are created capable of free agency. There are, in turn, two different ways of working out the free will position, depending on whether one holds that God can and does know in advance what agents will freely do in such-and-such situations, or denies that.

The Molinist version of the free will position holds that God does know this; and that God uses that knowledge to select, from among all the possible worlds, this actual world of ours to create and maintain. Everything happens according to the foreknowledge of God. But not everything happens because God brings it about; some of it happens because of the free agency of created persons. Though God knew in advance what Hitler would freely do, nonetheless it was not God who perpetrated the Holocaust but Hitler, along with his henchmen and underlings. And God profoundly disapproved of Hitler's actions. With reference to God's desires and commands for those creatures capable of free agency, volitions and affections have gone profoundly awry; as the consequence of that, in turn, very much suffering and life-duration have gone awry. Yet nothing has gone awry with reference to God's creating intent. For as on the Leibnizian position, the only reasonable conclusion, given the nature of God and the world, is said to be that God at creation was confronted with no option but to make trade-offs. Among the good-as-any worlds available to God for creating, there was none in which it was both true that human beings were free to make significant choices between good and evil, and true that each and every human being flourished on earth in the community of persons until full of years. The course of the world makes clear that God regards free agency as something of enormous value. But the fact that God tolerates the evil of our choices for the sake of our freedom by no means implies that God approves of that evil. God disapproves of it: *actually* disapproves of it, not just *ceteris paribus* disapproves.

The Bañezian version of the free will position, by contrast, denies that God could know in advance what a person capable of free agency would freely do in such-and-such a situation. Accordingly, assuming that

God does sometimes allow persons capable of free agency actually to act freely, we cannot think of this actual world of ours as selected by God from among all the possible worlds. Its realization does not represent the unfolding of a plan chosen by God before the foundations of the world. That's not to say that the world as it develops is constantly surprising God; though one cannot know what an agent *will* freely do in such-and-such a situation, often one can know what he or she is *likely* to do. Nonetheless, whereas providence on the Leibnizian and Molinist views consists basically of maintenance, on the Bañezian view it requires a considerable degree of intervention if God is to bring about as good a world as any that God is capable of bringing about. The counterpart to God's creating intent in the Leibnizian and Molinist views is, in the Bañezian view, the combination of God's creating and providential intents. By reference to that intent, nothing goes awry – even though very many of the actions of free agents and the consequences thereof go radically contrary to God's actual desire and command.

Three ways of working out the same idea: though things go awry with reference to God's desires and commands, nothing goes awry with reference to God's creating and maintaining intent. The history of the world simply exhibits the trade-offs already built into the divine intent. God does what God intends to do, achieves what God wants to achieve.

But if we judge ourselves answerable to the biblical speech of God, we can no more accept the Leibnizian and free will positions than that of soul-making theodicy. Again it is especially the "each-and-every" note in God's self-characterizing speech that goes unheard – or perhaps in this case not so much unheard as consciously rejected. Let's be sure that we rightly hear that "each-and-every" note. There's no problem, as such, with trade-offs in the life of a single person: no problem as such with the fact, for example, that I suffer from the consequences of my own free agency. I say, "no problem as such"; as a matter of fact, the suffering caused by physical and mental disease in our world often goes far beyond what could possibly be redemptive. The problem inherent in the Irenaean and Leibnizian positions is that the divine intent is regarded as using the suffering and early death of *one* person as a means for the chastisement or spiritual growth of *another*; the problem inherent in the free will position is that the divine intent is regarded as permitting the suffering and early death of *one* person for the sake of the unencumbered free agency of *another*. It is this using of one person for the good of another that the person who judges himself or herself

answerable to the biblical speech of God cannot accept as belonging to the divine intent.

Or, given the working of laws of nature in our world and the consequences of free agency, must we concede that God doesn't really pronounce over each and every person the creational and providential benediction: May you flourish on earth in the community of persons until full of years? Must we concede that that's an unsustainable interpretation of the biblical speech of God – for the reason that that benediction could not possibly be fulfilled in a world with free agency and laws of nature such as ours, and that God would know that, and accordingly would not pronounce such a benediction?

I think we should not concede this. It's thinkable, indeed, that a lot more knowledge about laws of nature than we actually have might force us to make that concession, as would a lot more knowledge about the relation between divine and human agency. But in our current state of relative ignorance, there is, so far as I can see, no such rational compulsion. Though the point is certainly relevant: a fundamental principle for the interpretation of divine discourse is that God does not say what entails or presupposes falsehood.

The root of the difficulty, for the person who judges himself or herself answerable to the biblical speech of God, is that the God of the Bible has told us too much. If we hadn't been told that it was God's intent that we should live until full of years, then no problem. If we hadn't been told that it was God's intent that we should flourish, then no problem. If we hadn't been told that it was God's intent that we should flourish here on earth in the community of persons, then no problem. If we hadn't been told that it was God's intent that each and every one of us should flourish until full of years, then no problem. It's the speech of the biblical God that leads us to see that suffering and life-duration have gone awry with reference to God's creating and maintaining intent. If we could dispense with answering to that speech, it would be possible to devise a point of view that fits together such suffering and brevity of life as we find in our world with the divine intent; many have done exactly that.

LIVING IN THE SILENCE

Suffering and life-duration have gone awry with reference to God's creating and maintaining intent. To acknowledge that is to have the question well up irresistibly: Why? Why this untimely death? Why that

unredemptive suffering? Why any untimely death and why any unredemptive suffering?

We cannot help but ask. Yet we get no answer. None that I can discern. We confront non-answering silence. We confront the biblical silence of the biblical God. We shall have to live in the silence.

What will such living be like? If we have all this while judged ourselves answerable to the speech of God in determining the questions we put to God, then we shall likewise judge ourselves answerable to the speech of God as we live in the silence of God.

In the first place, we shall endure in holding on to God, and shall engage in the practices of devotion whereby such holding on is accomplished, expressed, and nurtured.

Secondly, we shall join with God in keeping alive the protest against early death and unredemptive suffering. Till breath dies within us we shall insist that this must not be. We shall reject all consolation that comes in the form of urging us to accept untimely death, all that comes in the form of urging us to be content with unredemptive suffering. We shall endure in our existential No to untimely death; we shall forever resist pronouncing No on our existential No to untimely death. We shall endure in our existential No to unredemptive suffering; we shall forever resist pronouncing No on our existential No to unredemptive suffering. In the stories we tell of humanity's dwelling on earth, we shall not forget untimely death and unredemptive suffering; we shall keep the memory alive so as to keep the protest alive. And in the stories we tell of our own lives, we shall not disown our suffering but own it. There will be more to our stories than that; but there will be at least that.

Thirdly, we shall hope for the day, await the occasion, and seize the opportunity to own our own suffering redemptively. We shall struggle to wrest good from this evil – “to turn it to our profit” – while still saying No to untimely death and unredemptive suffering.

And lastly, whenever and wherever we spot an opening, we shall join the divine battle against all that goes awry with reference to God's intent. We shall join God in doing battle against all that causes early death and all that leads to unredemptive suffering: disease, injustice, warfare, torture, enmity. The self-characterization of the biblical God is not that of a God who passively accepts things going awry with reference to God's intent but that of a God who does battle; and it is not that of a God who weakly struggles in a failing cause but that of a God whose cause will triumph. It is in that cause that we shall join, as God's co-workers. In his

discussion of *das Nichtige* Karl Barth makes the point far more eloquently than I myself could possibly make it:

The incredible and real mystery of the free grace of God is that He makes His own the cause of the creature. . . . There is a grain of truth in the erroneous view that in virtue of His Godhead God himself has absolutely done away with *das Nichtige*, so that for Him it is not only *das Nichtige* but nothing. In Him there is room only for its negation. And as the Creator He has effected this negation once and for all. In creation He separated, negated, rejected and abandoned *das Nichtige*. How, then, can it still assail, oppose, resist and offend Him? How can it concern Him? But we must not forget the covenant, mercy and faithfulness of God, nor should we overlook the fact that God did not will to be God for His own sake alone, but that as the Creator He also became the covenant Partner of his creature. . . . Why is this so? Because, having created the creature, He has pledged His faithfulness to it. . . . That is to say, He whom *das Nichtige* has no power to offend is prepared on behalf of His creature to be primarily and properly offended and humiliated, attacked and injured by *das Nichtige*. . . . Though Adam is fallen and disgraced, he is not too low for God to make Himself his Brother, and to be for him a God who must strangely contend for his status, honor and right. For the sake of this Adam God becomes poor. . . . He lets a catastrophe which might be quite remote from Him approach Him and affect His very heart. . . . He does this of His free grace. For He is under no compulsion. He might act as the erroneous view postulates. He might remain aloof and detached from *das Nichtige*. . . . He might have been a majestic, passive and beatific God on high. But He descends to the depths, and concerns Himself with *das Nichtige*, because in His goodness He does not will to cease to be concerned for His creature. . . . He would rather be unblest with His creature than be the blessed God of an unblest creature. He would rather let Himself be injured and humiliated in making the assault and repulse of *das Nichtige* His own concern than leave His creature alone in this affliction. . . . There are few heresies so pernicious as that of a God who faces *das Nichtige* more or less unaffected and unconcerned and the parallel doctrine of man as one who must engage in independent conflict against it.⁵

I add, in closing, that it is at the very point on which Barth speaks so eloquently that biblical faith is most severely tried. Is it really true that God will win? Can we trust the struggle's outcome when we don't know the struggle's cause? Or wouldn't it help to know the cause?

⁵ *Church Dogmatics* III/3, 356–60.

Barth on evil

Though Karl Barth has much to say about evil, he does not aim to explain evil. Explanation, he says, is impossible; evil is “necessarily incomprehensible and inexplicable to us as human beings.”¹ Working as a Christian theologian whose thought is firmly grounded in the Scriptures, he develops instead a theological framework for *thinking* and *speaking* about evil. The development, extraordinarily rich, and as difficult and expansive as it is rich, occurs in the third part of the third volume of his *Church Dogmatics*, this being the volume in which he develops the doctrine of creation.

Having devoted §49 of III/3 to a discussion of providence, under its three aspects of preservation, accompaniment, and rule, he then opens the following section thus:

There is opposition and resistance to God’s world-dominion. There is in world-occurrence an element, indeed an entire sinister system of elements, which is not comprehended by God’s providence in the sense thus far described, and which is not therefore preserved, accompanied, nor ruled by the almighty action of God like creaturely occurrence . . . There is amongst the objects of God’s providence an alien factor. It cannot escape God’s providence but is comprehended by it. The manner, however, in which this is done is highly peculiar in accordance with the particular nature of this factor . . . The result is that the alien factor can never be considered or mentioned together in the same context as other objects of God’s providence. Thus the whole doctrine of God’s providence must be investigated afresh. This opposition and resistance, this stubborn element and alien factor, may be provisionally defined as nothingness [*das Nichtige*]. (289)

Evil is nothingness. “Evil” is not *defined* as nothingness by Barth. Rather, evil is *identified* by Barth as nothingness. To the question, “What really is evil?” the answer he gives is, “Nothingness.” Nothingness is what

¹ *Church Dogmatics* III/3: *The Doctrine of Creation*. I use the translation by G. W. Bromiley and R. J. Ehrlich (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1961). References to this work are given parenthetically in the text.

our word “evil” designates. Scriptural words for nothingness – thus, for evil – are “chaos” and “the demonic.” The fundamental feature of nothingness is that it menaces – menaces God and creature alike, especially those creatures that are human. Evil is the actualization of this menace:

the being of the creature is menaced by nothingness, menaced in such a way that it needs the divine preservation and sustaining and indeed deliverance if it is not to fall victim to it and perish. Obviously it is menaced by something far more serious than mere non-being as opposed to being, although it is of course menaced by non-being too ... that is chaos according to the biblical term and concept. (75–76)

The word Barth actually uses to designate that which is evil is, of course, not “nothingness,” since he was writing in German; it’s *das Nichtige*. The translators recognize that “nothingness” is inadequate as a translation of *das Nichtige*. Though accurate, its connotations are much too pallid. Since translation is not my concern here, I will, when speaking in my own voice, avoid the issue and regularly use Barth’s original, *das Nichtige*; when quoting from the English translation of Barth’s text I will, however, quote the translation as it stands.

Before we can get in hand the various things Barth says about *das Nichtige*, we need some glimmer of what he has in mind. One point of access to his thought here is his discussion of Heidegger and Sartre; for though Barth regards their comprehension of *das Nichtige* as shallow compared to that available to the Christian, he thinks that they did nonetheless recognize *das Nichtige*. They recognized that *das Nichtige* is

no mere fiction or theme of discussion. It is no mere product of our negations to be dismissed by our affirmations. It is there. It assails us with irresistible power as we exist, and we exist as we are propelled by it into the world like a projectile. We are forced to consider it, for it already confronts us. We experience nothingness. ... Their [i.e., Heidegger’s and Sartre’s] thought is determined in and by real encounter with nothingness. They may misinterpret this encounter and therefore nothingness, but not for a moment can they forget it. (345)

What brought *das Nichtige* with inescapable force to the attention of Heidegger and Sartre was the calamitous times through which they lived. Both lived through the

upheaval occasioned by two world wars. They have completely abandoned the optimism and pessimism ... of the 18th and 19th centuries. For the moment at least they cannot deny that nothingness – and it may well be the true nothingness – has ineluctably and unforgettably confronted them. ... Whoever is ignorant of the shock experienced and attested by Heidegger and Sartre is surely incapable of thinking and speaking as a modern man. ... For we men of to-day

have consciously or unconsciously sustained this shock. In our time man has encountered nothingness in such a way as to be offered an exceptional opportunity in this respect. More than that may and must not be said, for at all times man has his being within this encounter, and no more than an exceptional opportunity of realising this is offered us even to-day. Even to-day we have no reason to boast that "we have looked in the face of demons." (345)

We have indeed. But all men and all women at all times and in all places have done so – whether or not they knew that they were doing so.

Heidegger and Sartre were witnesses to the menacing power of *das Nichtige*. To the presence of the demonic among us. To that strange factor in reality that powerfully menaces not only our flourishing but our existence. To that which threatens our existence and our shalom with nihilation. More than merely human sin and its consequences, more than merely that plus the evils that befall us, *das Nichtige* is that power, that dynamic, that menacing and destructive factor (Barth's words) of which these are the concrete manifestations. *Das Nichtige* is the power of darkness that haunts our world. Menace. Cosmic menace.

