

“The Mystery of the Trinity is unique among treatments of the doctrine of God because of the way that Vern Poythress approaches God’s attributes through the Trinity, Christ’s resurrection, and philosophical analysis of other theological approaches. Poythress does not have all the answers to the controversy between classic Christian orthodoxy and modern modifications of the view of God (and does not claim to), but his book will certainly stir up edifying reflection and conversation, and he is a model of theological contemplation and gentleness.”

—**Joel R. Beeke**, President, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary

“The divine attributes are an understudied and confused area of modern systematic theology. Dr. Poythress guides us through them and helps us to see how they relate to one another and to us as believers. He takes the Trinity as his point of departure and demonstrates how our relationship with, and experience of, the three persons in God deepens our understanding of his nature and of its relevance to us. A great achievement.”

—**Gerald Bray**, Research Professor of Divinity, Beeson Divinity School, Samford University

“At one level, this book is a valiant and thought-provoking attempt to approach the attributes of God through the doctrine of the Trinity. Other theologians have placed the Trinity at the center of their thought; this work is epistemologically braver and more comprehensive than that. But at another level, Poythress is calling for a revolutionary change in how we engage in theological reflection. While broadly endorsing the classical doctrine of God, he is suspicious of our reliance on well-defined technical terms that are required to do our work for us. He wants us to abandon our implicit reliance on Aristotelian metaphysics in favor of the shaping power of the mystery of the Trinity. Above all, he wants us to turn aside from our unquestioning reliance on ‘tight, abstract logic’ as our primary resource for ‘affirming and maintaining’ the orthodox doctrine of God. In the hands of a lesser thinker, this appeal could pave the way toward subjectivism and uncontrolled, speculative dialectics; in the hands of Poythress, this becomes an appeal to become more robustly biblical, not less. Readers may preserve their quibbles here and there, but this book is truly

transforming—a capstone to all that Vern Poythress has taught us over the last two or three decades. Read it slowly and carefully.”

—**D. A. Carson**, Emeritus Professor of New Testament, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

“The study of God should be the central preoccupation of our lives. Thus, how it is conducted is all-important. The present work is a monumental achievement. It is not certain that anyone else could have put together such marvelous material in quite the same way as Vern Poythress. He unites doctrine with praise, content with personal knowledge, theory with pastoral practicality. Above all, the reflections are thoroughly and richly scriptural. Even when examining language and meaning, Poythress’s wheelhouse, we are steeped in divine revelation and drawn into worship. While pride of place rightly goes to the consideration of God’s nature, the author is not afraid to explore the contributions and pitfalls found in some of the established theologians. When he is critical, he is nevertheless charitable. Nor does he shy away from tackling some of the besetting issues facing the church, such as God’s immutability and his covenant relation to the creature. I believe that if given the right kind of regard, this book will be life-changing.”

—**William Edgar**, Professor of Apologetics, Westminster Theological Seminary

“The history of theology has been full of controversy over some of the most important teachings of the faith, such as the person of Christ, his atonement, our justification, and the Lord’s return. But for most of this history, at least since the Nicene Creed, the doctrine of God has been an area of agreement among Christians of all traditions. Different schools of thought have differed in detail, but there has been a consensus. On this matter, polemics have been muted. Recently, however, that unanimity has been shattered, first by the ‘open theist’ movement, and then by various philosophical attempts to deal with problems in the traditional consensus: Why does Scripture speak of God’s ‘repenting’? How can God act in history when he is unchangeable? How can God be ‘simple’ when the church confesses him in three persons? The intellectual and spiritual quality of these debates has

been largely disappointing, and the exegetical proposals unpersuasive. Theological factions have developed around various ideas, challenging the orthodoxy of one another. But now Vern Poythress has written a book that could be a big step forward for us, even a way back to unity. *The Mystery of the Trinity* presents the content and spirit of the authentic biblical teaching. The author presents what the Bible says: no more and no less, with caution and reverence. Here we learn what the Bible says about God. We learn also the method and attitudes in which we should ask our questions. I enthusiastically recommend *The Mystery of the Trinity* as by far the best account of these issues. And it is a book that will turn your heart from questioning to adoration.”

—**John M. Frame**, Professor of Systematic Theology and
Philosophy Emeritus, Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando

“It has been said, rightly, that every theological assertion is surrounded with mystery. That holds true especially for the attributes of God—both for what Scripture itself teaches infallibly and, all the more, for our own fallible and limited understanding of that teaching. The challenge for our speaking about who God is—as here decidedly ‘we see in a mirror dimly’—is to speak of the sublimely majestic mysteries involved in a biblically bounded way—a way that does not go beyond yet is also intent on honoring fully what Scripture enables and entitles us to say. In this volume, Dr. Poythress meets this challenge in an exemplary and most helpful way. I commend it for its sound in-depth instruction but also, importantly, for its tone—edifying throughout and with a view to current controversies, appropriately and constructively balanced and irenic.”

—**Richard B. Gaffin Jr.**, Professor of Biblical and Systematic
Theology, Emeritus, Westminster Theological Seminary

“I confess that I am fairly new to the Poythress household (expansive as it is), and I find *The Mystery of the Trinity* quite outstanding. The work is premised on (and argues throughout) the idea that the Holy Trinity is the ontological center and absolute to which all revelation testifies. What God does in creation reflects what Father, Son, and Spirit are in eternity. Poythress charts a course between two fatal whirlpools in Christian theology—the first that of philosophically defined

transcendence, the second that of overly literalistic immanence. The author's particular concern is that classical Christian theism has too often pushed beyond biblical testimony to reinterpret the divine attributes in Aristotelian or other alien categories. Rather, Poythress humbly and incisively invites us to reappraise the mystery of the triune God and how this mystery infuses every aspect of Christian thought and life. What an engaging, supremely edifying read."

—**J. Scott Horrell**, Professor of Theological Studies, Dallas
Theological Seminary

"This is a stimulating and fascinating book. While I have some reservations about his discussion of Aquinas and its resulting implications, nevertheless Poythress raises important questions that need addressing and offers many incisive and challenging insights."

—**Robert Letham**, Professor of Systematic and Historical
Theology, Union School of Theology

"This is a work of formidable scholarship, allied to a remarkable simplicity of language and humble submission to the guidance of Scripture. It never allows us to forget that we can know God only 'in part,' that the discussion of his attributes must always stay close to the doctrine of the Trinity, and that the supreme revelation of God in action is the resurrection of Jesus Christ. While offering new light on the traditional concepts of classical theism, it also offers sure-footed guidance through the mazes of innovation, good and bad. Unfailingly reverent, it is a fine example of the principle that a solid work of theology can often be the best sort of devotional literature. Who should read it? Any Christian who can read, whether novice or genius."

—**Donald Macleod**, Edinburgh Theological Seminary

"My experience in Vern Poythress's hermeneutics course at the start of my time in seminary was life-shaping—I have never read or taught the Bible quite the same way since. With the publication of his new book *The Mystery of the Trinity*, Dr. Poythress applies his deep knowledge of Scripture, his well-informed knowledge of historical theology, and his brilliant mind to some of the most difficult controversies in the theology of the divine attributes. By grounding his approach in

what the Bible tells us about intra-Trinitarian relationships within the Godhead, he brings fresh understanding to ancient mysteries and contemporary issues in our knowledge of God.”

—**Philip Graham Ryken**, President, Wheaton College

“We need a fresh vision of God as he has revealed himself—perfect in his transcendent love and intimate relationality. Theological terms are needed to shape our vision of God aright. All too often, books about these important concepts—*simplicity* in particular—are overly complex or fail to take due account of God’s Trinitarian nature. This volume is of great value because of its accessibility and sensitivity to God’s revelation of himself as Trinity. I encourage you to read it and expand your vision of God.”

—**Peter Sanlon**, Rector, Emmanuel Anglican Church, Tunbridge Wells, UK

“In this unique study, Vern Poythress considers the person and attributes of the triune God—who he is, how he communicates, and how we might communicate about God more clearly. Professor Poythress offers a book that is at once thoughtful, pastoral, and meticulously exegetical. There is no topic more important than the doctrine of God. Those who want to know him better will be richly rewarded by reading this book.”

—**Chad Van Dixhoorn**, Professor of Church History, Westminster Theological Seminary; Director, Craig Center for the Study of the Westminster Standards

“Christian theologians *must* speak in personal terms of the God who created us in his image. Christian theologians *must not* speak in worldly terms of the God who created and is over the world. Beginning with this oldest of all theological tensions, Poythress sets forth a middle, more biblical way between classical theism and views that introduce change or temporality into God. The emphasis on Jesus Christ as the mediation of divine transcendence and immanence is particularly welcome.”

—**Kevin J. Vanhoozer**, Research Professor of Systematic Theology, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

“The doctrine of the attributes of God constitutes one of the most important, albeit difficult, topics of Christian theology. In contemporary theology, considerable debate has focused on the compatibility between classical theism’s view of God’s attributes and the biblical revelation of the triune God who reveals himself in creation and redemption. Poythress’s study aims to address this contemporary debate by offering what he calls an ‘enhancement,’ not a mere ‘reiteration,’ of classical theism. On the one hand, he offers a defense of several features of classical theism in the face of unbiblical alternatives such as open theism. On the other hand, he expresses a willingness to modify features of classical theism that fail to account for the significance of God’s Trinitarian being and life, especially as these are revealed in God’s actions toward his creatures. Throughout his study, Poythress emphasizes the importance of the Trinity for our formulation of God’s attributes, including the way in which these attributes are reflected in the respective works of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. For readers looking for a treatment of God’s attributes that is remarkably clear, biblically grounded, and historically informed—this is the book for you.”

—**Cornelis P. Venema**, President, Professor of Doctrinal Studies,
Mid-America Reformed Seminary

“It is a delight to see Vern Poythress tackle the central doctrine of the divine attributes. He expertly and clearly leads the reader through the perplexities of the doctrine, deftly identifying the underlying principles and rules of speech, biblical foundations, and philosophical difficulties. Poythress balances a classical approach, which anchors the attributes in the divine essence, with a personalist framing of the attributes in the light of the Trinity.”

—**Adonis Vidu**, Professor of Theology, Gordon-Conwell
Theological Seminary

The
MYSTERY
of the
TRINITY

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*A Trinitarian Approach
to the Attributes of God*

VERN S. POYTHRESS


P U B L I S H I N G
P.O. BOX 817 • PHILLIPSBURG • NEW JERSEY 08865-0817

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Scripture quotations marked (KJV) are from the Holy Bible, King James Version (Authorized Version). First published in 1611.

Italics within Scripture quotations indicate emphasis added.

In the 2021 printing, the author revised content in “What It May Take: A Personal Reflection” (591–97) for the purpose of clarification.

Printed in the United States of America

ISBN: 978–1–62995–651–0 (hardback)

ISBN: 978–1–62995–652–7 (epub)

ISBN: 978–1–62995–653–4 (mobi)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Poythress, Vern S., author.

Title: The mystery of the trinity : a trinitarian approach to the attributes of god / Vern S. Poythress.

Description: Phillipsburg, New Jersey : P&R Publishing Company, 2020. | Includes bibliographical references and index. | Summary: “Starting with the doctrine of the Trinity, Vern Poythress addresses six significant challenges concerning God’s attributes, helping us to appreciate more deeply the mystery that lies in each of them”-- Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2020011569 | ISBN 9781629956510 (hardcover) | ISBN 9781629956527 (epub) | ISBN 9781629956534 (mobi)

Subjects: LCSH: Trinity. | God (Christianity)--Attributes.