Barth's entire discussion pivots on his claim that evil is a power. Heidegger and Sartre sensed the presence of such a power. Holy Scripture affirms it – affirms that there is a power of darkness that haunts reality and is ever on the attack against creation in general and human beings in particular, affirms that human beings are helpless against it but that God, embracing the life and flourishing of his human creatures as God's own, sacrificed God's own Son as victim in the battle, thereby winning the contest. "Holy Scripture regards nothingness as a kingdom, based upon a claim to power and a seizure of power ... always on the march, always invading and attacking. Its decisive insight is that God Himself is the superior and victorious Opponent of nothingness" (523–24). It "is for the Bible no mere figure of speech or poetic fancy or expression of human concern but the simple truth that nothingness has this dynamic, that it is a kingdom on the march and engaged in invasion and assault" (524). To deny such a power, says Barth, is to trivialize what transpired at the cross and in the resurrection.

We must not deceive ourselves and say that it does not really do all these things, or is not real in all these things. One form of the triumph that nothingness can achieve is to represent itself as a mere appearance with no genuine reality. Let us only be proud and enlightened and unafraid and unconcerned in face of it! Let us only persuade ourselves that there is nothing in it, that there is no devil and no kingdom of evil and demons as his plenipotentiaries, as effective powers and forces in the life of nations and societies, in the psychical and physical life of men and their relationships, that we can control our being without having to

take into account this alien lordship or considering that where it is not broken all being and enterprise and achievement on earth is fundamentally corrupt and worthless!... Nothingness rejoices when it notices that it is not noticed, that it is boldly demythologised, that humanity thinks it can tackle its lesser and greater problems with a little morality and medicine and psychology and aesthetics, with progressive politics or occasionally a philosophy of unprecedented novelty – if only its own reality as nothingness remains beautifully undisclosed and intact. (526)²

DAS NICHTIGE AS THE POWER THAT MENACES THE
CONTINUING EXISTENCE OF CREATURES

Barth faces the topic of *das Nichtige* head-on immediately after he has discussed God's providential preservation, accompaniment, and rule of his creatures. But as he himself observes, reference to *das Nichtige* was already made in his discussion of God's preservation. So let's begin there.

Before God created – if we may speak of “before” – before God created, there was God and God alone. Nothing else, not anything else. The primeval – if we may speak of “primeval” – state of things, other than God, was that they just were *not*. That is, there *were no other* things than God. If things other than God are to exist they must be brought forth from not being. The only one who can do that is God – by creating. Creation is bringing things forth from the abyss of non-being.

But we don't yet have *das Nichtige* in view. For *das Nichtige* is not non-being as such. Non-being is, precisely, not anything; whereas *das Nichtige* is something: there is *das Nichtige*. Yet it's not the case that before God

² Cf. 527–28: “We cannot deny the power and powers of falsehood in a thousand different forms. We cannot deny that in their infamous way they are real and brisk and vital, often serious and solemn, but always sly and strong, and always present in different combinations of these qualities, forming a dreadful fifth or sixth dimension of existence. Where? But surely the real question is: Where not? They are there in the depths of the soul which we regard as most properly our own. They are there in the relationships between man and man, and especially between man and woman. They are there in the developments of individuals and their mutual relationships. They are there in the concern and struggle for daily bread, and especially for that which each thinks is also necessary in his case. They are there in that in which man seeks his satisfaction or which he would rather avoid as undesirable, in his care and carelessness, in the flaming up and extinguishing of his passions, in his sloth and zeal, in his inexplicable stupidity and astonishing cleverness, in his systematisation and anarchism, in his progress, equilibrium and retrogression, in the great common ventures of what is called culture, science, art, technics and politics, in the conflict and concord of classes, peoples, and nations, in the savage dissensions but also the beautiful agreement and tolerances in the life of the Church, and not least in the *rabies* and even more so the *inertia theologorum*. ... We cannot deny but must soberly recognise that in all these things the demons are constantly present and active like the tentacles of an octopus. ... They are powers indeed, and yet they are only the powers of falsehood.”

creates there is God *and something* else – namely, *das Nichtige*. Before God creates there is God and not anything else. Neither is it the case that *das Nichtige* is a creature brought forth from non-being by God. *Das Nichtige* is not a creature of God but comes about as the inevitable *accompaniment* of God's bringing forth of creatures.

On God there are no limitations. In particular, on God's existence there are no limitations. God exists eternally, necessarily, and self-sufficiently. By contrast, the existence of the creature is inherently limited.

To no creature does it belong to be endless, omnipresent or enduring. The preservation which God grants to the creature is the preservation of its limited being.... It will be understood that it is not for this reason partial, transitory or imperfect. Indeed, for this very reason it is a complete and final and perfect preservation. For what could be more perfect than that God should give to the creature ... that which is proper to it, that to each one He should give that which is proper, that is, that which it is able to have of being, and of space and time for that being, according to its existence as posited by the wisdom and power of God, and that which it ought to have of being and space and time according to the righteousness and mercy of God? (61–62)

Why the repeated reference to God's activity of *preserving*? Because among the intrinsic limitations of the creature is its lack of self-sufficiency. God cannot give to the creature self-sufficient existence. Accordingly, the creature forever bears within itself the possibility of sliding back – better, the *tendency* to slide back – into the abyss of non-being. It's as if non-being is tugging, pulling, at the creature – as if it has an attracting power over it. Only God's preserving activity prevents the creature's tendency toward not being from being realized. Indeed, God's preserving activity just is God's prevention of the realization of that tendency.³ Non-being is “the abyss in which [the creature] must inevitably sink, the ocean by whose waves it must inevitably be overwhelmed, if He who created it did not also preserve and sustain it” (77). The reason, once again, is that the creature “is not God. It is the reality which is distinct from God, elected, willed and actualised by Him, but differentiated from Him, and therefore not participating in His sovereignty or in the freedom of his election and decision. And as such, if God did not will to save and keep it, it might well, indeed it must, be overwhelmed by chaos and fall into nothingness”

³ “The creative work of God has this in common with His work of grace – that ... these things take place within the created order with the very same immediacy as the act of creation itself. ... But when it is a matter of the preservation of creation as such, when it is a matter of that which succeeds creation but precedes redemption, there is need of a free but obviously not of a direct or immediate activity on the part of God” (64).

(74). To be a creature is to be subject to the menacing tug of nihilation (annihilation) which only God's providential preservation can avert. The "being of the creature is menaced by nothingness, menaced in such a way that it needs the divine preservation and sustaining and indeed deliverance if it is not to fall victim to it and perish" (75–76).

Das Nichtige is that menacing power. Given the non-self-sufficiency of creatures, a creature cannot exist without being subject to the menacing tendency to sink out of existence. *Das Nichtige* is that menacing tendency, inherent in being a creature that is not self-sufficient, toward not being: "the tremendous danger, the most serious peril," so completely hostile to the creature as to be "an absolute denial of the essence and existence of the creature" (76). *Das Nichtige* comprises more than the tendency of every creature to sink into non-existence; shortly we shall see what the more is. But this, at least, it is.

The shadow which flees before God, possesses everywhere in the Bible its own ponderable reality. God knows this nothing as the opponent of the creature, as that which may and can seduce and destroy the creature. God knows that under the dominion of this nothing the creature must perish. It is always present – as it were on the frontier of the cosmos to which He has given being. It continually calls this cosmos in question. It has mounted an offensive against it. If only for a moment God were to turn away His face from the creature, the offensive would break loose with deadly power. In its relation to God chaos is always an absolutely subordinate factor, but it is always absolutely superior in its relation to the creature. (76)

Now look at creation from a slightly different angle. "When in creation God pronounced His wise and omnipotent Yes He also pronounced His wise and omnipotent No ... He marked off the positive reality of the creature from that which He did not elect and will and therefore did not create. And to that which He denied He allotted the being of non-being, the existence of that which does not exist" (77). "[T]hat which He did not elect and will, the non-existent, comprises the infinite range of all the possibilities which He passed over and with good reason did not actualise, the abyss in which the one thing which He did create must inevitably sink ... if he who created it did not also preserve and sustain it" (77). The thought is that originally there was God and non-being – that is, God and nothing else; now, after creation, there are God, creatures, and *all that God did not create*. Barth calls this last, "that which is not." God's activity of creating perforce brings about this new "realm" of *that which is not*.

What are we to make of this? Barth's words invite the following interpretation: God's creation has a bright and a shadow side. The bright side consists of all the things God brought about by saying Yes to them; these are the creatures. The shadow side consists of all the things God brought about by saying No to them; these are the unactualized possibles. It is these unactualized possibles, *that which is not*, which menace the creature and thus constitute *das Nichtige*. Barth says that *that which is not* "is truly actual and relevant and even active after its own particular fashion" (74). He says that "In the power – that is, the negative power – of this divine creating, approving, dividing and calling, there enters in with the creature that which in all these things is marked off from it, and it enters in with menacing power, the power of the denial of that which God has affirmed, as the non-being which does not exist, as that which is not created, as that which is so absolutely opposed and hostile to the creature" (77). He identifies *that which is not* as "that which according to the account in Genesis 1:2 [God] set behind him as chaos" (74). And he describes it as the object of God's "wrath and rejection and judgment" (77). The picture comes to mind of a numberless swarm of possible wrens, robins, sparrows, and such like, to which God in wrath said "No, I refuse to create you," and which now menace creatures by trying to drag them down into the abyss where they too will become mere possibles.

If this is how Barth was thinking, it won't do. That there are unactualized possibles is a position that enjoys philosophical respectability – though I myself regard it as mistaken. But even if one holds that there are mere possibles, I don't see that it's tenable to suppose that creation consists of bringing about existent things, on the one hand, and non-existent possibles, on the other. One can see what was going through Barth's mind: there's an infinitude of possibilities that God rejected at creation; God's options were not limited to what God actually created. But the question to ask is how God's rejection of these possibles could bring them about. Don't they have to be there already if God is to reject them? And aren't the actuals also possibles; viz., *actualized* possibles? If one holds that there are possibles, then it is much better to think of God as *selecting* some from among the already-extant possibles to actualize, and choosing to let the others remain unactualized. But then, of course, before creation it's not God and non-being, that is, God and nothing else; it's God and an infinite realm of possibles. An unacceptable option. Beyond a doubt Barth wanted to avoid it. He saw no option but to say that *in* creating, God brought about the rejected possibles.

But rather than postulating possibles, some actualized, some not, it is better to recover the Augustinian way of thinking: before creation there was indeed just God and nothing else. But as part of that reality which is God there are the divine ideas, some of these being ideas of individual things. In creating, God chose to exemplify some of God's exemplifiable individual ideas and not others. Barth remarks that "that which is not is that which is actual only in the negativity allotted to it by the divine decision, only in its exclusion from creation, only, if we may put it thus, at the left hand of God" (73–74). What this comes to, on the Augustinian interpretation, is that only after God decided to exemplify certain of God's ideas and not others, will the latter have the property of *not* having been chosen by God for exemplification in creation. But then, they *really do* have that property. *That which is not* "has and can have its actuality only under the almighty No of God, but does have and is actuality in that sense" (74).

There's more that needs correcting than the ontology, however; what Barth says *about* the unactualized possibles is even more questionable than his postulation thereof. Surely unactualized possibles, supposing there are such, are totally lacking in activity and power. They menace no one. And why should they be the objects of God's wrath? Presumably God liked them less, individually and in combination, than the possibles God actualized; otherwise God would not have said No to them. But does the No have to be a wrathful No? Why should all those impotent, non-menacing, merely possible wrens, robins, and sparrows be the object of God's wrath?

Is it possible to spy what Barth might have been trying to get at? In particular, is it possible to spy something that he might have been trying to get at which is consistent with what we earlier interpreted him as saying? Or do we have to say, with regret, that this part of his thought is all confusion? Well, consider what he says at the very beginning of his discussion of *that which is not*:

God created [the creature] "out of nothing," that is, by distinguishing that which He willed from that which He did not will, and by giving it existence on the basis of that distinction. To that divine distinction it owes the fact that it is. And to the same distinction it owes the fact that it can continue to be. By preserving the distinction God preserves the creature. (73)

I suggest that what Barth wants to call to our attention is an additional aspect of the menacing tendency that confronts the creature. So far we have described that menace as the tendency toward not existing.

But once we see that creation consists of God distinguishing among possibilities in deciding to exemplify some of his exemplifiable archetypes and not others, then we see that the menacing tendency that confronts the creature is also the tendency toward the overthrowing of the distinction God made in creating – that between those of God's ideas that God exemplified and those that God did not. Earlier in our discussion, God's providential preservation was described as the preservation of the creature in existence, against the ever-present threat thereto; now we see that it can also be described as the preservation of the distinction among possibilities, made in creation, against the ever-present threat to that.⁴

Before we move on, we must look at creation from yet another angle. The creature is created and preserved in order that it may live in fellowship with God, "in order that the glory of the beloved Son of God may be manifest in it" (79), in order that it may "participate in [the] work of salvation" (79). For this fellowship, for this manifestation, for this participation, it must exist. "It must have permanence and continuity. It must be preserved by God" (79). Thus the tendency of the creature toward not existing, which haunts the created order, menaces not only the creature, and not only that plus the differentiation God drew in creating, but also God's gracious intentions.

[The menace] does not consist in the first instance in the powerlessness of the creature in face of the non-existent. It cannot then be described or understood in the first instance only as a weakness, privation, or imperfection of the creature. It has its root in the foreordination of the creature to participation in the divine covenant of grace. Because it has to be present in the divine work of deliverance and liberation, it can therefore be present – present as a creature – in all the immeasurable perils in which it cannot preserve or sustain itself. (80)

⁴ I judge this interpretation of what Barth was "really" getting at to be confirmed by the following passage, in which Barth, more than 200 pages later than the passages we have been scrutinizing, summarizes his earlier discussion: "... we were trying to understand the divine preservation of the creature. We saw this to be God's preservation of His creature from being over-thrown by the greater force of nothingness. We then considered how God confirms and upholds the separation between His creature and nothingness as effected in creation, halting the threatened and commencing enslavement of the creature." Barth immediately goes on to add the third point which I (am about to) make in the text above: "We saw that he does this because His will for His creature is liberation for a life in fellowship with Himself, because He wills to be known and praised by the creature as its Liberator and because He thus wills its continuation and not its destruction" (290).