Classification: LCC BT111.3 .P697 2020 | DDC 231/.044--dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020011569>

To my wife, Diane

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Foreword

ANYONE GLANCING AT the titles of the books that Vern Sheridan Poythress has written is bound to be impressed by the sheer variety of topics—from language to hermeneutics, from the reliability of Scripture to its relationship to science, from the book of Revelation to the doctrine of the Trinity (and much else). One might be forgiven for thinking that the good professor is simply a polymath with a perpetually inquiring mind interested in a wide variety of subjects. Dr. Poythress is indeed a polymath, but in fact the diverse topics on which he has written belong to a single tapestry with one great underlying theme. And this comes into sharp focus in this magnum opus, for it is the theme of all themes—God himself.

In *The Mystery of the Trinity*, we find ourselves climbing theology's Mount Everest. The ascent is exhilarating, but it can also be daunting. Such are the intellectual challenges that it is easy to lose one's footing—and many have. Dr. Poythress does not pretend that the way is easy; but in these pages he carefully leads us in the ascent step by step, sometimes indeed with almost baby steps. That he can do this is an indication of the quality of his intellect; that he wants to do it for as many readers as will climb with him as far as they can is an expression of that intellect's pastoral instinct.

All of Vern Poythress's work is marked by a concern to penetrate to the inner logic of things. He is, after all, mathematician turned theologian. Valedictorian in his class at California Institute of Technology (having graduated at breakneck speed), he earned his PhD in

mathematics from Harvard and then taught briefly before shifting gears from the logic sought by the mathematician to the inner logic and coherence expressed in God, Trinity, Bible, and gospel.

To this task he has brought a mind well disciplined by his earlier calling—patiently working through each logical stage in his exposition. But now there is the added incentive—not only the aspiration to glorify God (for surely mathematicians may also do that!), but also the desire to serve the church of Christ directly by helping us to clarify our thinking and bring it into conformity with all that God has revealed.

No doubt in the ascent of the theological mountain some readers may feel that they are running out of oxygen and reaching the limit of their ability to keep climbing. Even so, they will have gained much and probably been helped to climb higher than they have ever done before. Meanwhile, seasoned theological mountaineers will find the patient and careful reasoning here to be of significant value in helping them find a safe path through some of the deepest questions in the theological encyclopedia. So there is help and encouragement here for us all.

I for one am grateful that now, in *The Mystery of the Trinity*, Dr. Poythress has turned his attention directly to issues on the doctrine of God. Among the book's virtues, several are perhaps worth highlighting by way of introduction.

First and foremost, the exposition is anchored in biblical theology. Everything is drawn back into this center and read through Scripture's carefully crafted spectacle lenses.

Second, Dr. Poythress is careful to safeguard the doctrine of God from a false subordination to any alien philosophy. While by no means indifferent to serious intellectual exploration, or the legitimacy of transposing biblical teaching into categories that are not specifically employed in Scripture, he recognizes the native tendency of non-Christian thinking to begin with man, rather than with God, to make God in man's image, and therefore never attain to the true knowledge of God himself. This stands in sharp contrast to a truly Christian way of thinking that recognizes God as the archetype, the original, and man as the ectype, the miniature image, which alone can justify our use of terrestrial categories and language to speak of God.

Third, Dr. Poythress recognizes that while we can truly come to know God, our conceptual powers can never fully comprehend him,

nor can our vocabulary close down, as it were, over him as though we could understand him exhaustively; *finitum non capax infiniti*. True, the use of terrestrial language to speak of the celestial Lord is theologically justifiable, but when we speak of him, we realize that our words must be allowed to open out into God himself and be redefined by his own infinite being. We thus may come to speak of him and to know him while recognizing that we never know him as he knows himself. Our knowledge of him is, and indeed always will be, creaturely.

Then, fourth, these pages, marked as they are by intellectual rigor, also display an intellectual humility. We usually think of humility as a moral quality, but at root it is a matter of having “the mind of Christ” (1 Cor. 2:16). Humility, “true lowliness of heart” (as Bianco da Siena put it), affects our epistemology as well as our lifestyle. This helps explain why the atmosphere in these pages is intellectually rigorous but also pastorally irenic. That is true of the way that Dr. Poythress respectfully handles (and at times disagrees with) the views of great figures in the Christian church (Augustine, Aquinas, Charnock, Owen, and Turretin all pass before our eyes in these pages). It also marks his approach to issues debated in our own day. And because he is concerned for the church’s welfare, we readers should allow him, physicianlike, to poke and probe our own “body of divinity” to expose any weakness or even sickness with a view to the recovery of health.

Dr. Poythress’s books get longer and longer! This one is no exception. It is indeed a *magnum opus*. But then, it is written about the greatest subject of all. And if it is true that, if all Jesus did were to be written down, the whole world could not contain the books (John 21:25), then even the longest work of theology will still leave room for further growth in the knowledge of God. So *The Mystery of the Trinity* does not pretend to be the last word, but it does contain many words that will encourage all fellow climbers of theology’s Everest to continue toward the summit.

Here, then, is a work to challenge us to think more clearly about God—and a means by which we may know him, love him, trust him, and serve him more fully and indeed even to “rejoice in God” himself (Rom. 5:11). For this, I have no doubt, is its author’s chief desire. *Soli Deo Gloria!*

Sinclair B. Ferguson

Acknowledgments

IN WRITING THIS BOOK, I appreciate the many insights I have gained from reading, from oral instruction, and from people who have undertaken specific interaction with drafts of the manuscript. I particularly appreciate the input from students in a class at Westminster Theological Seminary, in which they cheerfully undertook to go through the manuscript and offer critiques. I am also grateful to my wife for her editing, and then for the work of P&R Publishing.

Introduction: *God's Attributes and the Trinity*

WE ARE SEEKING in this book to deepen our knowledge of God in his majesty. Knowing God involves deep challenges because God is infinite; it is impossible for human beings to understand him completely.

Some Challenges

We will focus on some challenges concerning God's attributes. All the challenges have to do in some way with God's relation to the world and things in the world. Here are a number of the challenges:

(1) How can God be independent and yet have relations to the world and things in the world? (See fig. i.1.)

This difficulty is especially acute in Thomas Aquinas's treatment of the names of God:

Since therefore God is outside the whole order of creation, and all creatures are ordered to Him, and not conversely, it is manifest that creatures are really related to God Himself; whereas in God there is *no real relation to creatures*, but a relation only in idea, inasmuch as creatures are referred to Him.¹

1. Thomas Aquinas, *The "Summa theologica" of St. Thomas Aquinas*, 2nd rev. ed. (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1920), 1.166, [1a] pt. I, Q. 13, art. 7, "I

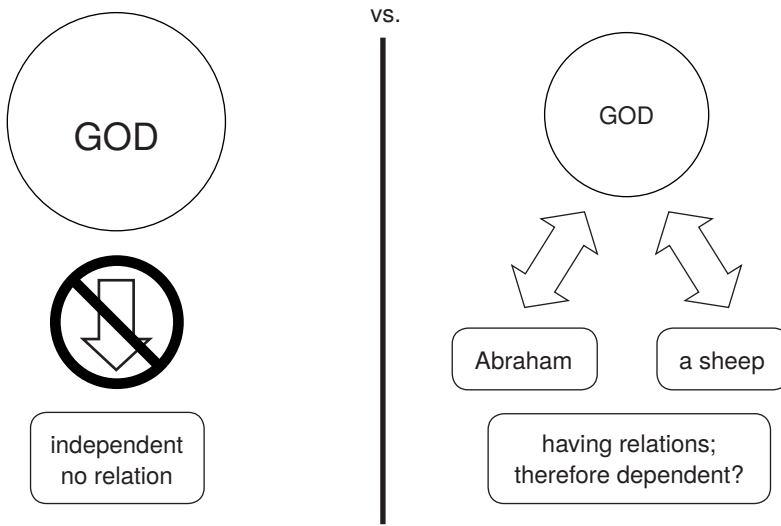


Fig. i.1. God's Independence versus Having Relations

If God's relation to the world has difficulties, it produces difficulties concerning other issues that touch on that relation.

(2) How can God be immutable (not able to change) and act toward the world?

Acting toward the world may seem to imply a change in God as he acts. So how are God's actions—actions such as speaking and ruling the world—consistent with his immutability?

(3) How can God be eternal and act in a differentiated way at different points in time?

God sends each of the Egyptian plagues at a distinct point in time. Moreover, God is angry with some people at some times and not with those same people at other times. One crucial example is

answer," *italics mine*. Another English translation is Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode; New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964). The latter translation supplies parallel columns in Latin and English, and much supplemental material. The 1920 translation is also found in its 1947 edition online, with parallel columns in Latin and English: <https://aquinas101.thomisticinstitute.org/st-index>, accessed March 16, 2020. All quotations are from the 1920 edition, unless otherwise noted, because on the average it is more literal. In footnotes, for the benefit of non-specialists, we have decided to also provide physical volume and page numbers from the 1920 English translation. All citations refer to part 1 (1a in standard notation).

that God had wrath toward us before we were in Christ, and now is gracious toward us and pleased with us for the sake of Christ. Different descriptions appropriately describe God at different times. How can these differentiated acts be consistent with God's being eternal?

(4) How can descriptions that some people see as "unworthy of God" be used by Scripture to describe him? God is angry, regrets, and is grieved (Deut. 4:21; 1 Sam. 15:11; Eph. 4:30).

These descriptions obviously compare God to human beings who have anger, or regret, or are grieved. Hence, they involve in some way relations between descriptions of God and analogous descriptions of human beings.

(5) How can finite man truly know the infinite God?

How can human beings know God when they can never know him completely (comprehensively)?

(6) How can God's attributes be identical with God and also be distinguished from one another?

This question 6 arises because of the doctrine of God's *simplicity*. The word *simplicity* here has a special, technical meaning. It means that God is not composed of parts. According to some interpretations of divine simplicity, simplicity implies that all of God's attributes are identical to him. Otherwise, each attribute would function like a "part" of God, which might conceivably be detached. If each attribute is identical to God, it seems that the different attributes must also be identical to one another. And then how do we any longer know what they mean?

Addressing the Challenges

We propose to address all six challenges by using the doctrine of the Trinity. The doctrine of the Trinity contains unfathomable mysteries because God is infinite, and we who are human cannot comprehend him. That is, we cannot understand him completely. So appealing to the doctrine of the Trinity does not dissolve any of the six challenges. It does not result in a transparent answer with no remaining mystery. Nevertheless, it may be useful to see the relation of the six challenges to the Trinity, in order that we may more deeply appreciate the mystery that lies in each one of them.

We will also consider other responses to the six challenges, involving appeal to analogies and multiple perspectives.

Answering the Challenges

Responding to the challenges will take some time. But to indicate the direction that we are going, it may be useful at the beginning to summarize the responses to each of the six challenges in turn.

(1) How can God be independent and yet have relations to the world and things in the world?

The doctrine of the Trinity says that God is one God and also is three persons. The three persons are God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Moreover, each person has relations to the other two. “The Father loves the Son” (John 3:35; 5:20). The Father knows the Son and the Son knows the Father (Matt. 11:27). The “Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God” (1 Cor. 2:10).

The relations between persons are the foundation for God’s establishing relations outside himself with created things.