CLEARING AWAY CONFUSIONS ABOUT EVIL

We do not yet have evil in view. We have discerned *das Nichtige*. It's that menacing tendency that faces the creature, by virtue of the creature's ontological non-self-sufficiency, to sink out of existence, and it's that menacing tendency that faces God, also by virtue of the creature's non-self-sufficiency, toward the overthrowing of the demarcations made by God at creation for the sake of fellowship with the creature. God's providential preservation staves off that menace, however. "Nothingness [has thus far] met us as this total peril which is not actual in this form but is warded off by God's preservation" (290). So far then, no evil. Menace. But the menace is warded off. We have not yet seen *das Nichtige* in its persona of evil.

Das Nichtige not only *menaces* the creature; it actually *makes an incursion* into the life of the creature. Evil is the incursion of *das Nichtige* into creation. The pages we have been looking at occur early in §49 of *Church Dogmatics* III/3, the topic of the section being "God the Father as Lord of His Creature." The topic of section 50 is "God and Nothingness" (*Gott and das Nichtige*). Here Barth discusses *das Nichtige* in the persona of evil. Conversely: here he develops his account of evil as *das Nichtige*.

Barth sets himself some crucial theological parameters. When we confront evil, we confront the fact that

between the Creator and the creature...there is that at work which can be explained neither from the side of the Creator nor from that of the creature, neither as the action of the Creator nor as the life-act of the creature, and yet which cannot be overlooked or disowned but must be reckoned with in all its peculiarity. The simple recognition that God is Lord over all must obviously be applied to this third factor as well. Where would be the real situation of the real man or the real way of real trust of the real Christian...if the knowledge that He is Lord over all were not applied especially to this element? (292)

Given this requirement, the challenge, for our explanation of God's lordship over evil, will be to avoid two opposite errors.

We stray on the one side if we argue that this element of *das Nichtige* derives from the positive will and work of God as if it too were a creature, and that the Creator Himself and His lordship are responsible for its nothingness, the creature being exonerated from all responsibility for its existence, presence and activity. But we go astray on the other side if we maintain that it derives solely from the activity of the creature, in relation to which the lordship of God can only be a passive permission and observation, an ineffectual foreknowledge and a subsequent attitude. How can justice be done both to the

holiness and to the omnipotence of God when we are faced by the problem of nothingness? (292)

Barth begins his treatment by polemicizing against confusions of two sorts.⁵ The first is that which identifies one and another form of negation inherent in creatures and their interrelationships, or inherent in God's relationships with creatures, with *das Nichtige* as such – or with *das Nichtige qua* evil. The fact that the creature is this and *not* that, and that God is this and *not* that, is not evil; neither is it *das Nichtige* in its persona of ontological menace. "... nothingness is not simply to be equated with what is *not*, i.e., not God and not the creature." For one thing, "God is God and not the creature, but this does not mean that there is nothingness in God. On the contrary, this 'not' belongs to His perfection." And as to the creature, "the creature is creature and not God, yet this does not mean that as such it is null or nothingness. If in the relationship between God and creature a 'not' is involved, the 'not' belongs to the perfection of the relationship, and even the second 'not' which characterises the creature belongs to its perfection. Hence it would be blasphemy against God and His work if nothingness were to be sought in this 'not,' in the non-divinity of the creature." Then too, "the diversities and frontiers of the creaturely world contain many 'nots.' No single creature is all-inclusive. None is or resembles another. To each belongs its own place and time, and in these its own manner, nature and existence" (349–50).

It's true that it is by virtue of the fact that it's not God, on the one hand, and not identical with any of the non-existent possibles (to use the language of Barth's ontology), on the other hand, that the creature is menaced by its tendency toward not existing. But these negations *by virtue of which* it is menaced are not, as such, the Menace; and certainly these negations are not themselves evil. The presence of these negations does not represent the *incursion* of *das Nichtige* into creation. "When the creature crosses the frontier [of God's positive will and election] from the one side, and it is invaded from the other, nothingness achieves actuality in the creaturely world. But in itself and as such this frontier is not nothingness" (350). One might rightly describe the negations belonging to the

⁵ I allow myself a bit of poetic (philosophical?) license here. After a statement of the problem, Barth does begin his discussion of *das Nichtige* with a section entitled "The Misconception of Nothingness." But what he discusses in that section is only the misconception which is the second of the two sorts in my arrangement. He discusses the misconception which is the first, in my arrangement, when he gets around later to what he calls "a comprehensive statement" (349).

creature – “its distinction from God and its individual distinctiveness” – as belonging to the “shadow side” of creation. On this shadow side, the creature, says Barth, is “contiguous” to *das Nichtige*. Better, I think, to say that it is contiguous to *that which is not*, and (ontologically) susceptible to the incursion of *das Nichtige*. But contiguity to *that which is not*, and susceptibility to the incursion of *das Nichtige*, is not yet the incursion of *das Nichtige*.⁶

All conceptions and doctrines that view nothingness as an essential and necessary determination of being and existence and therefore of the creature, or as an essential determination of the original and creative being of Godself, are untenable from the Christian standpoint. They are untenable on two grounds, first, because they misrepresent the creature and even the Creator Himself, and second, because they confound the legitimate “not” with nothingness, and are thus guilty of a drastic minimization of the latter (350).

Let us move on to the other, even more important, misconception against which Barth polemicizes. It is a near relative of the first. Pointing to “a negative aspect of creation and creaturely occurrence,” the second misconception identifies this negative aspect with evil – that is, with *das Nichtige qua evil*. The similarity to the previous misconception is obvious. What makes it different is that this “negative aspect” is distinct from the negations of the prior misconception.

In creation there is, says Barth,

not only a Yes but also a No; not only a height but also an abyss; not only clarity but also obscurity; not only growth but also decay; not only opulence but also indigence; not only beauty but also ashes; not only beginning but also end; not only value but also worthlessness. . . . [I]n creaturely existence . . . there are hours, days and years both bright and dark, success and failure, laughter and tears, youth and age, gain and loss, birth and sooner or later its inevitable corollary, death. (296–97)

It is “irrefutable,” however, “that creation and creature are good even in the fact that all that exists in this contrast and antithesis. In all this, far from being null, it praises its Creator and Lord even on its shadowy side, even in the negative aspect in which it is so near to nothingness” (296–97).

⁶ Even prior to creation, there will be an infinitude of things that God is not. On the trinitarian understanding of God, there will even be negations *within* God. These are additional reasons, not mentioned by Barth, for not identifying negations with *das Nichtige qua evil* – nor even with *das Nichtige* as such. In those negations, there is no menace.

There is a long tradition of philosophical writing about “the problem of evil” in which a good many, if not most, of Barth’s examples of the negative aspect of creation are cited as *evils*: pain, suffering, loss, failure, infirmity. Barth dismisses this whole tradition as “an insult to Creator and creature” (301). Over and over in his discussion of creation and providence he makes the point that we are creatures of a definite sort with definite limitations;⁷ and that, in being creatures of our sort placed in a world of our sort, and as a consequence regularly undergoing negatively “valorized” experiences, we are to see God’s gracious hand.

It’s part of our design plan, part of being a properly functioning human being, that we should dislike pain, suffering, loss, failure, infirmity – that we should experience them negatively. And it’s a well-nigh inevitable consequence of creatures with our design plan living in a world of this present sort that we would *in fact* experience pain, suffering, loss, failure, infirmity. It’s well-nigh inevitable that experiences that are in fact negatively valorized would come our way. About all this, there is, as such, nothing bad. These negative experiences are not, as such, evils. To creatures of our sort, living in a world of this present sort, experiencing these sorts of things, and experiencing them negatively, God said Yes.

Often it’s possible to see a rationale to some negative aspect of our constitution or existence. In general, minus these negative aspects, human life would be precarious and flaccid. Precarious, if, upon breaking bones, we felt no pain, or didn’t mind if we did; flaccid, if, upon failing in some endeavor, we felt no disappointment, or didn’t mind if we did. It’s true that in the negative aspect of our existence we are peculiarly open to the incursions of *das Nichtige*. “Viewed from its negative aspect, creation is as it were on the frontier of nothingness and orientated towards it” (295–96).

⁷ “That the creature may continue to be in virtue of the divine preservation does not mean that either as an individual or in its totality it is a creature without any limits. It may continue to be as a creature within its limits. It may have its place in space, and its span in time. It may begin at one point and end at another. It may come, and stay, and go. It may comprehend the earth but not heaven. It may be free here, but bound there; open at this point, but closed at that. It may understand one thing, but not another; be capable of one thing, but not another; accomplish one thing but not another. That it may be in this way, within its limits, is not at all an imperfection, an evil necessity, an obscure fate. Were we in a position to compare and comprehend all the possibilities of all creatures, and the possibilities of the individual with those of the totality, we should be astonished at the magnificent breadth of these limits. And certainly it is not a curse but a blessing that there are these limits to humanity and creation, and that in some cases they are notoriously narrow limits, of which the brevity of human life is only a single if rather drastic example. The creature must not exist like the unhappy centre of a circle which has no periphery. It must exist in a genuine circle, its individual environment. ... It has freedom to experience and accomplish that which is proper to it, to do that which it can do, and to be satisfied. It is in this freedom that it is preserved by God” (85).

But the fact that this negative aspect of our existence places us on the frontier of *das Nichtige*, and makes us peculiarly open to its incursions, by no means implies that this negative aspect is to be *identified* with the *actual incursions* of *das Nichtige*.

To confuse the negative aspect of human existence with evil is, for one thing, an insult to Creator and creature. "Since God's Word became flesh, He Himself has acknowledged that the distinct reality of the world created by Him is in both its forms, with its Yes and its No, that of the world which He willed. . . . In the knowledge of Jesus Christ we must abandon the obvious prejudice against the negative aspect of creation and confess that God has planned and made all things well, even on the negative side. In the knowledge of Jesus Christ it is inadmissible to seek nothingness here" (301).

But in this confusion an error is also made in relation to nothingness itself. Being sought where he is not to be found, the enemy goes unrecognised. . . . Being understood as a side or aspect or distinctive form of creation, nothingness is brought into a positive relationship with God's will and work. Its nature and existence are attributed to God, to His will and responsibility, and the menacing and corruption of creation by *das Nichtige* are understood as His intention and act and therefore as a necessary and tolerable part of creaturely existence. We cannot really fear and loathe nothingness. We cannot consider and treat it as a real enemy. (301)

DAS NICHTIGE AS EVIL

There is something right in the two misconceptions we have discussed. What is right is the underlying intuition that evil has to do with *the negative* – with negativity, with nullity, with not-ness, if we may speak thus. The intuition was of course present already in the patristics, and earlier yet, in the classical Greeks, finding expression in their suggestion that evil is a *lack* of being, of a certain sort. The error in the misconceptions we have discussed lies in the particular identification made. The challenge is to find that precise negativity, that precise nullity, that precise not-ness, which constitutes evil.

Barth's proposal is that evil is that negating, nullifying dynamic or power "which opposes and resists God, which is itself subjected to and overcome by His opposition and resistance, and which in this twofold determination as the reality that negates and is negated by Him, is totally distinct from Him. The true nothingness is that which brought Jesus Christ to the cross, and that which He defeated there" (305). The

fundamental point Barth wishes to make here is that the negativity that constitutes evil in all its forms can be identified only if God is brought into the picture. Unless we bring God in, we'll miss its nature. There is at work in reality a power, a dynamic, toward the negating of God's purposes and desires, which in turn God negates. Evil is that. Evil is not just a *factor* – the factor, say, of things going amiss with respect to God's purposes and desires. Evil is the *dynamic* toward the *frustrating* of those purposes and desires. The *dynamic* toward the *negating* of those purposes and desires. A power of negating God's will that in turn God negates. So as to distinguish it from all those forms of negativity of which we have already taken note – from non-being, from that which is not, from negations, from the negative aspects of creaturely life – Barth chooses to call it *nothingness*, *das Nichtige*. The choice is not arbitrary; he thinks that this is what Heidegger and Sartre had their eye on when they spoke of nothingness.

An obvious question is whether it's right to identify this dynamic toward the active negating of God's purposes and desires, with that ontological menace of which we spoke earlier, and which Barth also called *das Nichtige*. Isn't Barth using *das Nichtige* equivocally?

There is indeed a difference that must not be overlooked. The menacing tendency of creation to sink back into non-existence is averted by God. Were God not to avert that menace, the evil of all evils would take place, viz., the disappearance of creation, thus negating God's purposes and desires in the most fundamental way possible. In fact, however, ontological menace does not become ontological catastrophe. God's negating of the negating power that is ontological menace takes the form of preventing that power from being actualized. The creation still exists. God providentially preserves it. By contrast, the menace that is *das Nichtige* in its other form is not averted. Evil occurs. In this case, God's negating of the negating power takes the form of opposing its incursions.

Yet there remains something of importance common to ontological menace, on the one hand, and to that negating of God's purposes and desires that is evil, on the other hand: both are dynamics, powers, present in the created order, which menace God's will. It is that shared character of *menacing dynamic* that requires us to see these two phenomena together, and entitles us to call them both *das Nichtige*. In one of *das Nichtige*'s two major forms, the menacing dynamic is averted before being actualized; in the other, the menacing dynamic is actualized before being defeated.

What sort of reality are we to ascribe to *das Nichtige*? Barth asks. We can't say that it's "nothing, i.e., that it does not exist. God takes it into account. He is concerned with it. He strives against it, resists and overcomes it.... If we accept this, we cannot argue that... nothingness is nothing, i.e., it does not exist. That which confronts God in this way, and is seriously treated by Him, is surely not nothing or non-existent.... All conceptions or doctrine which would deny or diminish or minimise this... are untenable from the Christian standpoint. Nothingness is not nothing" (349). And obviously it's not God. Is it then a creature? Perhaps an angel that has freely chosen to oppose God, as much of the Christian tradition would have said?