(2) How can God be immutable and act toward the world?

God’s immutability is not a static immobility. God is eternally active, in that the Father loves the Son, in the Spirit, and eternally speaks the eternal Word (John 1:1). This eternal activity includes activity involving (analogically speaking) a relation of an actor to a recipient. This relational activity is the foundation for God’s acts outside himself. God’s activity within himself is a kind of archetype, the original pattern. This pattern is reflected in an ectype, that is, a derivative from the pattern, when he acts toward the world. He creates the world; he sustains it; and he rules over it. In particular, the eternal begetting of the Son is the archetype for the incarnation. The eternal speaking of the Word is the archetype for God’s speaking to create the world: “Let there be light” (Gen. 1:3; see Ps. 33:6).

(3) How can God be eternal and act in a differentiated way at different points in time?

God’s eternity is not a mere negativity, according to which he would be isolated from time. Rather, God is eternally active. Moreover, his acts fit within *contexts*. The Father loves the Son in the context of the giving of the Holy Spirit (John 3:34–35). This “context,”

of course, is a permanent, eternal reality. The Father knows the Son and the Son knows the Father, in the eternal context of the searching activity of the Holy Spirit (Matt. 11:27; 1 Cor. 2:10).

After God has created the world, his activity toward the world is a reflection of his wisdom in Christ (Col. 2:3). He acts toward the world in a wise way. In his wisdom, he takes into account the contexts in which he acts. He acts in a way that is differentiated according to the context of the world. For example, he punishes those who at the time deserve punishment. He blesses those to whom he is favorable because of Christ (a context).

(4) How can descriptions that some people see as “unworthy of God” be used by Scripture to describe him? God is angry, regrets, and is grieved (Deut. 4:21; 1 Sam. 15:11; Eph. 4:30).

Language of being angry, regretting, and being grieved is analogical² language. It is not language that has precisely the *same* meaning when used for God as it does when used for mankind. God does not regret in the same way that man regrets (Num. 23:19; 1 Sam. 15:29). An analogy is not an identity. The meaning of the term *regret* can vary with context. And in the context of describing God, its meaning must be in harmony with everything else that we know about God from the rest of the Bible.

The foundation for such analogical language lies in the creation of man in the image of God (Gen. 1:26–27). A considerable amount of language describing human activities can also describe divine activities, by virtue of the analogy established when God created man in his image. In every case, there is no pure identity of meaning, but analogy. The archetype for creating man in the image of God is the divine Son, who is the eternal Image of God (Col. 1:15; Heb. 1:3).

(5) How can finite man truly know the infinite God?

Man's knowledge is analogical to God's knowledge, based on the foundation of the image of God. The image of God belongs to two levels, as indicated in point 4 above. The divine Son is the eternal Image of God, and man is the created image.

2. The words *analogous*, *analogical*, and *analogy* in this book have their ordinary meanings; they are not directly related to technical discussions about *analogy of being*.

(6) How can God's attributes be identical with God and also be distinguished from one another?

God is one God. But there are distinctions in God, namely, the distinctions between distinct persons of the Trinity. These distinctions are the foundation for distinctions when God displays himself and his attributes in the world, and when distinct terms are used to designate distinct attributes.

The Plan of Exploration

Because we are confronting mysteries, it is not so easy to fully appreciate the answers right away. We plan to arrive at these answers by a number of gradual steps. The steps include some attention to Aristotle's metaphysics because it is not based on the Trinity and has had an adverse effect on the Christian discussion of the attributes of God.

First, we discuss briefly the resources that we are going to use, and what it means to know God (chaps. 1–2).

Second, we confirm that Scripture teaches that God has certain attributes (chaps. 3–9). We deal with only a few: absoluteness, infinity, omnipresence, eternity, immutability, the knowledge of God, and simplicity. The list could be greatly expanded. We deal with a sample in order to illustrate how people might proceed with other attributes.

Third, we briefly show that the Bible teaches the mystery of the Trinity (chaps. 10–12).

Fourth, we show how God communicates in language. This communication has Trinitarian differentiation (chaps. 13–18).

Fifth, we show some problems in Aristotle's philosophical system (chaps. 19–24). His reasoning does not start with the Trinity. It introduces terms and ways of thinking that are subtly at odds with the Trinity.

Sixth, we show by a short selection of thinkers how Aristotle's system has subtly influenced the history of treatment of the doctrine of God (chaps. 25–34).

Seventh, we show how the doctrine of the Trinity can be used positively to address issues concerning the relation of God to the world (chaps. 35–43).

Eighth, we provide explicitly Trinitarian reflections on a number of attributes of God (chaps. 44–48).

In the appendices, we consider a current controversy over the attributes of God, with suggestions for how people might move forward. We also consider two special issues: the question of knowing the essence of God (app. D) and the question of the meaning of accommodation (app. E).

Key Terms

accommodation³

analogy

angry

archetype

Aristotle

attributes (of God)

context

derivative

differentiated acts

distinction

ectype

essence

eternal

eternal begetting

finite

identity

image of God

immutable

incarnation

independent

infinite

knowing God

mystery

simplicity

Trinity

3. Key terms in bold are defined in the glossary at the end of this volume.

Study Questions

1. What are some of the basic questions that arise about God's relation to us and to the world?
2. What are some of the attributes of God that may seem to be in tension with God's acting toward the world and being related to the world?
3. In what way is the distinction between archetype and ectype important?
4. What are the challenges in understanding how human beings can know God?
5. Why is the doctrine of the Trinity important in addressing questions about God's relation to the world?

For Further Reading

- Berkhof, Louis. *Systematic Theology*. 4th rev. ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939. Pt. 1, chap. 8.
- Poythress, Vern S. *Knowing and the Trinity: How Perspectives in Human Knowledge Imitate the Trinity*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2018. Chap. 6.

PART 1

BEGINNING TO CONSIDER GOD

We discuss the resources we will use and the reality
and limitations of our knowledge of God.

Resources

WE PLAN TO reach our goal by going to the Bible and seeing what it teaches. The Bible is the infallible Word of God, while other writings are fallible.¹ But under the direction of the Bible, we are also going to try to learn from three strands of thinking in the history of the church. All three strands attempt to base their thinking on what is in the Bible.

The first strand, which we will call *classical Christian theism*, consists in centuries of meditations on the attributes of God, such as his eternity, his power, his knowledge, and his holiness. There is mystery here. In describing God in this book, we use the terms *attributes* and *characteristics* in roughly the same way, in line with the traditional term *perfections*. Omniscience, love, righteousness, omnipotence, and eternity are attributes or perfections of God. We also use the term *character*: God's character includes all his attributes. We do not include among the attributes any and every state of affairs involving God, such as the fact that God appointed David the son of Jesse to succeed Saul as king of Israel. Later on, we will consider the challenge of dealing with complex language about God

1. It would take a long detour to try to defend the divine authority of the Bible in the face of the multitude of objections, philosophical, historical, scientific, sociological, ethical, and religious, not to mention the wider atmospheric resistance subtly but forcefully working in Western cultures. We must be content to refer readers to books that address the nature of the Bible directly: John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2010), and many others.

that shows who he is partly through describing what he does (such as creating the world).

The second strand is the teaching on the Trinity. We will use this second strand to help enrich our understanding of the first strand. In the process, we will also try to criticize defects in the framework for the doctrine of God that have been carried over from Greek philosophy, primarily Aristotle.

The third strand consists in the development of *biblical theology*, or the appreciation of the history of special revelation, in a way set forth by Geerhardus Vos.² Building on this strand, we use the theme of the resurrection of Christ as a center point in considering the attributes of God.³ (See fig. 1.1.)

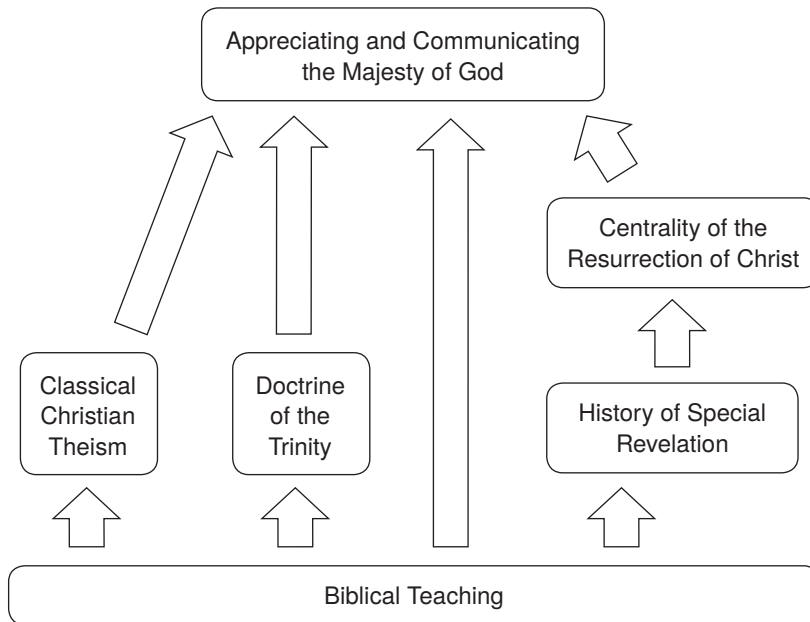


Fig. 1.1. Contributions to Growing in Understanding the Majesty of God

2. Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1975). Vos had predecessors, but his work sets forth the idea of *biblical theology* in a clearer way.

3. Richard B. Gaffin Jr., *Resurrection and Redemption: A Study in Paul's Soteriology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987). Even though our method involves some innovation, we must leave most of the discussion concerning method

Readers do not need to be familiar with any of these three strands in order to profit from this book. But these three strands have helped in producing the book.

In appendices we will also briefly consider a fourth strand, a recent controversy between some adherents of classical Christian theism and some advocates of other forms of expression. The controversy concerns whether our theological reasoning today should reinforce previous generations of classical Christian theistic formulations, or be enhanced, or be changed in directions other than the classical formulations.

How Can God Be Known?

Let us begin with a fundamental question: Can we know God? Can we know him in his majesty, the God who made the world, the God of infinite wisdom? How can we know him?

For thousands of years, God has made himself known to human beings through the things that he has made (Rom. 1:18–23). “For his [God’s] invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made” (v. 20). For thousands of years, in every culture of the world, human beings have suppressed the knowledge that God has given—they have turned to idols. They

to other books: Vern S. Poythress, *Symphonic Theology: The Validity of Multiple Perspectives in Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2001); Vern S. Poythress, *God-Centered Biblical Interpretation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1999); Vern S. Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language—A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009); Vern S. Poythress, *Redeeming Sociology: A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011); Vern S. Poythress, *Inerrancy and Worldview: Answering Modern Challenges to the Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012); Vern S. Poythress, *Logic: A God-Centered Approach to the Foundation of Western Thought* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013); Vern S. Poythress, *Redeeming Philosophy: A God-Centered Approach to the Big Questions* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014); Vern S. Poythress, *Reading the Word of God in the Presence of God: A Handbook for Biblical Interpretation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016); Vern S. Poythress, *The Lordship of Christ: Serving Our Savior All the Time, in All of Life, with All of Our Heart* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016); Vern S. Poythress, *Knowing and the Trinity: How Perspectives in Human Knowledge Imitate the Trinity* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2018).

“exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things” (v. 23). It is a sorry story.

The History of Redemption

One people was different. In God’s grace, he chose Abram and made a covenant with him and his offspring.⁴ The Jewish people descended from Abram. To this people God gave true knowledge of himself, through his special words and deeds, now recorded in the Old Testament. Not all the Jewish people responded to God’s words and deeds with true faith and understanding, but some did (Num. 12:7–8; Deut. 29:4; 2 Sam. 23:2–7). In the fullness of time (Gal. 4:4), in fulfillment of promises that God had made in the Old Testament, God sent Christ into the world to redeem us from the futility of idols. (See fig. 1.2.)

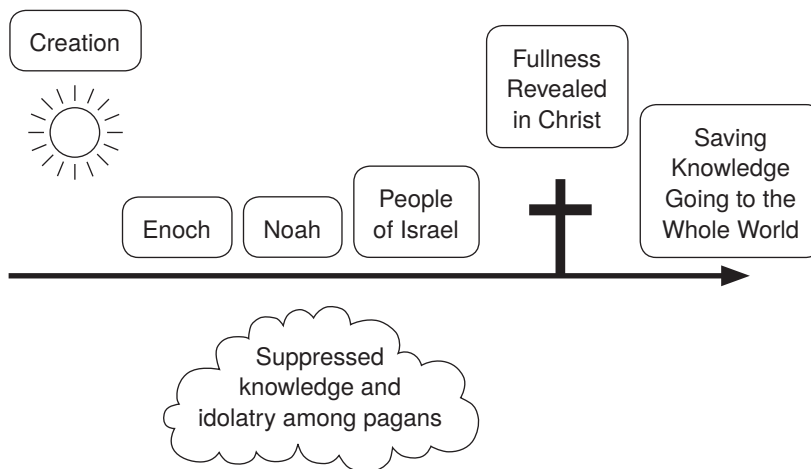


Fig. 1.2. History of Human Knowledge of God

God has sent out to the nations the gospel announcing Christ’s life, death, resurrection, and ascension. Through the Spirit of God, who unites us to Christ and changes hearts, people are being redeemed

4. Earlier, God had showed favor to Adam and Eve and to Abel, Enoch, and Noah, among others.

from the wrath of God and restored to spiritual fellowship with God. By believing the gospel of Christ and receiving the Word of God in Scripture, they have received the truth and sound knowledge of God:

All things have been handed over to me [Jesus Christ] by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and *anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him*. (Matt. 11:27)

And this is eternal life, that they *know you, the only true God*, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. (John 17:3)

The climax of redemption and the climax of revelation of God came when Jesus Christ came into the world (Heb. 1:1–3). But even before that climax, in Old Testament times, people came to know God and to praise him in his majesty:

The LORD reigns; he is robed in majesty;
the LORD is robed; he has put on strength as his belt.
Yes, the world is established; it shall never be moved.
Your throne is established from of old;
you are from everlasting. (Ps. 93:1–2)

In the New Testament, such praise continues:

To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen. (1 Tim. 1:17)

Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen. (Rev. 7:12)

Praising God

The wonder of who God is has been summarized over the centuries in many ways. It is celebrated in poetry such as Psalm 93, just quoted above. David expresses his awe toward God in prayer:

Blessed are you, O LORD, the God of Israel our father, forever and ever. Yours, O LORD, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty, for all that is in the heavens and in the earth is yours. Yours is the kingdom, O LORD, and you are exalted as head above all. Both riches and honor come from you, and you rule over all. In your hand are power and might, and in your hand it is to make great and to give strength to all. And now we thank you, our God, and praise your glorious name.

But who am I, and what is my people, that we should be able thus to offer willingly? For all things come from you, and of your own have we given you. (1 Chron. 29:10–14)

Classical Christian Theism

The wonder of God is also summarized in what has been called *classical theism*, that is, meditations on God in connection with his characteristics, his attributes. The words *immortal* and *invisible* in 1 Timothy 1:17 designate attributes or characteristics of God. Classical theism discusses these attributes and explains their meaning. Classical theism has been precious to many people because, like David, they have known and experienced who God is in his majesty. The language of classical theism has served in their lives to deepen their knowledge of God and their praise and service to God.

Psalms 93 and 1 Timothy 1:17 are both instances in which God himself is speaking, because the Bible is the Word of God. They are particularly precious and noteworthy because when God speaks, we do not need to remain in doubt about who he is. He is who he says he is.

After the completion of the Bible, other people have imitated the language of Scripture and have meditated on the attributes of God. These later meditations are comprised in what we are calling *classical theism*. In this book, we want to enrich the meaning of classical theism by using truths about the Trinity and by focusing on the resurrection of Christ as the path to knowledge of God.

God, the true God, is one God in three persons—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. God revealed himself progressively through the course of the Old Testament. He was always the Trinitarian God.

The Old Testament already contains some signs of a differentiation of persons within God (e.g., Gen. 1:2, 26). But only in the New Testament, at the climax of redemption and the climax of revelation, with the coming of Christ, did it become more obvious and evident that this God is one God in three persons. To indicate the distinctiveness of who God is, we might use the phrase “classical *Christian* theism.”⁵

Included among the expressions of classical Christian theism we find academic reasonings about God. As one principal example, we may take the work of Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*.⁶ The design of these reasonings is to confirm and strengthen people’s knowledge and praise of God, as well as to refute objectors.

But we who dwell on earth are still subject to sinful temptations, including intellectual ones. The academic reasonings could be twisted in at least two ways: (1) People might treat the reasonings as *merely* academic, and in a way that would isolate them from personal communion with God that includes joy and praise. Reading and thinking about God might become only a narrow intellectual exercise. (2) People who read might think that they can by human rational power *dictate* to God what he must be like.

Francis Turretin and others who wrote about classical Christian theism did not intend these misuses. Nevertheless, the misuses can arise because of remaining sin.

This book is for believers in Christ, because it is you who have received a true, saving knowledge of God. We all need to grow in appreciating the positive benefits of classical Christian theism. It serves as an explanation and a reminder of who God is in his majesty, and as a stimulus to personal, intimate communion with him. But we should be aware of the two temptations mentioned above. To deal with the first, this book includes reminders of our personal relation

5. Gerald Bray, *The Doctrine of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 40–45.

6. Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison Jr., trans. George Musgrave Giger, 3 vols. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1992). Volume 1 contains the material on God and his attributes. For convenience, citations from Turretin will include both the volume and page number from the English translation, and the division by topic (uppercase Roman numerals, I), question (lowercase Roman numerals, i), and paragraph (Arabic numerals, 1).

to God and the goal of serving him with praise. To deal with the second, we will give ourselves at the beginning some reminders about our subordination to God—a point that a healthy understanding of classical Christian theism should reinforce.

And then there is a third issue—how does the language of classical Christian theism take on its life from the foundations of human language and thought in God himself, in his Trinitarian nature, as revealed in Jesus Christ our Lord for our salvation? We will focus on this issue later on (part 4).

God's Making Himself Known in the Resurrection of Christ

We will add one more feature, by considering how the resurrection of Christ testifies to God and deepens our understanding of him.

Why focus on the resurrection of Christ? The resurrection of Christ, together with the ascension of Christ to the Father and his rule at the right hand of the Father, offers a climactic revelation of God. How so? The resurrection of Christ brings us salvation in all its richness. And this salvation is given by God, worked out by God, and applied to us by God. God shows who he is in the process of saving us. And the resurrection is no exception. It shows who God is—a God who gives life, who is merciful to sinners, who plans the end from the beginning, and who has infinite power.

The resurrection has a central role in the New Testament. It is the culmination of the story of the life of Christ in the Gospels. It is a prominent point in the preaching in the book of Acts. It is the basis for the pouring out of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:32–33). It has a weighty role in Paul's writings because Paul sees the resurrection as the decisive turning point in history that brought about the transition to a new era of history, the era of the age to come. This age to come has already dawned in the resurrection of Christ, because he is the fountainhead and source of the life in the age to come (as contrasted with “the present evil age,” Gal. 1:4).⁷

Christ is not dead but alive. Christ reigns now as the living Christ, who provides to all who come to him all the blessings of salvation:

7. Gaffin, *Resurrection and Redemption*.

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ *with every spiritual blessing* in the heavenly places” (Eph. 1:3). Christ announces to John, “I died, and behold I am alive *forevermore*, and I have the keys of Death and Hades” (Rev. 1:18). He has defeated death. He has the power over death (“the keys”). He gives his eternal life to those who trust in him:

I am the resurrection and the *life*. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall *never die*. (John 11:25–26)

For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have *eternal life*, and I will *raise him up* on the last day. (John 6:40)

Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has *eternal life*, and I will *raise him up* on the last day. (John 6:54)

Now, Christ’s resurrection was the resurrection of his body, which belongs to his human nature. He is fully human, with a full and complete human nature. He is also fully divine, with a full and complete divine nature. He is God and man. This joining of two natures in one person is a deep mystery.

The resurrection involves the transformation of Christ’s body from death to life. That transformation is the basis for our transformation. We are raised with him spiritually, even now, to walk in new life (Rom. 6:4; Col. 3:1–17). We will be raised in transformed bodies when he returns (Phil. 3:20–21; 1 Thess. 4:13–18). We receive these blessings from God the Father, who gives them to us in Christ. So Christ’s resurrection and the blessings it contains reveal not only his human nature, in the transformation of his body, but also his divine nature. They reveal who God is.

The resurrection of Christ is the turning point in the history of the world, where new creation begins. But it is also the turning point for each individual Christian, because we are united to Christ and experience the benefits of his resurrection. We are raised to new life, already, in Christ (Rom. 6:4; Col. 3:1–4).

The resurrection of Christ has a central role in our knowledge of God in at least three respects. First, it displays openly and climactically who God is in his infinite power and majesty (Eph. 1:19–21). Second, it displays who Christ is, as the divine Son of God who mediates the knowledge of God the Father (Matt. 11:27; Rom. 1:4). Third, it provides the foundation for our new life. The Holy Spirit joins us to Christ and his resurrection (Rom. 8:11). The Holy Spirit renews our whole being, including our minds, so that we may know the things that God has freely given us (1 Cor. 2:12). So we can profit by looking at the resurrection of Christ as we consider the attributes of God.

Considering the resurrection also alerts us to the Trinity. All three persons of the Trinity are involved in Christ's resurrection. They are involved in a differentiated way:

If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you. (Rom. 8:11)

God the Father raised Jesus, who is God and man. Through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, Christ's resurrection life gets imparted to us.

This Trinitarian differentiation in the resurrection will help to remind us that all our knowledge of God and his attributes has Trinitarian differentiation.

Key Terms

Aristotle⁸

attributes (of God)

the Bible

biblical theology

character (of God)

classical Christian theism

eternity

8. Key terms in bold are defined in the glossary at the end of this volume.

infallible
love
omnipotence
omniscience
perfections
resurrection (of Christ)
righteousness
Trinity

Study Questions

1. What are some prime resources in learning about God and coming to know him more fully?
2. In what way is the Bible a unique source for knowing God?
3. What is classical Christian theism, and why is it important to reckon with in studying God?
4. What is the Trinity?
5. Why is the resurrection of Christ an important focus when we are studying the doctrine of God?
6. What is biblical theology, and how does it contribute to knowing God?
7. What are some of the ways in which human knowledge of God can be corrupted?
8. What are the implications of Romans 1:18–23 for how we think about human knowledge of God?

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- Vos, Geerhardus. *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments*. Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1975. Chap. 1.