Barth's rejection of this suggestion is brief – brief for him, that is (522–31)! Several points of response come to mind. For one thing, it makes no sense to identify *das Nichtige*, in its persona of ontological menace, with some fallen creature; the menacing tendency to sink back into not existing is of the wrong ontological category to be identified with a creature. And if it were a creature, why wouldn't God just let it do what it tends to do; viz., sink back into non-existence? Furthermore, as we shall see in more detail shortly, Barth's understanding of freely chosen evil action – sin – is that though it is the agent's own act, for which the agent is responsible, nonetheless it is also "surrender to the alien power of an adversary" (310). If then we identify that alien power with some spiritual creature, we shall have to say that the sinful choices of that adversarial creature are themselves not made under the influence of any alien power whatsoever. These, I say, are points of response that come to mind. Barth's actual response is different from any of them. In the biblical view, "God sees and therefore treats all things, including nothingness, with justice, i.e., according to their true being" (524). God's attitude toward *das Nichtige* is total condemnation; for *das Nichtige* "is falsehood in its very being" (525). Justice for *das Nichtige* consists of total annihilation. That cannot be said of any creature – not even of a rebellious angel.

Barth does not deny the existence of demons and demonic powers. What he argues instead is that those are to be identified with *das Nichtige* in its persona as evil. The language of "demons" and "demonic powers" is another way of speaking of *das Nichtige*.

Everything which has to be said about [nothingness] is also to be said of demons as the opponents of God's heavenly ambassadors [i.e., the angels]. They are. As we cannot deny the peculiar existence of nothingness, we cannot deny their existence. They are null and void, but they are not nothing.... Their being is neither that of God nor that of the creature, neither that of heavenly creatures nor

that of earthly, for they are neither the one nor the other. They are not divine but non-divine and anti-divine. On the other hand, God has not created them, and therefore they are not creaturely. ... This is all to be said of demons as of nothingness. They are not different from the latter. They do not stand apart. They derive from it. They themselves are always nothingness. They are nothingness in its dynamic, to the extent that it has form and power and movement and activity. This is how Holy Scripture understands this alien element. (523)

Demons are "the exponents" of *das Nichtige*, "the powers of falsehood in a thousand different forms" (527).

So what then is the ontological location of *das Nichtige*? What is its ontological category? If, on the one hand, it's not simply nothing; but if, on the other hand, it's neither God nor any of the powers and activities of God, nor any creature nor any of the powers and activities of any creature, what is it? It's a power; yes. But it's not a power of either God or creature. There seems to be nothing of which it is a power – a free-floating power. We must conclude, says Barth, that it exists "in a third way of its own" (349). Which is, of course, not to say anything more than that it is neither God nor creature. *In addition to* God and creatures, to their powers and activities, there is *das Nichtige*.⁸

Though we do not know how to locate *das Nichtige* ontologically, we do know its nature, its identity, says Barth. The identity of *das Nichtige* is determined by its relation to God's purposes and desires. Specifically, the identity of *das Nichtige* consists in its being that power and dynamic that negates God's will and which, in turn, God negates. God's will is thus, in an odd way, the condition of there being *das Nichtige* and the basis of its identity. Only because God said Yes to certain possibilities, and therein No to others, can there be any such thing as opposition to God's will. God "says Yes, and therefore says No to that to which He has not said Yes. He works according to his purpose, and in so doing rejects and dismisses all that gainsays it. ... It is only on this basis that nothingness 'is,' but on this basis it really 'is.' As God is Lord on the left hand as well, He is the basis and Lord of nothing too" (351).

⁸ In pp. 524–27, Barth strongly suggests that our wish, as theoreticians, to locate *das Nichtige* ontologically, thus to assign to it its proper place in an ontological system, represents a victory for *das Nichtige*. Instead of opposing it with tooth and fang as that which does not fit into God's creation, as that which menaces creation, we try to show how it *does* fit in. "Let us only integrate the devil and the kingdom of demons and evil into the same system in which elsewhere and according to their different character we also treat of God and Christ and true man and the angels! Let us only do this kingdom the honour of taking it seriously in this sense! ... Nothing could suit it better than to find a sure place in the philosophical outlook of man or the world of human thought, securing recognition as a serious co-worker and opponent of God and man" (526). I find this unconvincing!

So far, so good. But Barth succumbs to the temptation to say that God's negative will is not only the *necessary* condition of anything having the *identity* of being the dynamic of negating God's will that God in turn negates, but also that it is the *sufficient* condition for the *existence* of that dynamic. The passage quoted just above continues, "That which God renounces and abandons in virtue of His decision is not merely nothing. It is nothingness, and has as such its own being. ... Nothingness is that which God does not will. It lives only by the fact that it is that which God does not will. But it does live by this fact. For not only what God wills, but what He does not will, is potent, and must have a real correspondence. What really corresponds to that which God does not will is nothingness" (352). The passage is less than decisively clear on the issue at hand. Barth's thinking *appears* to be that if God said No, then *there's something* to which God said No. But since that was not some previously existing creature, nor some entity whose existence was entirely independent of God, it must be the case that that to which God said No exists on account of God saying No to it. That, I say, *appears* to be Barth's reasoning in the passage; but it's not entirely clear. I take the following passage to confirm that that was in fact how he was thinking: the demons (i.e., *das Nichtige*) "are only as God affirms Himself and the creature and thus pronounces a necessary No. They *exist in virtue of the fact* [my emphasis] that His turning to involves a turning from, His election a rejection. ... They are as they are judged, repudiated and excluded by God" (523).

It turns out, then, that Barth's thinking here is wholly parallel to his thinking about *das Nichtige* in its persona of ontological menace. In creation, God's Yes implies a No. And his Yes amounts to his saying Yes *to something*; those are the creatures. Likewise, his saying No amounts to his saying No *to something*; those are the uncreated possibles. God's saying Yes to the creatures is what brings them into existence; and God's saying No to the unactualized possibles is what brings them into existence. So too, within creation, God's saying No to all that threatens the well-being of the creature brings about the power of threatening the creature. For if God says No to threats to the creature, then *there is something* to which God says No. And God's saying No to those threats is what brings them into existence. The reasoning is as flawed in this latter case as we saw it to be in the other.

It turns out, then, that in spite of his claim that evil is "incomprehensible and inexplicable," there is much about evil that Barth professes to comprehend and explain – more than he should. We know the nature,

the essence, of evil. Likewise, we know why there is something that has this essence. And in a certain way we even know, as we shall see shortly, why the menace to the creature is not averted in the case of evil, whereas, by contrast, it is averted in the case of ontological menace. What we do not know is the ontology of evil – other than that it is a power; we don't understand what sort of being it is that is neither Creator nor creature, yet brought about by the Creator.

Though it's been implicit in what's been said, there's one point worth highlighting before we leave this part of our topic. That which constitutes the essence of *das Nichtige* is the very same thing that gives to it its character of evil. For what is fundamentally definitive of evil, from the Christian standpoint, is resistance to grace; and such resistance, as we have seen, is the essence of *das Nichtige*.

What God positively wills and performs in the *opus proprium* of His election, of His creation, of His preservation and overruling rule of the creature... is His grace... What God does not will and therefore negates and rejects, what can thus be only the object of His *opus alienum*, of his jealousy, wrath and judgment, is a being that refuses and resists and therefore lacks His grace. This being which is alien and adverse to grace and therefore without it, is that of *das Nichtige*... and this is evil in the Christian sense, namely, what is alien and adverse to grace, and therefore without it. For it is God's honour and right to be gracious, and this is what *das Nichtige* contests. It is also the salvation and right of the creature to receive and live by the grace of God, and this is what it disturbs and obstructs. (353)

SIN AS THE INCURSION OF *DAS NICHTIGE*

One of the forms assumed by *das Nichtige's* incursions into the created order is sin. The point of saying this is that though sin is "man's own act, achievement, and guilt" (310), it's more than that. It's something "under which we suffer" in a way which is "sometimes palpable but sometimes we can only sense and sometimes is closely hidden. In Holy Scripture, while man's full responsibility for its commission is maintained, even sin itself is described as his surrender to the alien power of an adversary... He is led astray and harms himself, or rather lets himself be harmed. He is not merely a thief but one who has himself fallen among thieves" (310).⁹ From

⁹ Cf. 307–08: "The reality of nothingness is not seen sharply enough, even in its concrete form as sin, if sin is understood only generally as aberration from God and disobedience to His will. This is true enough, but we cannot stop at this generalization. Otherwise we might escape and extricate ourselves with the assertion that we are men, creatures, and not God, and that

this we can infer that Barth would dismiss as woefully inadequate any attempt to account for evil by locating it in free will wrongly used, coupled with the overriding value God attaches, in creation and providence, to free will however used, rightly or wrongly. The sinful exercise of free will is to be understood as not only an action of the agent, but also as submission to the power of *das Nichtige*.

Barth insists, emphatically, that sin is not the only concrete form of *das Nichtige* in its persona of evil. *Das Nichtige* also manifests itself in all that exhibits and tends toward what he regularly calls “evil and death,” meaning by “evil” not “the ills which are inseparably bound up with creaturely existence in virtue of the negative aspect of creation,” but “evil as something wholly anomalous which threatens and imperils this existence”; and meaning by “death” not “dying as the natural termination of life,” but death as the total opposite of human flourishing, namely, “the ultimate irruption and triumph of that alien power which annihilates creaturely existence and thus discredits and disclaims the Creator” (310).¹⁰ *Das Nichtige* aims at “the comprehensive negation of the creature and its nature” (310). And it is “absolutely essential” that it be seen in its form of “evil and death,” as well as in its form of sin, “if we are to understand what is at issue and to what we refer ... [I]n the incarnation God exposed Himself to nothingness ... in order to repel and defeat it. He did so in order to destroy the destroyer. The Gospel records of the miracles and acts of Jesus are not just formal proofs of His Messiahship ... but as such, they are objective manifestations of His character as the Conqueror not only of sin but also of evil and death, as the Destroyer of the destroyer, as the Saviour in the most inclusive sense” (311).¹¹

therefore our aberration from God, and to that extent our disobedience, and therefore sin and nothingness, are basically no more than our essential and natural imperfection in contrast with His perfection. ... In sin as the concrete form of nothingness we should then be dealing again with merely the negative aspect of creation.” Sin is not only the creature’s *act* of disobedience, but also the creature’s *submission* to *das Nichtige* – hence, the concrete form of *das Nichtige*’s opposition to God.

¹⁰ Cf. p. 74: “not death as a natural limitation but eternal death, the enemy and annihilator of life.” And p. 312: “The New Testament says that [Christ] suffered death for the forgiveness of the sins of many, but it also says, and the two statements must not be dissociated, that He did so in order to take away the power of death, real death, death as the condemnation and destruction of the creature, death as the offender against God and the last enemy.”

¹¹ Barth adds that “It is a serious matter that all the Western as opposed to Eastern Church has invariably succeeded in minimising and devaluating, and still does so today, this New Testament emphasis. And Protestantism especially has always been far too moralistic and spiritualistic ...” (311).

HAS BARTH SATISFIED HIS OWN CRITERIA?

I think there can be no doubt that in his account of evil – at least in that part of it that we have seen thus far – Barth satisfies the requirement he set for himself of honoring the holiness of God. To *das Nichtige* in general, and to *das Nichtige* in its persona of evil, in particular – that is, to *das Nichtige* as manifested in sins, evils, and eternal death – God unrelentingly and unwaveringly says No. The essence of evil is that it is that to which God says No; and there really are things to which God says No, namely, sins, evils, and eternal death. Barth wants nothing to do with any of the multitude of theories which say that those phenomena that he, Barth, identifies as sins and evils are not really evil but merely “negative aspects” of human existence – like the dissonances in a Bach fugue that, if heard all by themselves, are repulsive, but that, when heard within the context of the whole, are seen to contribute indispensably to the goodness of the whole. It’s not the case that reality is good through and through. There is evil in it: that which is in opposition to God and to which God is therefore in opposition. God does not survey the whole with blissful satisfaction, finding nothing to which God wishes to say No. God is angry, wrathful. Barth’s metaphors for God are the metaphors of one engaged in combat, not the metaphors of one engaged in blissful contemplation. Battlefield, not art museum. Rather than being “a majestic, passive and beatific God on high,” God is “the Adversary of this adversary” (357).

But what about the other requirement, of honoring the omnipotence of God? If things aren’t going as God wants, if reality is laced through with that to which God says No, isn’t God radically lacking in power? Not at all, says Barth. The issue is not whether God is omnipotent, but of the form that omnipotence takes. God’s omnipotence is not that of one who finds nothing to which to say No, no menace and no incursion; it’s that of one who wins the battle against that to which he says No. *Das Nichtige* “has no perpetuity. God not only has perpetuity, but is Himself the basis, essence and sum of all being. And for all its finiteness and mutability even His creature has perpetuity – the perpetuity which he wills to grant it in fellowship with Himself, and which cannot be lacking in this fellowship but is given it to all eternity. Nothingness, however, is not created by God, nor is there any covenant with it. Hence it has no perpetuity” (360). It is “broken, judged, refuted and destroyed at the central point, in the mighty act of salvation accomplished in Jesus Christ” (367).

In this is to be seen the “incredible and real mystery of the free grace of God,” “that He makes His own the cause of the creature” (356). There

was no necessity in this, Barth insists. God might have been content with the fact that in creating and preserving he overcomes the ontological menace of *das Nichtige*, “separated, negated, rejected and abandoned” it (356). He might have declared that such inroads as *das Nichtige* makes *within* creation are the business of the creature. God’s own battle, against the tendency of creation to slide back into non-existence, is won; let the creature now take over. He might have remained “aloof and detached,” “a majestic, passive and beatific God on high” (357). In fact God did not. God did not because:

having created the creature, He has pledged His faithfulness to it. ... That is to say, He whom nothingness has no power to offend is prepared on behalf of His creature to be primarily and properly offended and humiliated, attacked and injured by nothingness. ... Though Adam is fallen and disgraced, he is not too low for God to make Himself his Brother, and to be for him a God who must strangely contend for his status, honour and right. For the sake of this Adam God becomes poor. ... He lets a catastrophe which might be quite remote from Him approach Him and affect His very heart. ... He does this of His free grace. For He is under no compulsion. He might act as the erroneous view postulates ... [B]ut He descends to the depths, and concerns Himself with nothingness, because in His goodness He does not will to cease to be concerned for His creature. ... He would rather be unblest with His creature than be the blessed God of an unblest creature. ... He actually becomes a creature, and thus makes the cause of the creature His own in the most concrete reality and not just in appearance, really taking its place. (356–58)

Barth adds that “there are few heresies so pernicious as that of a God who faces nothingness more or less unaffected and unconcerned, and the parallel doctrine of man as one who must engage in independent conflict against it” (360).