Prayer

May the only true God, God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, magnify his greatness in us, and magnify also our understanding of his greatness!

2

Knowing God

WE BEGIN BY considering how we can know God and what the limits of our knowledge are. God is infinite in majesty, as David confessed: “you are exalted as head above all” (1 Chron. 29:11). We human beings are on earth: “For we are strangers before you and sojourners, as all our fathers were. Our days on the earth are like a shadow, and there is no abiding” (v. 15). God’s thoughts are above ours:

For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD.
For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts. (Isa. 55:8–9)

At the same time, we *can* know God, because God has chosen to reveal himself and to give true knowledge: “All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses *to reveal him*” (Matt. 11:27).

Transcendence and Immanence in Knowledge

In thinking about God, we need to bear in mind who he is. We affirm two complementary truths: (1) God exceeds the grasp of our

minds and thoughts; (2) we know him truly through his revelation to us.

The first of these truths is an expression of God's *transcendence*. God is exalted above us and above our knowledge. Only God knows himself comprehensively. As human beings, we do know him. But we do not know him completely. We do not know him as he knows himself (Isa. 40:28; Rom. 11:33). In the classical language of Christian theology, God is *incomprehensible*—incomprehensible to us, not to himself. If we truly understand God's transcendence, it encourages us to resist the temptation to dictate what God must be like, according to our own notions of what we would like God to be. Instead, we humble ourselves before God and stand in awe of him.

The second truth tells us that God's revelation is a reliable source of knowledge. God comes to us and is *immanent*.¹ He draws near to us. In Christ, God is "God with us" (Matt. 1:23). God in his power and wisdom has crafted his revelation so that it accomplishes what he designed it for (Isa. 55:11). God actually makes himself known (Heb. 8:11).

This second truth is in harmony with the first. To humble ourselves before God implies humbling ourselves to receive his revelation for what it is—fully trustworthy, fully true, and expressing faithfully not only who God is but also how he relates to us. God's revelation includes three aspects: natural revelation, through what God made and through his providential control of the world (as in Romans 1:18–23); special revelation, found in Scripture; and revelation in the very nature of man, created in the image of God.²

1. The terms *transcendence* and *immanence* both have a *relational* meaning, in the sense that they designate two aspects of God's relation to us. God has a relation to us once he has created us and the world around us. So the terms do not directly designate God's character before creation. At the same time, the terms reflect and express aspects of who God always is. Transcendence reflects God's absoluteness, and immanence reflects God's self-presence and immensity, as well as the dwelling of the persons of the Trinity in one another. We will explore these matters more fully as the book progresses.

2. The last of these three, revelation through the nature of man, is often included within the broad category of natural revelation. Natural revelation is also called *general revelation* because it comes to human beings in general and is not given only to some special individuals, such as Noah and Abraham and Moses, or to

Corruption of Knowledge through Sin

Ever since Adam sinned, we are all fallen and enmeshed in sin. It takes the work of Christ to bring us back to right knowledge of God and communion with God. This work of Christ is proclaimed and explained in the Bible. The special revelation in the Bible is necessary in order for us to understand natural revelation and even our own selves. Otherwise, as Romans 1:18–23 indicates, people “suppress the truth.” Ephesians 4 indicates that “Gentiles” outside the scope of special revelation are in darkness:

Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. They are *darkened* in their understanding, *alienated* from the life of God because of the *ignorance* that is in them, due to their *hardness of heart*. They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. But that is not the way you learned Christ! (Eph. 4:17–20)

That does not mean that unbelievers have no knowledge of God. Romans 1:18–23 affirms that they have such positive knowledge. But Romans 1:18–23 also states that the knowledge is suppressed. So here and there we will find fragmentary expressions of truth in pagan religion and philosophy. But it takes great wisdom to separate the good from the bad, the truth from its distortions. It is dangerous to immerse oneself in false religions or philosophies because they never offer people unmixed, clear, obvious falsehood, or pure, obvious truth. They contain a mixture of truth and error, truth and confusion. The mixture can occur even in a single sentence, which may have a fragment of truth and still entice us into a false view of God. We need to return again and again to what God says in his Word, the Bible.

some special group, the Jews. In addition to Scripture, special revelation includes verbal communication from God that is not directly recorded in Scripture, such as speeches of Jesus during his earthly life that were not recorded in the Gospels (John 21:25).

Frame's Square of Transcendence and Immanence

We can summarize the two complementary truths in a diagram used by John Frame.³ The diagram summarizes both the transcendence of God and his immanence. (See fig. 2.1.)

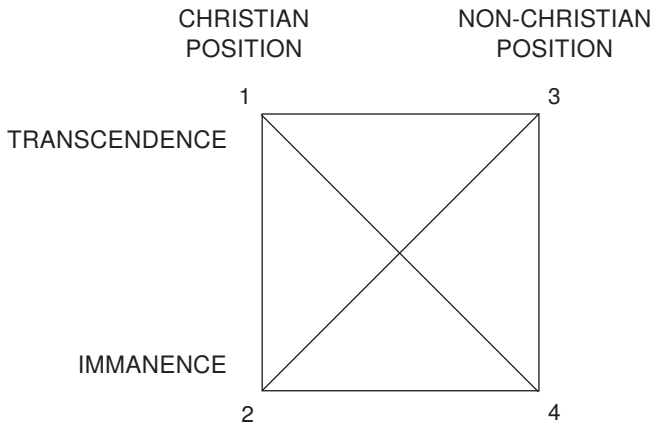


Fig. 2.1. Frame's Square

This diagram has been more fully explained in Frame's book and elsewhere.⁴ We will be content to summarize.

The left-hand side of the square represents the Christian position, as taught in the Bible. The right-hand side of the square represents the non-Christian position, which is the alternative to the truth. The upper-left-hand corner of the square (#1) represents the Christian

3. John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987), 14. The diagram has come to be known as *Frame's square*.

4. Frame, *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, 13–61. Frame's whole book is relevant to filling in a larger context for understanding knowledge of God. Frame goes over the same points in John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002), 103–15. Frame's square appears in *Doctrine of God*, 113, but in this diagram the numbers 2 and 3 need to be interchanged. For my own summaries, see Vern S. Poythress, *Logic: A God-Centered Approach to the Foundation of Western Thought* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), chaps. 14–15; Vern S. Poythress, *Knowing and the Trinity: How Perspectives in Human Knowledge Imitate the Trinity* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2018), chap. 10.

view of God's transcendence. God's transcendence is his superiority and absolute character as God. As Creator, he is the source of all things in creation. The lower-left-hand corner of the square (#2) represents God's immanence. He is present throughout the world that he has made (Jer. 23:24), and he is also present to every human being, including unbelievers.

The upper-right-hand corner (#3) represents a non-Christian view of transcendence. God is conceived of as far off, inaccessible, and uninvolved. The lower-right-hand corner (#4) represents a non-Christian view of immanence. God is conceived of as identical with the world.

The two diagonal lines in the square represent contradictions. The non-Christian view of transcendence (#3) says that God is inaccessible, denying the Christian understanding of immanence (#2). The non-Christian view of immanence (#4), by identifying God with the world, denies the Christian understanding of transcendence (#1).

The two horizontal lines represent a kind of similarity in form of expression. Christian and non-Christian views of transcendence can *sound* similar. They may both use some of the same words, such as *transcendence* and *exalted*. But the meaning is different.

Frame's Square Applied to Knowledge

We can now apply Frame's square to the particular issue of knowing God. The Christian view of transcendence (#1) says that God's knowledge is superior to ours—it is comprehensive. His knowledge is the original knowledge, and it is the ultimate standard by which our knowledge is assessed. The Christian view of immanence (#2) says that God actually makes himself known to us, in general and special revelation. We do truly know him. The non-Christian view of transcendence (#3) says that God is unknowable. The non-Christian view of immanence (#4) says that our own minds can serve as the standard for what God must be. We may summarize these four aspects in a single diagram, which is Frame's square applied to the issue of knowledge (fig. 2.2).

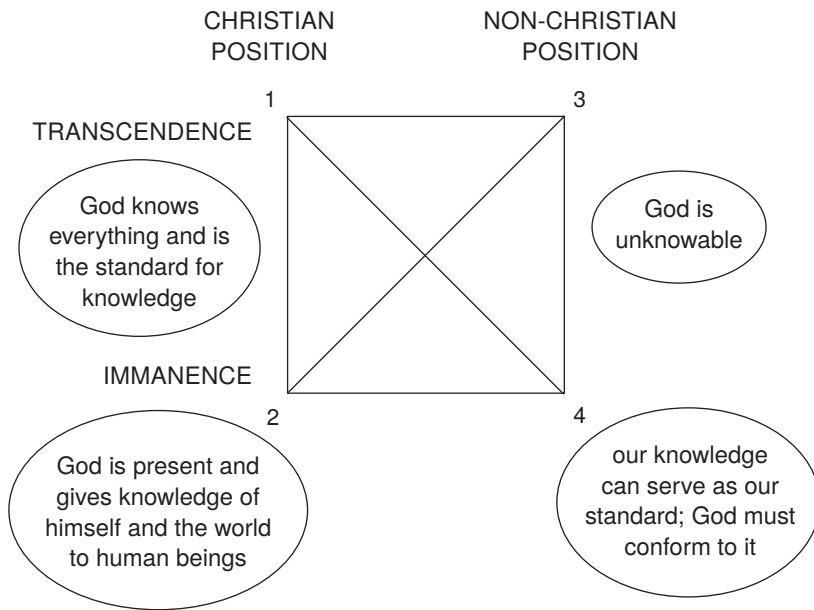


Fig. 2.2. Frame's Square for Knowledge

Challenges to Our Thinking

This basic summary will help guide us in considering how to think about our knowledge of God and its limitations. We *are* limited, and so we must avoid dictating out of our own minds what we think God must be (we reject corner 4). We must pay close attention to Scripture and submit to its teaching. On the other hand, we should have confidence that through the Scripture, in union with Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we receive genuine knowledge (corner 2). These two principles are not so easy to follow as it might first appear. Even though we have been made new by being born again by the Spirit, we are tempted by remaining sin, including sins of the mind (!). In subtle ways, we may still fall back into forms of non-Christian thinking (the right-hand side of the square).

We should also remember that Frame's square is only a summary. It is filled out by the teaching of the whole Bible. The square is meant to be understood as pointing to this teaching, rather than being a self-contained complete statement.

The Resurrection of Christ's Making God Known

How does the resurrection of Christ throw light on how we think about our knowledge of God? The resurrection of Christ plays a key role in our knowledge of God in at least three respects.

First, the resurrection of Christ underlines and confirms that Christ himself is the authoritative source for the knowledge of God. During his earthly life, Jesus several times predicted his resurrection (Matt. 16:21; 17:22–23; 20:17–19; 26:29, 32, 64). The resurrection confirms his authenticity as a true prophet—and more than a prophet. It confirms that his teaching is true and that he is who he claimed to be, God come in the flesh (John 1:14; 8:58; 14:6; 20:28). The religious leaders of Christ's day thought that he was blaspheming because he made himself God: "The Jews answered him, 'It is not for a good work that we are going to stone you but for blasphemy, because you, being a man, make yourself God'" (10:33). But after Jesus' resurrection, when the apostle Thomas saw Jesus, he realized that Jesus was God: "My Lord and my God!" (20:28).

By confirming publicly the authenticity of Jesus' claims, the resurrection also shows that the apostles of Jesus are authentic messengers of God who proclaim the true Word of God. The apostles were commissioned by Jesus with his authority (Matt. 10:1, 6; Acts 1:2–3, 8; compare 1 Cor. 14:37–38). Jesus also affirms the divine origin and authority of the Old Testament (Matt. 5:17–20; John 10:35). So the resurrection of Christ leads us to a recognition of the authority of the Bible, which is the written Word of God. And the Bible in turn, including the teachings of Jesus in the Gospels, provides us with knowledge of God. According to 1 Corinthians 15, the resurrection provides confirmation of apostolic preaching (vv. 1–2, 14–15).

Second, the resurrection of Christ provides an open display of the majesty of God. God raised him from the dead. And that work of God displays spectacularly God's majesty and power and wisdom and justice and goodness and mercy.

Third, the resurrection provides the power enabling us to understand God and submit to his teaching about who he is. The pagans, as we observed, suppress the knowledge of God. They have hard hearts concerning spiritual things (1 Cor. 2:12–14; Eph. 4:17–19). They are

spiritually “dead in . . . trespasses and sins” (Eph. 2:1). Where will they receive power to rise from their dead condition? Only through Christ:

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, *made us alive together with Christ*—by grace you have been saved—and *raised us up with him* and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus. (Eph. 2:4–6)

Christ’s resurrection led to his exaltation, as Acts 2:33 indicates:

Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this [the Spirit in his work of granting the gift of tongues] that you yourselves are seeing and hearing.

From Christ’s resurrection, then, comes the pouring out of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. And the pouring out of the Spirit leads to the spread of the gospel throughout the rest of Acts. People of all nations come to believe in the risen Christ, just as the Jews of various languages began to do on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:8–11, 40–41). The Holy Spirit opens their spiritual eyes to see the truth about who Christ is and what he has done (John 3:3–8; Eph. 1:17–18).

The resurrection of Christ has implications for the knowledge that Christians receive. We are raised to new life through the power of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:11). This life includes new life in the *mind*, new knowledge:

If then you have been *raised with Christ*, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. *Set your minds on things that are above*, not on things that are on earth. (Col. 3:1–2)

We Have the Mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2:16)

Verses 8 and 10 of Ephesians 4 speak of Christ’s ascension, which is an extension of his resurrection. This ascension leads to his giving

gifts to the church that give the church knowledge, “until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the *knowledge* of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Eph. 4:13).

Praising God

It is appropriate to praise God for making himself known. And it is appropriate to come to Christ and ask for his purification.

Key Terms

Frame’s square

immanence⁵

knowledge

natural revelation

reveal, revelation

revelation in the nature of mankind

special revelation

transcendence

Study Questions

1. What does it mean for God to be knowable but not comprehensible to human beings? What difference does this make in how we think about God and in how we read the Bible?
2. What is the Christian view of transcendence and immanence?
3. What is the non-Christian view of transcendence and immanence?
4. What are the Christian and non-Christian views of transcendence and immanence, when applied specifically to the issue of knowing God?
5. In what ways do the Christian and the non-Christian views of knowing God relate to each other? How are they similar and how are they different?

5. Key terms in bold are defined in the glossary at the end of this volume.

6. In what ways are Christians tempted to drift into a non-Christian view of transcendence and immanence?

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Frame, John M. *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*. Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987. Chap. 1.

Prayer

God our Father, we praise you for the magnificence of who you are and the magnificence of your knowledge. You are glorious! We would say with the Israelites:

Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods?

Who is like you, majestic in holiness,

awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders? (Ex. 15:11)

We praise you for making yourself known to us in your greatness. Thank you especially for the resurrection of Christ, which you accomplished for our salvation. We pray that through the perfection of Christ and the cleansing of his blood, our minds as well as our inclinations will be more and more purified, so that we may serve and praise you as we ought. May we love you with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our mind and with all our strength (Mark 12:30). May our thinking about you be deepened and purified. Thank you for sending your Holy Spirit for this purpose.

PART 2

CLASSICAL CHRISTIAN THEISM

We consider God's majesty and some of his attributes.

3

Attributes of God: Absoluteness

LET US TAKE a brief look at some of the attributes of God that have a close connection with his transcendence. This survey will illustrate how the Bible teaches us about all the attributes of God.

We begin with *absoluteness* (also called *aseity*, or *independence*).

What Is Absoluteness?

God is absolute; he is independent of the world that he made. He always existed, while everything created had a beginning. Not only in its beginning but in its continuation, each created thing is dependent on him. God, by contrast, does not need anything from the world:

The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he *served* by human hands, as though he *needed anything*, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. (Acts 17:24–25)

God has planned the end from the beginning (Isa. 46:10), and each created thing follows the course that he has marked for it. Note how Isaiah 46:9–10 links God's own character with the display of his sovereignty in his plan and its execution:

remember the former things of old;
for *I am God*, and there is no other;

I am God, and there is none like me,
declaring the end from the beginning
and from ancient times things not yet done,
saying, “My counsel shall stand,
and I will accomplish all my purpose.”

The apostle Paul bursts into spontaneous praise as he contemplates the boundless majesty and wisdom of God:

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!

“For who has known the mind of the Lord,
or who has been his counselor?”
“Or who has given a gift to him
that he might be repaid?”

For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen. (Rom. 11:33–36)

It has often been suggested that God’s mysterious name “I AM WHO I AM” (Ex. 3:14) expresses his independence. Who he is depends only on himself, not on anything outside him. Though this idea of independence and self-sufficiency is not the only implication of God’s name, the idea of independence is confirmed in Exodus 33:19:

And he said, “I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name ‘The LORD.’ And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy.”

In this verse God uses the special name “the LORD,” which is closely related to the expression “I AM” in Exodus 3:14–15.¹ Structurally, “I AM WHO I AM” in Exodus 3:14 also corresponds to two

1. In Hebrew, “LORD” is YHWH [יהוה] and “I AM” is ’HYH [אֲנִי־הָיָה]. These are two forms of the same verb “to be” HYH [הָיָה].

expressions in Exodus 33:19, “I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious” and “will show mercy on whom I will show mercy.”² In Exodus 33:19, God indicates that his acts of grace and mercy originate from his own decision, as he indicates with the smaller included expressions “to whom I will be gracious” and “on whom I will show mercy.” He does not give grace and mercy due to the commendable quality of the recipients. He does not say, “I will be gracious to gracious people,” or “I will be gracious to people who already love me and serve me faithfully.” No, he will be gracious to those to whom he himself chooses to be gracious. Otherwise, we could not be saved, because we had rebellious hearts.

God’s grace depends not on qualities in the recipients, but on God’s choice, as the apostle Paul sees in Romans 9:9–18. Paul quotes from Exodus 33:19 in Romans 9:15, and then sums it up: “So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy” (v. 16). Likewise, God’s own character “I am” is not determined from outside, but from himself (“who I am”). (See fig. 3.1.)

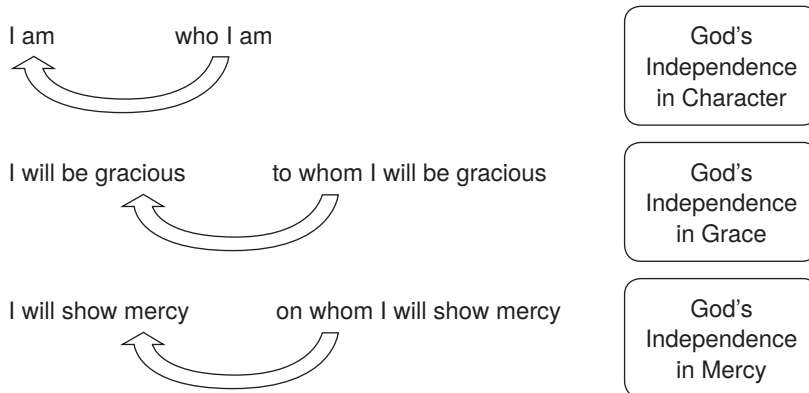


Fig. 3.1. God’s Independence

The reliability of God’s whole character, on which Moses and the people of Israel depend, has the firmest possible grounding. God himself is

2. Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1975), 114–19 (first edition, 129–34); John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002), 43–46.

the ultimate basis for confidence and trust. He is trustworthy and is to be sought for mercy, precisely because he is God, and there is no other. How this truth focuses our worship and leads to praise!

Absoluteness in the Resurrection of Christ

The resurrection of Christ is a spectacular, climactic revelation of God's absoluteness. Everyone knows that people do not rise from the dead. That means that no capabilities in a dead body would bring it to life. And no capabilities in human physicians can do it. (We must distinguish Christ's resurrection from a mere resuscitation. Christ is permanently free from the power of death.) No powerful herbal remedy can do it. No resources within this world have the faintest chance of succeeding. When God does it, he shows that he is absolute. He does not need anything but himself.

Remarkably, the resurrection of Christ is not only the work of the Father and of the Spirit, who is the source of all life (Rom. 8:10–11), but the work of Christ:

For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have *authority to take it up again*. This charge I have received from my Father. (John 10:17–18)

We might begin to understand at least a bit that the Father could raise Christ from the dead. But how can Christ say, "I have authority to take it up again"? Moreover, he does so in a context in which he explicitly distinguishes himself from the Father: "This charge I have received *from my Father*." Who is the one who is taking up again a life that is dead? The same one who is dead! What kind of saying could more strikingly affirm absoluteness? Christ needs no resources outside himself. He himself produces life for himself.

Of course, the three persons of the Trinity are one God. Christ does raise himself from the dead. But it is also true that the Father raises him from the dead, and that the Spirit is at work as the one who is the power of resurrection life (Rom. 8:10–11). Absoluteness

belongs to each person because each person is God. Absoluteness belongs to the one God. The three persons act jointly and mysteriously together when Christ rises from the dead. The resurrection of Christ thereby reveals God in his triunity. (See fig. 3.2.)

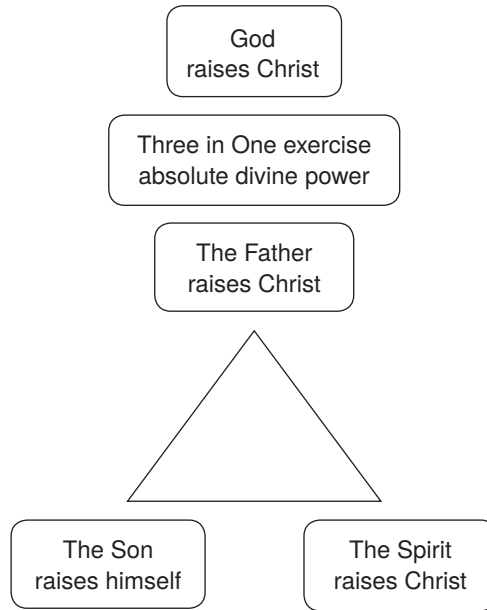


Fig. 3.2. God Raises Christ in Trinitarian Action

Only God understands himself completely (Christian view of transcendence). Only God understands the resurrection of Christ completely. Only God understands completely how Christ could take up again his own life, at the very point when he is dead.³

What we ourselves should understand is that here God gives us a display of his absoluteness. This display is, in fact, comparable to the creation of the world. Christ's resurrection is the beginning point and fulcrum for making the new creation: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new *creation*" (2 Cor. 5:17). It is radically new. The

3. More precisely, when we distinguish the two natures of Christ, we affirm that when he died after his crucifixion, Christ was dead with respect to his human nature, and always alive with respect to his divine nature (because God is forever the *living* God).

apostle Paul sees the radical newness when he compares the raising of the dead to calling new things into existence: “the God in whom he [Abraham] believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist” (Rom. 4:17).