Barth concedes that the defeat of *das Nichtige* achieved in “the mighty act of salvation accomplished in Jesus Christ ... is not yet visible or recognisable” (367). The “final revelation of its destruction has not yet taken place and all creation must still await and expect it” (367). In faith we know, says Barth, that it “is now objectively defeated as such in Jesus Christ.” “It cannot be doubted” (367). But it’s not evident. The “blindness of our eyes and the cover which is still over us [obscures] the prospect of the kingdom of God already established as the only kingdom undisputed by evil” (8).

These words suggest that now, after the death and resurrection of Jesus, it only *appears* that there’s evil; there isn’t really. But that can’t be Barth’s meaning; for there’s nothing more fundamental to his account

of evil than his insistence that there really is evil in the world. What he has to mean is the following: once upon a time there was reason to think that the dominion of the powers of darkness was perhaps equal, or even superior, to that of God. However, in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God has defeated the powers; accordingly, therein it is manifest that their dominion is not, and was not, equal to God's. All along it was only a "semblance of validity" (367), that is, a semblance of dominion equal or superior to God's. Nonetheless, though the powers of darkness were defeated in Jesus Christ, and their dominion therein displayed as inferior, the incursion of those powers is not yet over. So much is this the case, that to our ordinary secular eyes there's about as much reason as ever to wonder whether perhaps the powers of darkness are not equal or even superior to those of God. It's not evident that *das Nichtige* lost the battle. That, so I suggest, is what Barth has in mind.

There's an obvious question: Why, if *das Nichtige* lost the battle, do its incursions continue? If *das Nichtige* has been defeated, then it "can have even its semblance of validity only under the decree of God. What it now is and does, it can be and do only in the hand of God" (367). So why do its incursions continue?

Barth's answer is that "there is a legitimate place here for a favourite concept of the older dogmatics – that of permission. God still permits His kingdom not to be seen by us, and to that extent He still permits us to be a prey to nothingness" (367). And indeed, what else *could* Barth say at this point? But is permission of evil compatible with the holiness of God? Hasn't Barth, at the end of the day, failed to satisfy one of the conditions he set for himself, that in his account of evil he fully honor the holiness of God? Can a holy God *permit* evil?

The answer is surely that introducing permission of this sort at this point does not, so far forth, compromise the holiness of God. Sins and evils remain evil; they are not reconceived as "negative aspects." The reason is that, in general, one may permit something to happen that one could prevent while nonetheless disapproving of it, desiring that it not happen. One's reason for permitting it might be of many different sorts; but if it's to be a morally acceptable reason, it will have to be of the form that one (non-culpably) believed that preventing the evil would not secure a greater good, overall, than permitting it. Which implies that one's permission occurs within the context of being in control of the situation. Clearly it's along these lines that Barth is thinking. God "thinks it good that we should exist 'as if' He had not yet mastered [*das Nichtige*]" (367).

The truth is that the incursions of *das Nichtige* are now, strangely, “an instrument of [God’s] will and action” (367).¹² Even though *das Nichtige* does not will to do so it is forced to serve [God], to serve His Word and work, the honour of His Son, the proclamation of the Gospel, the faith of the community, and therefore the way which He Himself wills to go within and with His creation until its day is done. The defeated, captured and mastered enemy of God has as such become His servant. Good care is taken that he should always show himself a strange servant. . . . Yet it is even more important to reflect that good care is taken by this One that even nothingness should be one of the things of which it is said that they must work together for good to them that love Him. (367–68)

Barth makes no attempt to describe the general pattern of sins and evils working together for good; perhaps he thinks there is no general pattern.

Even as subject in this strange way to God’s providence, however, *das Nichtige* “has no perpetuity. . . . As God fulfils his true and positive work, His negative work becomes pointless and redundant and can be terminated and ended.” Barth adds that

it is of major importance at this point that we should not become involved in the logical dialectic that if God loves, elects and affirms eternally He must also hate and therefore reject and negate eternally. There is nothing to make God’s activity on the left hand as necessary and perpetual as His activity on the right. . . . This negative activity of God has as such, in accordance with its meaning and nature, a definite frontier, and this is to be found at the point where it attains its goal and accomplishes its purpose. With the attainment of the goal the *opus alienum* of God also reaches its end. (360–61)

What does Barth mean? Does he mean that when the battle is over, *das Nichtige* itself will have disappeared, so that there is no longer any menace to the creature, neither ontological nor existential? Or does he mean that though the menace of both sorts will remain, the menace will be no more than menace? No longer will there be an incursion of *das Nichtige* into the life of the creature? No longer will there be evil – sins, evils, and death? Does he mean that just as ontological menace has always been stymied, existential menace will be stymied as well?

¹² This is the strangeness that Barth had in mind when, in a passage quoted earlier, from the beginning of the section on God and Nothingness, he said that “there is amongst the objects of God’s providence an alien factor. It cannot escape God’s providence but is comprehended by it. The manner, however, in which this is done is highly peculiar in accordance with the particular nature of this factor” (289).

Barth's language certainly suggests the former interpretation. He doesn't say that evil has no perpetuity; he says that *das Nichtige* has no perpetuity. But if that's what he wants to say, doesn't his earlier line of reasoning, which I criticized, now come back to haunt him – I mean, his reasoning that God's Yes inevitably involves a No as well, and that, if God says No, then thereby and thereupon there is that to which God said No, this being the power of *das Nichtige*? For presumably God's *opus proprium*, God's Yes-saying, continues; hence, by the above reasoning, *das Nichtige* also continues. Or does God's *opus proprium* not continue? Does God's work cease? Does God rest?

The clue to how Barth was thinking is to be found in a few paragraphs that occur in the passage on The Divine Preserving, in section 49, where Barth discusses the *eternal* preservation of the creature. Temporal creation is destined to be incorporated into the eternal life of God; when thus incorporated, all menace will have disappeared. The Yes that is God's creation and preservation will have ceased; likewise the Yes that is God's providential affirmation of the temporal well-being of the creature will have ceased. God will be at rest; and the creature at rest within God.

The time will come, says Barth, "when the created world as a whole will only have been. In the final act of salvation history, i.e., in the revelation of Jesus Christ as the Foundation and Deliverer and head of the whole of creation, the history of creation will also reach its goal and end. It need not progress any further, it will have fulfilled its purpose.... It will not need any continuance of temporal existence" (87–88). This does not mean the end of God's preservation, however. God's preservation will continue – only now as *eternal* preservation, not temporal. "Eternal preservation does not mean a continuation of the [temporal] existence of the creature. To what end and for what purpose could it continue to be when already it has had and fulfilled its course ...?" (88).

"The eternal preservation of the creature of God means negatively that its destruction is excluded" (89). Were its destruction to be permitted, that "would mean that the non-existent had triumphed over the creature of God, that by giving such power to the non-existent God had finally revoked His own work, and that He had finally retracted that Yes and given Himself to isolation" (89). However, "by means of that which He did on behalf of the creature when He Himself became creature, He has in fact broken the power of the non-existent against the creature when He Himself became creature, destroying it and removing the threat of it" (89).

The eternal preservation of the creature means positively ... that it can continue eternally before Him. God is the One who was, and is, and is to come. With

Him the past is future, and both past and future are present. ... And one day – to speak in temporal terms – when the totality of everything that was and is and will be will only have been, then in the totality of its temporal duration it will still be open and present to Him, and therefore preserved: eternally preserved. ... Everything will be present to Him exactly as it was or is or will be, in all its reality, in the whole temporal course of its activity, in its strength or weakness, in its majesty or meanness. He will not allow anything to perish, but will hold it in the hollow of His hand as He has always done, and does and will. He will allow it to partake of His own eternal life. And in this way the creature will continue to be, in its limitation, even in its limited temporal duration. ... In all the unrest of its being in time it will be enfolded by the rest of God, and in Him it will itself be at rest, just as even now in all its unrest it is hidden and can be at rest in the rest of God. This is the eternal preservation of God. (89–90)

BARTH'S ACCOUNT CONTRASTED WITH OTHERS

Karl Barth's discussion of evil is extraordinarily rich, insightful, imaginative, and provocative – filled with observations and emphases that the Christian philosopher ought to take seriously. I think, to cite just a few examples, of his observations concerning what I have called "ontological menace," of his insistence that the "negative aspects" of our existence are not to be regarded as evil, of his insistence that sin, while certainly the act of the person who sins, is also submission to an alien power, of his insistence that the nature of evil is determined by its negative relation to God's desires and purposes, of his insistence that God does not survey creation with unalloyed bliss but is engaged in combat as one who is wounded and wrathful, of his insistence that God's omnipotence is to be located in God's winning the battle against menace and evil rather than in everything happening as God wishes, and, most fundamentally, of his insistence that evil is a power – a nullifying, negating, nihilating power. These particular points all seem to me true as well as important.

Along the way in my presentation of Barth's thought I have made some critical comments; just now I have expressed agreement on several fundamental points. This is the merest beginning of the critical engagement that Barth's thought merits. On this occasion it is impossible to do more, however. In closing, let me merely call attention to the fundamental structure of Barth's account of evil, and contrast his account with some of the major options present in the philosophical tradition.

I judge that the most fundamental points at which Barth's account differs from most of the philosophical accounts of evil is in the insistence

that evil is a power, in the insistence that the negative aspects of our constitution and situation are not evil, in the insistence that evil can accordingly not be identified by reference to such negative aspects, and in the insistence that God is wounded and angered by much of what transpires in creation. On that last point, Barth differs not only from most of the philosophical tradition, but from much if not most of the theological tradition as well; perhaps that is also true for the second and third points. Barth himself discusses (316–34), in some detail, his disagreements on these points with the “great” and “mighty” Leibniz, and in great detail his disagreements with Schleiermacher (while also vigorously defending Schleiermacher against a number of misguided objections).

The traditional account to which Barth’s account comes closest is the free will account – that is, the account which says that evil is due to the free agency of human and angelic/demonic persons. Barth, of course, rejects this account. He holds that human sin must be understood, in part, as submission to an alien, God-defying power; and he holds that that power cannot be identified with any creature whatsoever. Nonetheless, both accounts hold that God is genuinely displeased by what transpires in the world; there’s genuine evil. Furthermore, it’s open to those who embrace the free will account to join with Barth in saying that God is *wounded* and *angered* by what transpires in creation. The free will account joins Barth’s in resisting the temptation to eliminate genuine evil by treating sins and evils as negative aspects of our nature and situation, all of these sins and evils together making an indispensable contribution to the greater good, thus grounding God’s unalloyed bliss.

Barth’s strategy for resisting the lure of the negative-aspects account can be seen as consisting of three moves. The first of these is his claim that creation without ontological menace is impossible, coupled with his claim that God’s desire for fellowship with the creature and for the creature’s flourishing unavoidably brings about ontological menace; only the eventual incorporation of creation into the eternal life of God can remove this menace. Second, Barth assumes, without ever, so far as I have noticed, making a point of the matter, that the ontological menace is of such a character that God’s only option for dealing with it was to overcome it after it was actualized, rather than to stymie it. And third, God for God’s own good reasons now permits the ontological menace to continue its incursions, these good reasons consisting, at least in part, in the fact that evil itself is now forced to contribute to the good of the creature.

In the free will account there is nothing like the first two of these moves. At the point of the third move, however, there is close resemblance. The free will account is fundamentally a trade-off account. God decided to trade off the situation of no evil coupled with no free agents, for the greater overall good of free agency, human and cosmic, coupled with the evil of their sins and ensuing evils. If, for each situation in which a given agent might find itself, there is a fact of the matter as to what that agent would freely choose in that situation, and if God foreknew all these facts, then God knew in advance the details of the trade-off God was making at creation. If there are no such facts, or if there are but God did not know them at creation, then at creation God would have held in reserve the option of calling the whole thing off should the point be reached where the trade-off was no longer acceptable.

Barth's third move, like the free will account as a whole, consists of viewing God as making a trade-off. Having defeated *das Nichtige* at the cross, God could have called to a halt its ingressions. But God did not, for reasons that in their totality are known to God alone; God permits *das Nichtige* to continue to work evil. The details of the trade-off are significantly different from that of the free will account. In the Barthian account it is *das Nichtige* that God permits to continue to work evil – *das Nichtige* being the uncreated power that, against but mysteriously on account of God's will, ineluctably accompanies creation and providence; in the free will account, it is creatures possessing the power of free agency who are permitted to continue to work evil. Furthermore, on the Barthian account, the goods that ensue from permitting the power of evil to continue to work its evil ways are presumably diverse – as already noted, Barth makes no attempt to generalize; on the free will account, the good in view is just one, viz., the great good of free agency. So the differences are significant. Nonetheless, the final move in Barth's three-part strategy is also a trade-off move: God trades the good of stopping *das Nichtige* in its tracks for the greater overall good that ensues from permitting it to continue its incursions for a while. It's hard to see how an account that both honors God's omnipotence and, by acknowledging that there genuinely is evil in the world, not just "negative aspects," honors God's holiness, could be anything other than, in part at least, a trade-off account.

"The light shines in the darkness; and the darkness has not overcome it" – John 1:5.

CHAPTER 13

Tertullian's enduring question

TERTULLIAN ON THE RELATION OF THE CHRISTIAN TO PAGAN LEARNING

“What does Jerusalem have to do with Athens,” asked Tertullian in memorable, bitingly eloquent words:

the Church with the Academy, the Christian with the heretic? Our principles come from the Porch of Solomon, who himself taught that the Lord is to be sought in simplicity of heart. I have no use for a Stoic or a Platonic or a dialectic [i.e., Aristotelian] Christianity. After Jesus Christ we have no need of speculation, after the Gospel, no need of research. Once we come to believe, we have no desire to believe anything else; for the first article of our faith is that there is nothing else we have to believe.¹

Tertullian's aim, in his *Prescriptions against Heretics*, was to persuade his readers to stay away from heresies. Just before the passage quoted he had been inquiring into the root of these “doctrines of men and of daemons.” Philosophy is the root – that repository of “worldly wisdom, that rash interpreter of the divine nature and order.” Heretics are “equipped by philosophy.” “From philosophy come those fables, those endless genealogies and fruitless questionings, those words that spread like cancer,” that we find in the heretics. Heresies are “generated for itching ears by the ingenuity of that worldly wisdom which the Lord called foolishness. . . .”² Lift a heretic and you'll find a philosopher.

It was to hold us back from the futile and deceiving speculations of the heretics, says Tertullian, that the apostle Paul “testified expressly in his letter to the Colossians that we should beware of philosophy. ‘Take heed lest anyone beguile you through philosophy or vain deceit, after the tradition of men,’ against the providence of the Holy Spirit. Paul had

¹ *Prescriptions against Heretics*, 7. Translated and edited by S. L. Greenslade, *Library of Christian Classics: Vol. V, Early Latin Theology* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1956).

² *Prescriptions*, 7.

been at Athens, and in his argumentative encounters there had become acquainted with that human wisdom of the philosophers which attacks and perverts truth, being itself divided up into its own swarm of heresies by its mutually antagonistic sects.”³

Having located the root of heresy in philosophy, Tertullian then poses his rhetorical question: “What does Jerusalem have to do with Athens, the Church with the Academy, the Christian with the heretic?” Be done, he says, with Stoicized Christianity, with Platonized Christianity, with dialectic Christianity. Were Tertullian living in our own day his list would be much longer: be done with Kantianized Christianity, with Hegelianized Christianity, with deconstructionist Christianity. Be done with them all. The stance of the Christian toward all attempts at “worldly wisdom” must be unrelenting opposition:

Would to God that no “heresies had ever been necessary in order that those who are approved may be made manifest!” We would then never be required to try our strength in contests about the soul with philosophers, those patriarchs of heretics, as they may fairly be called. The apostle Paul already foresaw the ensuing conflicts between philosophy and the truth. He offered his warning about philosophy after he had been at Athens, had become acquainted with that loquacious city, and had there gotten a taste of its huckstering wisecracks and talkers. . . . It will be for Christians to clear away those noxious vapors, exhaled from philosophy, which obscure the clear and wholesome atmosphere of truth. They will do so both by shattering to pieces the arguments which are drawn from the principles of things – meaning those of the philosophers – and by opposing to them the maxims of heavenly wisdom – that is, such as are revealed by the Lord; in order that both the pitfalls with which philosophy captivates the heathen may be removed, and the means employed by heresy to shake the faith of Christians may be destroyed.⁴

There is danger confronting those Christians who set out to shatter the arguments of the philosophers: they may themselves be seduced by those arguments and become heretics. The danger cannot be avoided; some in the community must oppose heresy by uncovering its roots in philosophy and then attacking those. But to those who suggest that a training in philosophy should become a more or less standard part of the education of Christians, Tertullian’s answer is unequivocal – as indeed are most of his answers to most of his questions! Addressing the soul, he says:

³ Ibid.

⁴ *On the Soul*, 3. Translated and edited by A. Roberts and J. Donaldson, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Vol. III, Latin Christianity, Its Founder, Tertullian* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1951 reprint).

I call you not as one formed in the schools, trained in the libraries, nourished in the Attic academies and porticoes, belching forth wisdom. I address you simple, unskilled, uncultured and untaught, as those are who have you and nothing else; I address you as a person of the road, the square, the workshop, that alone. I want your inexperience, since no one of small experience feels any confidence. I demand of you that you consult only the things you bring with you as a human being, the things you know either from yourself or from your author, whoever that may be.⁵

Tertullian's question, "What does Jerusalem have to do with Athens?" remains as much alive today as it was in AD 198 when Tertullian posed it. It's not one of those questions that the Christian community has settled and from there gone on to other matters. It remains an enduring question for the Christian academic. It is, in fact, *the* enduring question: What does the Christian gospel have to do with the enterprise of scholarship – in particular, with the scholarship of those who are not Christian?

The question would not have endured if Tertullian's answer, or some alternative, had been universally accepted. It would now be of interest only to antiquarians. In proclaiming that Jerusalem's business with Athens is combating those philosophies spawned by Athens that inspire the heretics who disturb the church, Tertullian was staking out a position within a multifaceted debate that agitated the ancient church. In particular, he was staking out a position in opposition to that articulated by his near-contemporary, Clement of Alexandria. I think that you and I, at the dawn of the third millennium after Christ, can still learn something by reflecting on that debate conducted by our forebears.

The picture presented by the passages from Tertullian that I have cited is unremittingly that of *disjunction* and *opposition*. Between pagan philosophy and Holy Scripture there is no choice but to choose. "Choose ye this day whom you will serve."⁶ To be a Christian is already to have chosen. The Christian lives by Holy Scripture, in opposition to pagan philosophy. To the suggestion that some Christians should advance beyond their acceptance of Holy Scripture to engage in philosophical speculation, Tertullian's answer is crisp: "After Jesus Christ we have no need of speculation, after the Gospel, no need of research. When we come to believe, we have no desire to believe anything else; for the first article of our faith is that there is nothing else we have to believe."⁷

⁵ *The Soul's Testimony*, 1. Translated and edited by A. Roberts and J. Donaldson, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Vol. III, Latin Christianity, Its Founder, Tertullian* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1951 reprint).

⁶ Quoted from Joshua 24:15. ⁷ *Prescriptions*, 7.

There were those, Clement included, who were citing the New Testament injunction, "Seek and you shall find," to justify the project of becoming learned Christians. Tertullian's answer is eloquently dismissive:

The reasonable exegesis of this saying turns on three points: matter, time, and limitation. As to matter, you are to consider what is to be sought; as to time, when, and as to limitation, how far. What you must seek is what Christ taught, and precisely as long as you have not found it, precisely until you do find it. And you found it when you came to believe. You would not have believed if you had not found, just as you would not have sought except in order to find. Since finding was the object of your search, and belief the result of your finding, your acceptance of the faith bars any prolonging of seeking and finding. The very success of your seeking has set up this limitation for you. Your boundary has been marked out by him who would not have you believe, and so would not have you seek, outside the limits of his teaching.

If we were bound to go on seeking as long as there is any possibility of finding, simply because so much has been taught by others as well, we would always be seeking and never believing. . . .

I have no patience with the man who is always seeking, for he will never find. He is seeking where there will be no finding. I have no patience with the man who is always knocking, for the door will never be opened. He is knocking at an empty house. I have no patience with the man who is always asking, for he will never be heard. He is asking one who does not hear. . . .

But even supposing that we ought to be seeking now and ever, where should we seek? Among the heretics, where everything is strange and hostile to our truth? . . . Instruction and destruction never reach us from the same quarter. Light and darkness never come from the same source. So let us seek in our own territory, from our own friends and on our own business, and let us seek only what can come into question without disloyalty to the Rule of Faith.⁸

If we are to see the full pattern of Tertullian's thought, we must understand the import of those final cryptic words. With rhetoric of hammering force, Tertullian has been arguing that it is incoherent to suggest that Christians should engage in "seeking the truth." To be a Christian is to accept the teachings of Scripture; in and by accepting those teachings, one ends one's search for the truth. And as to the more specific suggestion that, in seeking the truth, Christians should not neglect to look into the pagan philosophers, Tertullian's response is that this is not only incoherent, but altogether futile and muddle-headed.

It was not Tertullian's position, however, that Christians are to refrain from all forms of intellectual endeavor; he was not an exponent of bare

⁸ Ibid., 10–12.

faith alone. His own writing is evidence to the contrary. It is appropriate for Christians to try both to understand better *what already they believe* and to defend that with intelligence. Provided you honor the Rule of Faith, says Tertullian to his fellow Christians, you may “seek and discuss as much as you please, and pour forth your whole desire for curious inquiry if any point seems to you undetermined through ambiguity, or obscure from want of clarity. There is surely some brother, a teacher gifted with the grace of knowledge, someone among those skilled intimates of yours,” who can assist you in this, while steering you away from inquiries that stray from the Rule of Faith.⁹

CLEMENT ON THE RELATION OF THE CHRISTIAN
TO PAGAN LEARNING

The picture drawn by Clement was unmistakably different. For Clement, the fundamental relation of Christianity to pagan philosophy was not *opposition* but *supersession*. Pagan philosophy is not *anti-Christian* but *sub-Christian*. Or to speak more historically: just as the law and the prophets served for the Hebrews as a preparation for Christ, so philosophy prepared the Greeks. In Clement's own words: “Philosophy was given to the Greeks directly and primarily, until the Lord should call the Greeks. For this was a schoolmaster to bring the Hellenic mind, as was the law, the Hebrews, to Christ. Philosophy, therefore, was a preparation, paving the way for him who is perfected in Christ.”¹⁰ Using a different cluster of metaphors to make the same point, Clement says that philosophy “was given to the Greeks as a covenant peculiar to them – being, as it is, a steppingstone to the philosophy which is according to Christ.”¹¹

As his words suggest, Clement's reason for embracing this positive picture of Greek philosophy was, at bottom, theological. Sometimes he appeals to the general principle that, according to the teaching of Scripture, all that is good comes from God. Since it seemed obvious to him that there was truth in Greek philosophy, he drew the conclusion that Greek philosophy, insofar as it has a grasp of the truth, comes from God. In other passages, thinking not about the good in general but about truth, Clement appeals to his understanding of what the prologue to the Gospel of John teaches about Logos. Having described Logos, in Chapter 1,

⁹ Ibid., 14.

¹⁰ *Stromata* I, 5. Translated and edited by A. Roberts and J. Donaldson, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. II: Fathers of the Second Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1956).

¹¹ *Stromata* VI, 8.

verse 9, as “the true light that enlightens every man,” John goes on in verse 14 to say that Logos “became flesh and dwelt among us.” The conclusion Clement drew was that the very same Logos that became incarnate in Jesus Christ is at work in all humanity, leading them toward truth. This is how he puts the point in one passage: “Into all human beings whatsoever, but especially those who are occupied with intellectual pursuits, a certain divine effluence has been instilled; wherefore, even if reluctantly, they confess that God is one, indestructible, unbegotten, and that somewhere above in the tracts of heaven, in His own peculiar appropriate eminence, He has an existence true and eternal from whence He surveys all things.”¹² There were those in Clement’s day who said that it was through *human understanding* that philosophy was discovered by the Greeks. Clement rebukes them: “I find the Scriptures saying that understanding is sent by God.”¹³

One version of the supersessionist view would be that Christianity has so far superseded its two main antecedents, Hebrew revelation and Greek philosophy, that there is no longer any point in paying attention to those superseded antecedents. That was not Clement’s version. Beyond a doubt “the teaching which is according to the Savior is complete in itself and without defect,” he says, “being ‘the power and wisdom of God’; the addition of Greek philosophy does not make the truth more powerful.”¹⁴ Or to put it the other way round: the absence of Greek philosophy would not render the perfect Word incomplete, it would not cause the Truth to perish. Nonetheless, the study of Greek philosophy remains of great utility for Christians.

For one thing, it is useful for warding off heresy and sophistry. The learned Christian “can distinguish sophistry from philosophy ... rhetoric from dialectics, and the various sects of barbarian philosophy from the truth itself. How necessary, then, is it for him who desires to be partaker of the power of God to treat of intellectual subjects by philosophizing!” The philosophically learned Christian, “a man of much counsel, is like the Lydian touchstone, which is believed to possess the power of distinguishing spurious from genuine gold.”¹⁵ Alluding to the Tertullianists of his day, Clement observes that:

some, who think themselves naturally gifted, do not wish to touch either philosophy or logic; nay more, they do not wish to learn natural science. They demand

¹² *Exhortation*, VI. Translated and edited by A. Roberts and J. Donaldson, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. II: *Fathers of the Second Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1956).

¹³ *Stromata*, VI, 8. ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, I, 20. ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

bare faith alone, as if they wished, without bestowing any care on the vine, right away to begin gathering clusters. [Tertullian, as we saw above, does not “demand bare faith alone” of all Christians.] Now the Lord is figuratively described as the vine from which, accordingly to the word, we are to take pains to gather fruit with the art of husbandry.

In husbandry “we lop, dig, bind, and perform other operations. . . . So also here, I call him truly learned who brings everything to bear on the truth; so that, from geometry, music, grammar, and philosophy itself, culling what is useful, he guards the faith against assault.”¹⁶

It is clear, however, that Clement did not regard the utility for apologetics of the study of Greek philosophy as exhausting its serviceability for Christians. Indeed, that for him was not its most important use. Though the truth proclaimed by our Savior is the truth necessary and sufficient for salvation, it is not the whole of truth. It is then the calling of Christian intellectuals to go beyond apologetics and incorporate the truth proclaimed by Christ into a larger picture – a more comprehensive “philosophy,” if you will. For this purpose, the learned Christian takes fragments of truth from wherever he finds them. Truth as such is the one ever-living Logos. The various sects of barbarian and Hellenic philosophy vaunt themselves as having got hold of that whole truth. In actual fact, however, none has done more than tear off a fragment. Yet “the parts, though differing from each other, preserve their relation to the whole. . . . Be assured, then, that he who brings the separate fragments together and makes them one again will contemplate the perfect Word, the truth.”¹⁷ “The way of truth is one. But into it, as into a perennial river, streams flow from all sides.”¹⁸

THE ISSUES IN DISPUTE

Disjunction or supersession, opposition or incorporation. Who was right about the relation of Christianity to pagan learning? And who was right about the Christian intellectual? Does the Christian intellectual study the learning of non-Christians solely to discern the error of its ways, confining the scope of his own positive inquiries to the content of the faith itself? Or does the Christian intellectual, convinced that Logos has dispensed portions of truth to all humanity, study such learning not only to discern the error of its ways but also to harvest such fragments of truth as are to be found there, with the goal of combining those, along with the

¹⁶ Ibid. ¹⁷ Ibid., 13. ¹⁸ Ibid., 5.

more clear, ample, and fundamental truths of the Gospel, into a larger synthesis?