To call into existence the things that do not exist is a work of absoluteness. God needs only himself, not preexisting matter, not other people’s plans, not outside power, in order to do it. Praise the Lord!

Now, Christ’s resurrection body was not made directly out of nothing. Rather, it is a transformation of his preresurrection body. The tomb was empty. The nail prints were in his hands. The resurrection, in that way, is not a creation out of nothing. But resurrection *life* does come out of nothing in the created world. It comes from God, who creates things that “do not exist.” So resurrection life reflects the absoluteness of God.

Absoluteness Applied to Us

We have already seen some verses that indicate that Christians have been spiritually raised with Christ already (Eph. 2:5–6). We have resurrection life. This life is sustained by the absolute God, who can never fail. His love for us can never fail. His reign never ends.

Key Terms

absolute, absoluteness⁴

aseity

create, creation

grace

I AM (as the name of God)

independence

mercy

self-sufficiency

4. Key terms in bold are defined in the glossary at the end of this volume.

Study Questions

1. What is the meaning of God's absoluteness?
2. How is God's absoluteness illustrated in Exodus 33:19?
3. How is God's special name "I AM" (Ex. 3:14–15) related to his absoluteness?
4. How does God's absoluteness affect how we think about him?
How should we respond to God, knowing that he is absolute?

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Prayer

We thank you, our God and Father, that we can absolutely depend on you and that your commitment to saving those who belong to Christ is secure. We thank you that you have given us resurrection life in Christ, through the indwelling of the Spirit of Christ. We thank you that through the Holy Spirit, by faith in Christ, we may participate in resurrection life.

4

Infinity

GOD'S ABSOLUTENESS IS seen in his *infinity*.

What Is Infinity?

God is not limited, but boundless in his wisdom, power, and character. Several texts¹ express this aspect of God's majesty:

Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised,
and his greatness is *unsearchable*. (Ps. 145:3)

Behold, the nations are like a drop from a bucket,
and are accounted as the dust on the scales;
behold, he takes up the coastlands like fine dust. (Isa. 40:15)

All the nations are *as nothing* before him,
they are accounted by him *as less than nothing* and emptiness.
(Isa. 40:17)

Can you find out the deep things of God?
Can you find out the *limit* of the Almighty?

1. Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison Jr., trans. George Musgrave Giger (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1992), 1.195, III. viii.5.

Infinity

It is higher than heaven—what can you do?
Deeper than Sheol—what can you know?
Its measure is longer than the earth
and broader than the sea. (Job 11:7–9)

The last quotation is from a speech of Zophar, who is not a reliable witness. But as in so many other cases in the book of Job, the sentiments in these verses are correct. Their correctness is confirmed by the fact that they agree with other parts of Scripture. Zophar goes astray not in his affirmation of God's majesty, but in how he turns his speech to accuse Job. We are safe to use his words in admiration of God's greatness.

God's infinity is closely related to his absoluteness. If he is absolute, he is not limited; that is, he is infinite. It is also closely related to his power. God's power is boundless, and thereby displays his infinite nature. The impulse of true worship is to recognize God's infinity. Well we might say with David, "Yours, O LORD, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty" (1 Chron. 29:11).

God's Infinity in the Resurrection of Christ

The resurrection of Christ displays the glory of God. In so doing, it is a mirror of all of God's attributes, not simply his power or his life. How does the resurrection display God's infinity?

Let us reflect for a bit. It is natural for us to be impressed with big things. The universe is incredibly big. We can see that it takes an infinite God to make it. God's invisible attributes, including his infinity, "have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made" (Rom. 1:20). But it takes more attention to see the infinity of God in the minute character of his care. Jesus points to little things: "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered" (Matt. 10:29–30). The infinity of God is displayed in his unlimited capacity to pay attention to, direct, and account for every detail of every size—as modern physics tells us, even every atom in our bodies, and every

elementary particle within every atom. God's infinity is on display in what is microscopically small.

The resurrection of Christ is intermediate in size in its spatial dimensions, intermediate between the clusters of galaxies and the insides of atoms. The spatial dimensions are the dimensions of Christ's resurrected body. Because of our familiarity with human bodies, it is easy to take for granted this kind of intermediate size. But what kind of power is it, and what kind of wisdom, that can bring life out of death? What kind of power, and what kind of wisdom, that can transfigure a human body (1 Cor. 15:42–43; Phil. 3:20–21), so that it is still a transfigured form of the *same* body, and yet also profoundly transfigured, from a natural body after the likeness of Adam to a spiritual body, the body of the risen Christ, the man from heaven (1 Cor. 15:44–49)?

For that matter, what kind of power and what kind of wisdom can create the human body in all its intricacy? The human body is finite. But it displays the infinite wisdom of its Creator. This is true with respect to the original, natural body of Adam (Gen. 2:7; 1 Cor. 15:44–45). It is therefore also true, and indeed even more strikingly true, with respect to the spiritual body, that is, Christ's resurrection body, which surpasses Adam's body in its nature (1 Cor. 15:46–49). It is the consummate form of the human body, prepared for the consummation period of the new heaven and the new earth (Rev. 21:1).

Infinity in the Glory of God

We can begin to see more by considering the key verses in Philipians 3:20–21 about the transformation that takes place in the resurrection of the body. The resurrection body of Christ is "his glorious body." The word *glorious* translates a Greek expression that more literally is "the body of his glory."

The word *glory* has a history. It evokes the Old Testament background of the glory of God, and times when God appears in his glory and displays his glory to man, often in the form of immense brightness. In the wilderness, the glory of the Lord appeared to Israel in a cloud. At the crucial point after the incident of the golden calf, Moses asks to see "your glory" (Ex. 33:18), which includes a display

of God's character. God's glory reflects who God is. God promises to show his glory (v. 22), and then does so in the events of Exodus 34:6–7. God declares who he himself is, by listing his attributes. Later, we have a report that Moses' "face shone because he had been talking with God" (34:29). The brightness of his face reflected the brightness of God's glory, which in turn showed him God's character. The theme continues in Ezekiel 1:26–28, where God shows Ezekiel an elaborate vision, at the center of which is "a likeness with a human appearance" (v. 26). The appearance is "the appearance of the likeness of the *glory of the LORD*" (v. 28).

The vision of Christ in Revelation 1:12–16 takes up some of the features of the vision of the human figure in Ezekiel 1:26–28. Christ in his coming is the fulfillment to which Ezekiel 1 points forward. Christ displays the glory of the Lord. In confirmation of this idea, note how in Revelation 1:14 "his eyes were like a flame of fire." This fiery presence links us backward to the fire in Ezekiel 1:27. It also links forward to a later point in Revelation 19:12: "His eyes are like a flame of fire." Whose eyes in this case? The eyes of Christ, just as in Revelation 1:14. But in Revelation 19:13 he is also identified as "The Word of God." His appearance displays God. He is God (John 1:1). The figure in Ezekiel 1:26–28 also displays God, "the appearance of the likeness of the *glory of the LORD*" (v. 28).

The point here is that just because we have a human figure, we must not limit the meaning of these appearances *merely* to the human nature of Christ. Yes, we know that he has a human nature. But he is also God. And the glory in these appearances is the glory of the one true God, who is Father, and Son, and Holy Spirit. So the "glorious body" of Christ's resurrection offers us a way to reflect not only on his transformed human body, but on the glory of God: "the glory of God gives it [the holy city] light, and its lamp is the Lamb" (Rev. 21:23). (See fig. 4.1.)

We can confirm this cluster of connections by considering the transfiguration, as described in Matthew 17:1–8 and parallel passages. Christ was "transfigured," and "his face shone like the sun" (v. 2). Many interpreters have seen that this passage, following almost immediately after a prediction of Christ's resurrection (16:21), offers a kind of preview of resurrection glory. In Revelation 1:16,

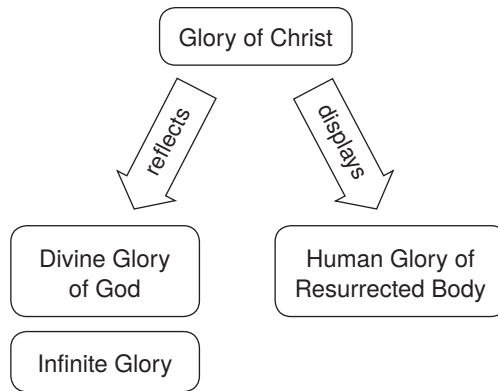


Fig. 4.1. The Glory of God and of the Resurrection

after Christ's resurrection, "his face was like the sun shining in full strength." So the brightness of Christ's face is the brightness of his resurrection glory.

But we should also pay attention to the Old Testament background for transfiguration in Matthew 17:1–8. Moses and Elijah appear (v. 3). Both had a spectacular encounter with God at Mount Sinai (Mount Horeb; Ex. 19; 24; 1 Kings 19). And now the entire company has a similar encounter: "a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, 'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him'" (Matt. 17:5). The bright cloud is the cloud of God's glory as God approaches. Then, just as God spoke to Moses and to Elijah long ago, he speaks again out of the cloud. In addition, the scene is on "a high mountain" (v. 1), reminiscent of Mount Sinai. Will God's voice reiterate the Ten Commandments, which he spoke at Mount Sinai? No. Rather, the voice tells them to listen to God's voice in the person of his beloved Son: "listen to him." The Son, in his glory, now expresses the glory of God that appeared on Mount Sinai. And the voice of the Son expresses the voice of God, who spoke on Mount Sinai.

So the glory that appears in Matthew 17 has two aspects of meaning, not one. First, it previews the glory of Christ's resurrection body in his renewed humanity. Second, it shows the glory of God himself. This duality is fitting because Christ is both God and man, in one person. Jesus declares to Philip, "Whoever has *seen* me has *seen* the

Father” (John 14:9). *Through* the means of the glory of his human nature, we see God: “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his *glory*, *glory* as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (1:14). In John 1:14, as well as the other passages, the background is found in the Old Testament passages about the glory of God. “No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known” (v. 18). The Word, who was in the beginning with God (v. 1), displays God in “flesh” (v. 14).

Note also a further detail in John 1:14. The Word who is the only Son is “full of grace and truth.” God gives grace and truth to his people. He does so because he is himself the fountainhead of grace and truth. He is gracious and true. So the Word displays the attributes of God. The fullness of grace and truth manifests God’s attributes of graciousness and truth. God is infinite in graciousness and truth. So God’s infinity is also on display.

Now let us return briefly to Philippians 3:21. In the language about Christ’s “glorious body,” the focus is on his human body, not immediately his divine person and divine nature. The word *glorious* evokes the background of the glory of God only as background. But the verse also contains something else, “by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.” The power on display in the transformation of the body is not only resurrection power, but divine power that subjects “all things.”

Let us consider this theme of subjecting all things. In the background is the dominion of Adam, which Christ has achieved as the last Adam. The expression “subject all things” in Philippians 3:21 alludes to Psalm 8:6, “you have put all things under his feet,” which is talking about man’s dominion (see v. 4). Psalm 8:6 in turn is based on the dominion given to mankind in Genesis 1:28–30. Hebrews 2:6–9 quotes from Psalm 8 and indicates that its fulfillment is found in Christ.