The reader will have discerned that the dispute between Clement and Tertullian was multifaceted: a *cluster* of issues was under discussion, not just one issue. From that cluster I can, on this occasion, pick out just one for discussion – one of the most important, however, namely, this: How should Christians interpret pagan literature and philosophy? What should be their goal and strategy of interpretation? Or more generally: How should one interpret the textual tradition that one has inherited? Clement espoused one goal and strategy, Tertullian, another. Neither party won the debate in the second century; neither party has won the debate to this day.

Though Clement believed firmly that, as the consequence of the activity of Logos, there is truth to be found in the Greek philosophers, he did not deny that the truth to be found there is mingled with falsehood. Neither did he deny – indeed, he ardently affirmed – that something decisively new had taken place in world history when the Logos that enlightens all who come into the world was enfleshed in Jesus Christ. Unlike every philosophy, be it Greek or barbarian, the teaching of Jesus “is complete in itself and without defect, being the ‘power and wisdom of God.’”¹⁹ Accordingly, when confronted with the teaching of some philosopher that contradicts the teaching of our Savior, the Christian does not spend time mulling over which to accept. Everything incompatible with the teaching of our Savior is in error; none of it is a fragment of the truth. Clement was not Hegel born out of season. History is not a vast ongoing series of supersessions, continuing until such time as *Geist* is fully manifested in the abstract thought of some philosopher. Though Christianity supersedes both Hebrew revelation and Greek philosophy, nothing will supersede Christianity. Our Savior did not teach us the *whole* of truth; he did teach us nothing but truth; there was no falsehood mingled in. And the truth he taught us is the most important truth, taught with a clarity never to be superseded in this present existence. The teaching of our Savior is thus a touchstone for the Christian interpreter.

Just as Clement did not deny that the truth to be found in the Greek philosophers is mingled with abundant error, and either of secondary importance or lacking in full clarity, so too he did not deny that the Greek philosophers, unlike our Savior, exhibited a multitude of vices. The most fundamental of their vices was that they were, in Clement’s words,

¹⁹ Ibid., 20.

"thieves and robbers." Echoing the then-current view that the Greek philosophers had somehow gained direct access to Hebrew prophecy, Clement says that "before the coming of the Lord they received fragments of the truth from the Hebrew prophets, though admittedly not with full knowledge, and they claimed these as their own teachings, disguising some points, and treating others sophistically by their ingenuity."²⁰ Nonetheless, Clement insists that "sentence of condemnation is not ignorantly to be pronounced against *what is said* on account of *him who says it* (a point also to be kept in view in the case of those who are now alleged to prophesy); rather, *what is said* must be scrutinized to see if it conforms to the truth."²¹

There is, thus, a definite sobriety about the Christian intellectual of Clementine persuasion as he interprets the Greek philosophers. He does not place them on a pedestal; he recognizes their moral failings. He does not idolize them as the fount of all and only wisdom and clarity; he recognizes that such truth as they grasped is either of secondary importance or but a hazy and hesitant apprehension of what our Savior taught us. Nonetheless, there's truth in the Greek philosophers – truth even about God. And the Christian intellectual interprets principally for that truth, so as to incorporate it within a larger synthesis. The Christian interpreter notes, for example, that because of the "divine effluence" at work in the Greek philosophers, they correctly "teach, even if reluctantly, that God is one, indestructible, unbegotten," and so forth.²²

Anybody who takes in hand Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae* will at once discern Clementine hermeneutics at work. Having posed a question – for example, "Whether the Existence of God is Self-Evident?" – Aquinas opens his treatment by citing objections to the answer for which he will argue. These objections almost always are, or incorporate, citations from the tradition. Having stated objections from the tradition to his thesis, Aquinas then announces "On the contrary," and as the introduction to his own argumentation he cites a passage from the tradition that is on his side in the dispute. Finally, after he has laid out his own argument for the answer he prefers, he returns to the opening objections. Though on a few occasions he pronounces an objection mistaken, almost always he instead argues that what was cited as an objection need not be, and, indeed, *should not* be, so interpreted. When appropriate clarifications, qualifications, and distinctions are made, what appeared to be an objection is seen instead to be getting at an aspect of the full and complex truth.

²⁰ Ibid., 17. ²¹ *Stromata* VI, 8. ²² *Exhortation*, VI.

The strategy, as I say, is clearly Clementine. Though there are indisputably errors in the textual tradition bequeathed to us, nonetheless the bulk of that tradition presents to us a finely articulated apprehension of the truth. And rather than dwelling on the errors, Aquinas regards his interpretive task and challenge to be discerning that particular facet of the truth that is presented by the text at hand, thereby showing how that text properly interpreted fits together with other texts that might have been supposed to contradict it. In thus interpreting the textual tradition, Aquinas typifies the medieval tradition in general; the medieval Western tradition was dominantly Clementine in its interpretive practice.

Hans-Georg Gadamer, in our own day, has argued for recovering the Clementine tradition – though I am not aware of his anywhere calling attention to the Clementine ancestry of the interpretive strategy that he defends. (He does call attention to its medieval ancestry.) Confronted with a text, the initial goal of the interpreter, so Gadamer argues, should be to interpret so that what the text says on the subject (*Sache*) under discussion turns out true. Only if that goal is frustrated, only if there is no reasonable way of interpreting the text so that it comes out true, should we interpret for the opinion of the author on the subject under discussion. The strategy of interpreting for authorial opinion is legitimate only as a fall-back. Here is what Gadamer says in one passage:

Just as the recipient of a letter understands the news that it contains and first sees things with the eyes of the person who wrote the letter – i.e., considers what he writes as true, and is not trying to understand the writer's peculiar opinions as such – so also do we understand traditional texts on the basis of expectations of meaning drawn from our own prior relation to the subject matter. And just as we believe the news reported by a correspondent because he was present or is better informed, so too are we fundamentally open to the possibility that the writer of a transmitted text is better informed than we are, with our prior opinion. It is only when the attempt to accept what is said as true fails that we try to “understand” the text, psychologically or historically, as another's opinion.²³

TERTULLIAN'S BASIC POINT

My claim that the medievals, for the most part, practiced the Clementine strategy of interpretation, combined with my description of Gadamer as arguing for “recovering” the Clementine strategy, suggests that somewhere

²³ *Truth and Method*, second revised edition, translated and edited by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1994), 294.

along the line the Clementine strategy went into decline. And so it did. But before we get to that, let me return to the second century to characterize Tertullian's alternative strategy of interpretation.

Contrary to what one might have expected, Tertullian did not deny that there is truth to be found in the Greek philosophers. It's definitely a concession on his part rather than an emphasis; and he doesn't do anything with the concession. Yet there it is. In his *Apology* he says, for example:

We have already said that God fashioned this whole world by His word, His reason, His power. Even your own philosophers agree that *logos*, that is, Word and Reason, seems to be the maker of the universe. This *logos* Zeno defines as the maker who formed everything according to a certain arrangement; the same *logos* (he says) is called Destiny, God, the Mind of Jupiter, and the inevitable Fate of all things. Cleanthes combines all these predicates into Spirit, which, according to him, permeates the universe. Moreover, we, too, ascribe Spirit as its proper substance to that Word, Reason, and Power by which, as we have said, God made everything.²⁴

But if this is Tertullian's conviction, why are disjunction and opposition the themes of his interpretive strategy? Why not, as with Clement, supersession and incorporation?

Tertullian is less explicit on the matter than one would like. Nonetheless, I think one can see how he was thinking. Whereas Clement urged his readers to forget about the persons who are philosophers and concentrate on extracting what is true from what they taught, Tertullian had his eye on the very thing that Clement urged his readers to overlook – the *particular philosophers themselves*, and the distinctives of their patterns of thought in which the particularities of their allegiances, convictions, characters, and so forth get expressed.

When we have the full pattern of Plato's thought in view – or Aristotle's, or some Stoic's – and then compare it with the full pattern of the Rule of Faith, what leaps out is *difference*. Plato's thought, in its distinctive totality, is not a hazy and hesitant adumbration of what finally becomes clear in the Christian Rule of Faith – along with fragments of truth that can nicely be synthesized with the Rule. Plato's thought in its totality has a contour of its own; it has its own integrity. It's not a patternless assemblage of fragments. As such, his thought is not sub-Christian but

²⁴ *Apology*, 21. Translated and edited by A. Roberts and J. Donaldson, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Vol. III, Latin Christianity, Its Founder, Tertullian* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1951 reprint).

anti-Christian. Be it granted that the Christian discerns that here and there Plato is hazily and haltingly getting at something that is stated with clarity and affirmed with confidence in the Gospel. Be it granted that the Christian here and there discerns fragments susceptible to being synthesized into a larger Christian philosophy. But to approach Plato thus is to ignore the integrity of his thought. Let Plato be Plato, rather than a failed approach to Christianity. And let Christ be Christ.

Tertullian was clearly suggesting that we cannot account for the fact that the full pattern of Plato's thought is different from that of the Gospel solely by observing that the Logos dispenses its illumination more fully in Christ than in the minds of the Greek philosophers. Perhaps it does. But human beings are not passive recipients of shafts of illumination thrown off by Logos. In the construction of learning there's always a self at work. What goes a long way toward accounting for the difference between Platonic thought in its integrity – or Stoic, or Aristotelian – and Christian, is that pagan selves are different selves from the Christian self: different allegiances, different commitments, different loves, different orientations, different virtues. Further, the ways in which pagan selves are different from the Christian self are not *in addition to* their thought; those differences *shape* their thought. It's with his eye on the differences of pagan selves from the Christian self that Tertullian asks:

Where is there any likeness between the Christian and the philosopher? between the disciple of Greece and the disciple of heaven? between the man whose object is fame and the man whose object is life? between the talker and the doer? between the man who builds up and the man who pulls down? between friends of error and foes of error? between one who corrupts the truth and one who restores and teaches the truth? between truth's thief and truth's custodian?²⁵

Some might reply that the first of each of these disjunctions is scarcely fair and accurate as a description of all Greek philosophers – not of Socrates, for example. Maybe not. Nonetheless, says Tertullian, "Who can know truth without the help of God? Who can know God without Christ? Who has ever discovered Christ without the Holy Spirit? And who has ever received the Holy Spirit without the gift of faith? Socrates, as none can doubt, was guided by a different spirit – his daemon."²⁶

To most of us, the Clementine strategy of interpretation practiced by the medievals seems very strange. And not only strange. It seems to us that the integrity of author and text are violated when one interprets with

²⁵ *Apology*, 46. ²⁶ *On the Soul*, 1.

the aim of fitting all texts together into some grand synthesis. Aristotle was not just supplementing Plato; Nietzsche was not just complementing Pascal. Each was a unique person working out a unique pattern of thought and expression. You and I relish the inscapes of each of those unique patterns of thought and expression, and the differences among those inscapes. So much is this the case that it has become common practice in this century even to resist trying to interpret the various texts of a *single author* so that they constitute a unity – indeed, to resist trying to interpret *single texts* of an author so that they constitute a unity. Where once upon a time interpreters unquestioningly accepted the challenge to show how the various Aristotelian texts fit together, Werner Jaeger taught us instead to acknowledge dissonance within the Aristotelian corpus, the explanation offered being that Aristotle's texts, written across the span of his career, represent stages in his struggle to free himself from the intellectual grip of Plato. And where once upon a time interpreters struggled mightily to extract a unified teaching from Kant's *First Critique*, Norman Kemp-Smith taught us instead to acknowledge dissonance within the *First Critique*, the explanation offered being that the Critique was written across a twenty-year stretch of time during which Kant was struggling to break free from his earlier metaphysical way of thinking into his new critical way of thinking.

Before the rise of deconstruction, in which Tertullianist interpretation goes berserk, it was, however, in biblical interpretation that one saw the Tertullianist strategy followed most relentlessly. Once upon a time the Bible was regarded as one book, containing a unified, inexhaustibly rich body of teaching. Then it came to be seen not as God's one book but as an anthology of sixty-six human books – give or take a few depending on one's preferred canon. Not long thereafter, many of the books came in turn to be regarded as anthologies: deutero-Isaiah, trito-Isaiah, and so forth. And then these sub-anthologies came in turn to be regarded as anthologies of pericopes. An anthology of anthologies of anthologies, along with the traces of fumbling editorial efforts to blend these anthologies together.

I judge the Reformation to have been the principal, though certainly not the only, cause of the decline of Clementine, and the rise of Tertullianist, interpretation. The Reformers no longer regarded the texts they inherited, excepting a few unalleviatedly heretical texts, as all together embodying a finely articulated, highly complex body of truth, it being the task and challenge of the interpreter to extract that truth by drawing the right distinctions, making explicit the tacit qualifications, properly disambiguating

the ambiguities, honoring the inherent hierarchies of decisiveness, and so forth. To the contrary: the Reformers regarded the bulk of the texts they inherited as riddled with error. Best then to be done with them and return to the church fathers, and behind those, to God's own text, the Bible, in which there was no error at all.

But if the Reformation thus played a fundamental role in the great reversal of interpretive strategy, I judge it was the Romantic movement that secured the victory of the Tertullianist strategy of interpretation in the modern world. For it was the Romantics who taught us the importance of history, the dignity of the particular, and the organic unity of what is truly a text. It's because of our Romantic inheritance that you and I feel in our bones that Clementine interpretation, be it practiced on philosophical texts, biblical texts, or whatever, dishonors the authors and texts of the past, violating their integrity, by riding roughshod over their particularities in the concern to pluck out whatever can be incorporated into a vast synthesis in which everything has its own little place – that synthesis being constructed, of course, by ourselves. Clementine interpretation feels to us like an act of abusive arrogance.

A SYNTHESIS OF THE TWO POSITIONS

Revulsion is not reasoned objection, however. The question remains open: Which goal and strategy of interpretation is right, the Clementine or the Tertullianist? And in particular: How do you and I, as Christian intellectuals, interpret all those texts that are not Christian? Do we interpret them for what is true in what is said – now and then polemicalizing against some of the errors we notice? Or – if we bother with them at all – do we interpret them for the particular contour of thought, allegiance, and sensibility there expressed? And if we do the latter, to what end? Do we follow Clement or Tertullian? As preface to the answer I wish to propose, let me call your attention to one fundamental point of agreement between Clement and Tertullian. Perhaps you noticed that whereas I spoke of the goal of interpretation for Clement as discerning what is true in what the author said, I described the goal of interpretation that Gadamer espouses as trying to interpret the text as saying what is true. Those are very different goals – though the descriptions are closely similar. Clement first interprets the text, with the aim of discerning what the author said; then, interpretation finished, he sorts out the true from the false with his incorporationist goal in mind. Gadamer, by contrast, conducts interpretation itself in accord with the

rule of trying to have the text turn out true on the matter under consideration. In this respect, Gadamer is closer to the medievals than the medievals were to Clement. Both Clement and Gadamer advocate what I called the "Clementine strategy of interpretation." Neither is much interested in what Gadamer calls the particular "opinions" of authors; both interpret for truth. But their ways of getting there are very different; they represent different versions of the Clementine strategy. Clement, to say it again, *first* interprets for what is said and *then* looks for truth therein, Gadamer interprets *so as to have it come out true* and judges that to be what's said.

On this point there is full agreement between Clement and Tertullian; and I, in turn, agree with them. One *can* interpret a text with the aim in mind of having it come out true – or, be it noted, with the aim in mind of having it come out false, or boring, or interesting, or shocking, or bland, or disunited, or aesthetically satisfying – or whatever. Instead of construing a sentence literally, on which interpretation it may be bland, one can construe it metaphorically, on which interpretation it may be arresting; instead of construing it ironically, on which interpretation it may express an important truth, one can construe it literally, on which interpretation it may express a silly falsehood. And so forth. One can do this. But to interpret thus is to ignore the fact that texts are engagements among persons, in which one person performs an act of discourse and another tries to discern what act that was and to respond appropriately. If one insists on never doing anything else with texts other than use them as occasions for engaging in one's own play of interpretation, on never using them to engage another human being over what she said, then one is – so it seems to me – in a profound way dishonoring that other human being. I insult you if, whenever you say something to me, I subject your words to a play of interpretation rather than attempting to discern what you said and responding appropriately.

It may be said that one scarcely dishonors the person if one engages in Gadamerian interpretation – that is, engages in a play of interpretation with the goal in mind of having the words come out true. Isn't this, on the contrary, the most respectful of all modes of interpretation – more respectful than if I interpret for what you said, for your "opinion," which, after all, may or may not be true? I think not. You interpret my speech so as to have it come out true, and you succeed in that. But the truth that emerges is not what I said; it's not what I meant, not what I had in mind. Is that to respect *me*? I fail to see that it is. It's to display your own ingenuity as interpreter.

In short, I am a firm advocate of the priority of what I call “authorial-discourse interpretation.” I concede the propriety on occasion of what I call “performance interpretation” – that is, interpretation of a text so as to have it come out true, or unified, or rife with aporia, or whatever. But authorial-discourse interpretation ought to have priority, as I describe more fully in my own *Divine Discourse*. To which it’s worth adding that those who advocate performance interpretation regularly question interpretations of their own texts by insisting that interpreters have not grasped *what they said*.

So suppose we interpret texts for what the author or editor said, rather than so as to have them come out some way that we prefer. Should we who are Christians, when interpreting the texts of non-Christians, interpret so as to discern, and then appropriate, what’s true in what is said, perhaps taking note along the way of errors, or should we interpret so as to grasp the particular contour of that person’s thought, then noting its difference from the contour of Christian thought? Should we read Plato for what’s true and to be appropriated from Plato, or for the distinct and alien contours of his thought?

My answer is: we should do both. Neither by itself is sufficient.

The first part of my reason is that there is both truth in what Plato thought, and a particular contour to his thought distinct from that of the Christian Gospel. Both are there, awaiting the interpreter’s discovery.

The foundation of Clement’s practice was his insistence that truth is not the exclusive possession of Christians – not even truth about God. Nobody is entirely blind to reality; most (maybe all) are not even blind to the reality of God. The Christian will no doubt feel that the non-Christian’s apprehension of God is for the most part deficient in one way and another, and to one degree or another. She will not – not usually, anyway – find herself *learning* something about God that she didn’t already know, or that she couldn’t have known by reading biblical exegesis or Christian theology. But when it comes to other matters, she will often find herself genuinely learning things. I am myself hesitant to embrace Clement’s explanation for all of this. Perhaps some of it is rightly ascribed to the Logos of which John speaks. But I would say that much of it is the outcome of the workings of the nature with which we human beings are endowed: our perceptual, rational, introspective, memorial nature. Either way, though, we are, of course, ultimately to ascribe truth to God.

On the other hand, Tertullian put his finger on something that Clement consistently overlooked or neglected. Plato’s thought has a

definite contour distinctively different from that of the Christian Gospel, a contour shaped not just by the way various experiences acted on various parts of his innate generic belief-forming nature, but also by the way those experiences acted on the *blend* of Plato's innate generic nature with the contingent particularities of his allegiances, commitments, convictions, and so forth. It's not just our hard-wiring, but our hard-wiring plus our programming, that accounts for what we come to believe.

It was especially Augustine, among the church fathers, who emphasized and developed this point about the ways in which our particular contingent selves shape our learning. It led him to supplement Clement's motto, faith seeking understanding (*fides quaerens intellectum*), with the more complex motto, I believe in order to understand (*credo ut intelligam*). Faith not only seeks understanding; it is a condition of the understanding it seeks. A full exploration of what Augustine meant by this, and how he argued it, would require a lengthy paper by itself. Here it must suffice to say that it was Augustine's conviction that our affections – our loves and hates – have a profound impact on our understanding. If, for example, one loves some part of earthly reality in an idolatrous way, that will skew one's understanding of God and of God's relation to humanity and the world. It may even lead to one's denial of God. Augustine was convinced, accordingly, that the right ordering of the affections that faith secures is a condition of progressing in the understanding of God, and of reality generally.

To look at the full pattern of Plato's thought is to see a pattern of thought different from that of the Christian Gospel, that was Tertullian's point. To focus on what is true in Plato's thought is to see adumbrations of, and supplements to, the Christian Gospel; that was Clement's point. Both were right. What should be added is that often the pieces cannot be cleanly abstracted from the whole; what Plato meant by the piece is often bound up with the whole, and the whole isn't true. That's an implication of the Tertullianist point, that Plato's thought is not a mere assemblage of true and false items. On the Clementine side of the matter it's to be noticed, however, that in some such cases, though what Plato said is strictly false as he meant it, nonetheless, one can see what it was in reality that he *was trying to get at*. He had his eye on something real, though he didn't see it with full clarity or describe it with full accuracy.

That was the first part of my argument for the conclusion that we need both Clementine and Tertullianist interpretation: what Clement had his eye on, and what Tertullian had his eye on, are both there. To establish that both are there is not yet, however, to establish that both should be of

concern to the Christian scholar. Something more has to be said before we can draw that conclusion.

At this point Clement and Tertullian were, in my judgment, each partly right and partly wrong. Let me begin my unraveling by speaking of the *goal* of Christian learning, as distinguished from the *strategy*.

Tertullian believed that the positive goal of Christian learning does not extend beyond the attempt to deepen one's understanding of the Christian Gospel. It's worth noting that just as Augustine agreed with Tertullian that our affections and loyalties pervasively shape our learning, so too he agreed with Tertullian on this point. Augustine's mottoes, *faith seeking understanding* and *I believe in order to understand*, are almost invariably understood by contemporary Christians as affirming the development of sociology in Christian perspective, psychology in Christian perspective, economics in Christian perspective, and so forth. They are almost invariably understood, in short, along Clementine lines. I think it decisively clear, however, that that is not how Augustine understood them. For Augustine, faith seeks to understand *that which already it believes* – a thoroughly Tertullianist point!

Never was this Tertullianist-Augustinian conviction formulated with greater precision and elegance than by that very Augustinian theologian Anselm, in his *Proslogion*. So rather than citing Augustine, let me cite Anselm. Before he sets out his proof for God's existence, Anselm addresses God with the words:

I long to understand in some degree thy truth, which my heart believes and loves. For I do not seek to understand that I may believe, but I believe in order to understand. For this also I believe – that unless I believed, I should not understand. And so, Lord, do thou, who dost give understanding to faith, give me, so far as thou knowest it to be profitable, to understand that thou art as we believe; and that thou art that which we believe.²⁷

Then, the proof finished, Anselm again addresses God: "I thank thee, gracious Lord, I thank thee; because what I formerly believed by thy bounty, I now so understand by thine illumination, that if I were unwilling to believe that thou dost exist, I should not be able not to understand this to be true."²⁸

To my claim that Augustine sided with Tertullian, and against Clement, on the positive goal of Christian learning, it might be replied that Augustine emphasizes, as Tertullian did not and Clement did, the

²⁷ *Proslogion*, 2. I use the edition translated by S. L. Deane (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1962).

²⁸ *Proslogion*, 4.

utility of pagan learning for this project of faith seeking understanding. The famous passage from *On Christian Doctrine*, in which Augustine speaks of the Israelites appropriating the gold of the Egyptians, comes to mind. But Tertullian did not deny – as we have already seen – that there is truth in the pagan philosophers. More importantly, it is to be noted that Augustine, after calling attention to the gold and silver to be found among the pagan philosophers, concludes the passage with these words: “These, therefore, the Christian, when he separates himself in spirit from the miserable fellowship of the philosophers, ought to take away from them, and to devote to their proper use in preaching the gospel.”²⁹ No hint here of the broadscoped Christian learning that Clement favored!

I am well aware, then, of disagreeing with the greatest father of the ancient church when I say that, on this issue, I side with Clement and against Augustine – and Tertullian. I do not believe that positive Christian scholarship is to be confined to understanding better what already we believe. We are allowed, and sometimes required, to seek to understand what is no part of faith, what goes beyond faith: butterflies and quarks, plate tectonics and contemporary sculpture, epistemology and leprosy.

Before I leave my defense of Clementine interpretation, let me emphasize one point that has already become clear: disagree as they did on the goal of positive Christian learning, Clement, Tertullian, and Augustine agreed on a fundamental point of strategy: whatever be the segment of reality that one is engaged in trying to understand, one consults whatever sources might be of help. And pagan philosophy may well be among those sources. Clement, Tertullian, and Augustine were all agreed that there is, to use Augustine’s metaphor, gold and silver to be found in the pagan philosophers. And should one find some relevant truth in some pagan philosopher, one does not then regret that those who are not Christian are nonetheless in touch with reality. One gives thanks to God, the author of all good things.

I have been speaking in defense of the goal and strategy of Clementine interpretation, though with an important qualification. Yes, we do look for truth in the texts of non-Christians; with this, no one disagreed, though indeed it’s much more heavily emphasized by Clement than by Tertullian, or even by Augustine. Yes, we do appropriate such truth not just for the end of understanding better what already we believe but for the end of understanding the reality in which we find ourselves – God

²⁹ *On Christian Doctrine*, 40, 60. Translated by Philip Schaff in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. II (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1976).

and God's creation. And yes, because of the faith and love that shape our lives, the learning that emerges will have its own distinct Christian contour. This last is the qualification. It's a Tertullianist-Augustinian point; not a point Clement makes.

But now to defend Tertullian's favored goal: Tertullian's strategy, so I have argued, was to interpret for the distinctive contour of Plato's thought, so as to take note of how different that is from the contour of Christian thought. (The reader will recognize, of course, that I am here using Plato to stand in for the totality of non-Christian thinkers.) The question before us now is this: Why interpret thus? Why not glean from Plato such truth as is to be found there that is useful for one's own incorporationist purposes, and then move on? Why care about the contours of Plato's thought?

A bland answer comes to mind: this too is part of the reality that the Christian intellectual is allowed to study. To this an aesthetic observation might be added: it's interesting. And a moral observation: if the Christian is going to engage in that practice of our common humanity which is scholarship, then he is thereby under obligation to honor his fellow participants by understanding as well as he can how they are thinking and where, to put it colloquially, they are "coming from."

All true, I do not doubt – especially the last point. It's a point I make to my students once a week, thereabouts. Thou must not bear false witness against other scholars, be they ancient or contemporary. Thou must not take cheap shots. Thou must not sit in judgment until thou hast done thy best to understand. Thou must earn thy right to disagree. Thou must conduct thyself as if Plato or Augustine, Clement, or Tertullian, were sitting across the table – the point being that it is much more difficult (I do not say impossible) to dishonor someone to his face.

Tertullian's goal was different from all of these, however. The difference represented *opposition* for Tertullian. It was to bring opposition to light that Tertullian thought we should interpret for the distinct contours of pagan thought and take note of how those differ from the contours of Christian thought. Apples are different from oranges; but they're not in opposition. Tertullian saw Platonic thought as not just different from Christian thought but also in opposition. Human culture, whatever else it may be, is a conflict of religious visions and loyalties, a struggle over God and the good, a contest for allegiance. And Tertullian believed with all his heart that for the health and fidelity of the Christian community, that struggle has to be engaged by its scholars and intellectuals. There are a thousand and one things going on that threaten to distract and lead

astray those who follow Christ. It's the responsibility of the scholars and intellectuals of the community to dig beneath the clutter so as to spy the fundamental dynamics at work. Typically those fundamental dynamics prove to be powerful, comprehensive systems of thought at work – philosophies. I would myself add that they may instead prove to be patterns of social organization that are only in part the application of the ideas of intellectuals. Be that as it may, however: it is then the responsibility of the scholars and intellectuals of the community to take the measure of those philosophies and join combat.

This, if I understand him at all, is what Tertullian was saying. And I agree. Culture is a struggle for allegiance. Christian learning must accordingly be Tertullianist learning. Tertullianist as well as Clementine – Clementine as well as Tertullianist.

THE ENDURING QUESTION

The question that Christian scholars and intellectuals can never be finished with pondering is how to speak and act with Christian integrity within that practice of our common humanity that is scholarship and learning. We do not, or should not, go off into our own corner to think; we participate in the practice of our common humanity. But we are not under the illusion that it is possible to participate in that practice as generic human beings; accordingly, we struggle to participate there with Christian integrity.

If nothing else, I trust my discussion has made clear that we are not the first generation to have thought about this question. Our forebears in the second century were already discussing it with a profundity both provocative and instructive. To forget or ignore their contribution would not only be to shortchange ourselves, but also to dishonor them.

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