But even deeper than the background of creation in Genesis 1 is the background consisting in the fact that Christ is the Word and the original Image of God (Col. 1:15). Christ is Lord. He shows divine power in the process of subjecting all things to himself. And that same power is at work in the resurrection of Christ’s body, and then in the future resurrection of our bodies.

This power is immeasurable, that is to say, infinite:

what is the *immeasurable* greatness of his [God the Father's] power toward us who believe, according to the working of his *great* might that he worked in Christ when he *raised him from the dead*. (Eph. 1:19–20)

Ephesians 1:19–23 is a parallel passage to Philippians 3:21. It further expands on the close relation between Christ's resurrection and his subjecting all things to himself: "And he put all things under his feet" (Eph. 1:22). The language is once again the language of Adamic dominion, alluding to Psalm 8:6 and then Genesis 1:28–30. Christ's resurrection represents not only his freedom from the power of death, but his status as the last Adam, who rules over all things on behalf of God and for the benefit of his church: "[God] gave him as head over all things *to the church*" (Eph. 1:22). Ephesians 1:19 traces the power at work in Christ back to its origin, "the immeasurable greatness of his [the Father's] power." Christ's resurrection displays immeasurable power, infinite power, and so displays God's infinity.

Infinity Applied to Us

Ephesians 1:19–23 shows us not only the infinity of God in Christ's resurrection, but the effect of his infinity *on us*. Because we are united to Christ, the infinity of Christ is for our good.

And he [the Father] put all things under his [the Son's] feet and gave him as head over all things *to the church*, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all. (Eph. 1:22–23)

Nothing ought to frighten us or shake us, because God the infinite one is "for us": "What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?" (Rom. 8:31). Therefore:

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written,

Infinity

“For your sake we are being killed all the day long;
we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.”

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom. 8:35–39)

Key Terms

absoluteness²
boundless
glory
infinite, infinity

Study Questions

1. What is the meaning of God’s infinity?
2. How is God’s infinity illustrated in Isaiah 40?
3. How does God’s infinity affect how we think about him? How should we respond to God, knowing that he is infinite?
4. How is God’s infinity manifested in the resurrection of Christ?

For Further Reading

Bavinck, Herman. *Reformed Dogmatics*. Vol. 2, *God and Creation*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004. Pp. 159–70.
Berkhof, Louis. *Systematic Theology*. 4th rev. ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939. Pp. 59–61.

2. Key terms in bold are defined in the glossary at the end of this volume.

Prayer

Lord, we thank you for giving us “precious and very great promises” (2 Peter 1:4). Thank you for the infinity of your power displayed in Christ. May we respond to you with the praise and faith that you deserve.

5

Immensity (Omnipresence)

GOD'S ABSOLUTENESS IS seen in his *immensity* or *omnipresence*.

What Is Omnipresence?

We use the word *omnipresence* to express the truth that God is everywhere present in the world that he made: "Can a man hide himself in secret places so that I cannot see him? declares the LORD. Do I not *fill* heaven and earth? declares the LORD" (Jer. 23:24). But even before God made the world, his presence was without limit. The word *immense* is used to express more directly this aspect of God, before creation.¹ It is an implication of God's infinity, applied to the nature of his presence. As Solomon prays, "Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built!" (1 Kings 8:27).

When Solomon dedicated the temple, God's glory filled the house: "the glory of the LORD filled the house of the LORD" (1 Kings 8:11). This filling of the house reflects the fact that God fills his dwelling in heaven. And his filling of heaven reflects the fact that he fills all things (Jer. 23:24). (See fig. 5.1.)

1. Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison Jr., trans. George Musgrave Giger (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1992), 1.201, III. ix.22.

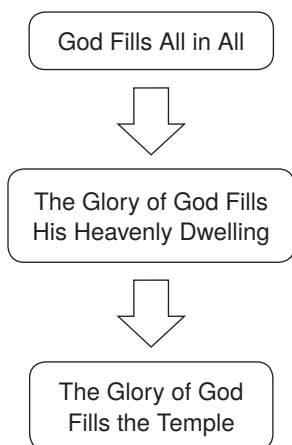


Fig. 5.1. God's Filling of All

The immensity of God is a source of admiration for Solomon as he contemplates the relation of God to the temple, and through the temple the relation of God to himself and to the people of Israel. When we understand God's immensity, it leads to praise.

Psalms 139 is a wonderful meditation on God's presence. The whole psalm is relevant, but we may single out a few verses (7–13):²

Where shall I go from your Spirit?
Or where shall I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there!
If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!
If I take the wings of the morning
and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me.
If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light about me be night,"
even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is bright as the day,
for darkness is as light with you.

2. Turretin, *Institutes*, 1.198, III.ix.9.

For you formed my inward parts;
you knitted me together in my mother's womb.

This truth reinforces our confidence not only in the greatness of God but of his concern and care for those whom he loves. He is right here, knowing, seeing, and acting.

The Immensity of God in the Resurrection of Christ

How does the resurrection of Christ display the immensity of God?

At first glance, it might seem to be a poor prospect to see the immensity of God in the resurrection, because Christ's resurrection body is a human body. It is his *resurrection* body, to be sure. It has been transformed from his preresurrection body, and his transformation forms the pattern for our transformation, as Philippians 3:20–21 indicates: “we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will *transform* our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.”

When Christ appeared to him, the apostle Thomas could see very clearly that Christ had a human body. Christ invited him to put his finger in the nail prints. Christ's human body, like his preresurrection body, had a human shape and size, and a particular location in space. The apostles saw him eat a piece of broiled fish in order to confirm the reality of his body (Luke 24:42–43). He says, “For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have” (v. 39).

Christ's body is not ubiquitous, that is, it is not everywhere equally. But the God whom we meet in Christ is ubiquitous and immense. So does Christ, when he appears in his resurrected body, display the immensity of God? He does. How?

We can move forward by looking again at Ephesians 1:19–23. We recall that the power of God in Christ's resurrection is immeasurably great (v. 19); it is infinite. Here we see infinite power. Do we also find that infinity is expressed in space? We do. Verse 23 describes the church as “his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.” The church is the fullness of Christ. And Christ is the one who fills all in all. This filling manifests his immensity.

Adam in Genesis 1:28–30 was given a commandment to “*fill* the earth and subdue it” (v. 28). Ephesians 1:22 alludes to Adamic language. But Ephesians 1:22–23 goes further. Christ rules not only over the animals, but over “all things.” He fills not only the earth, but “all.” And he does so “in all,” comprehensively. This filling is connected with the universality of his dominion in verse 22. As the last Adam, Christ fulfills the task of filling and subduing that was given to Adam. But he surpasses Adam. His resurrection indicates that he surpasses Adam with respect to his transformed body. But he surpasses Adam also in who he is. He is God as well as man. And as we have already seen, his resurrection manifests the glory of God. The glory of God displays his immensity.

We can confirm this idea by going back to a particular case in which God manifests his glory, namely, at the dedication of Solomon’s temple: “And when the priests came out of the Holy Place, a cloud filled the house of the LORD, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud, for the *glory* of the LORD *filled* the house of the LORD” (1 Kings 8:10–11). The glory of the Lord filled the house.

God’s glory, as we have seen, displays all his attributes. But in the context, Solomon understands that the house on earth is a pattern reflecting God’s dwelling in heaven (Heb. 8:5; 9:23). He calls on God to “listen in heaven your dwelling place” (1 Kings 8:30); “hear in heaven” (vv. 34, 36, 39, etc.). Solomon sees how his temple and God’s dwelling in heaven express a deeper truth about God’s immensity: “But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven *cannot contain you*; how much less this house that I have built!” (v. 27).

Now, when Christ comes to the earth, he is the fulfillment of Solomon’s temple: “he was speaking about the *temple* of his body” (John 2:21). He is the dwelling place of God with man, as the name *Immanuel* implies: “they shall call his name Immanuel” (which means, God with us)” (Matt. 1:23). John 1:14 reinforces this truth when the apostle says that “the Word became flesh and *dwelt* among us.” The glory of God fills the temple of Christ’s body: “we have seen his *glory*” (John 1:14). But we can also say that it is the glory of *God* that fills his body, with a focus on God. This God is the God to whom Solomon prayed, whom heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain. The coming of

God in the person of Christ manifests and makes known *this* God of Solomon. Christ as God fills all things. The point at which that filling becomes openly and permanently manifest is in the resurrection, which reveals the universal scope of his dominion and his glory.

Ephesians 4:10 also shows the connection between Christ's resurrection and immensity, by way of his ascension: "He who descended [Christ] is the one who also ascended [in resurrection splendor] far above all the heavens, that he might *fill all things*." His ascension is to the highest position, "far above all the heavens." The spatial representation reflects his exalted position in power and authority. The spatial extent is "far above." It is limitless. It reflects his immensity. The result is "that he might fill all things." Here his immensity becomes explicit in the text.

His immensity is already implicit in his resurrection because his resurrection is the first aspect of his ascent: "And I, when I am *lifted up* from the earth, will draw all people to myself" (John 12:32). The saying in verse 32 has a dual meaning. Jesus is lifted up on the cross to die (v. 33). And that anticipates his being lifted up to heaven, where he now reigns, drawing people from every nation to himself.³

Immensity Applied to Us

According to Ephesians 2:6, we are raised with Christ to rule: "[God] raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus." The picture of being "seated" is a picture of ruling with Christ. Since his rule fills all things, we ourselves, while remaining limited, finite beings, have fellowship with him and with his life; and his life extends to the whole universe.

Key Terms

glory

immensity⁴

omnipresence

3. D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 444.

4. Key terms in bold are defined in the glossary at the end of this volume.

presence
temple

Study Questions

1. What is the meaning of God's immensity? Is there any difference in nuance between *immensity* and *omnipresence*?
2. How is God's immensity illustrated in 1 Kings 8?
3. What do we learn about God's presence in Psalm 139?
4. How does God's immensity affect how we think about him? How should we respond to God, knowing that he is omnipresent?
5. How is God's omnipresence manifested in the resurrection of Christ?

For Further Reading

Bavinck, Herman. *Reformed Dogmatics*. Vol. 2, *God and Creation*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004. Pp. 164–70.

Prayer

Thank you that you display your immeasurable greatness in filling all things. Thank you that you promise to be present with us in all circumstances. Thank you for uniting us to Christ, and for his surpassing greatness.

6

Eternity

GOD IS *ETERNAL*.

What Is Eternity?

God's eternity is an implication of his absoluteness, applied to the arena of time. God is not limited by time. Unlike us, he is not subject to the passing of time and the coming of change in the world. Scripture testifies to his supremacy over time in a number of ways:

Before the mountains were brought forth,
or ever you had formed the earth and the world,
from *everlasting to everlasting* you are God. (Ps. 90:2)

"O my God," I say, "take me not away
in the midst of my days—
you whose years *endure*
throughout all generations!"

Of old you laid the foundation of the earth,
and the heavens are the work of your hands.
They will perish, but you will *remain*;
they will all wear out like a garment.
You will change them like a robe, and they will pass away,
but you *are the same*, and your years *have no end*.

The children of your servants shall dwell secure;
their offspring shall be established before you. (Ps. 102:24–28)

Note that the abiding character of God provides security for the life of human beings: “The children of your servants shall dwell secure” (Ps. 102:28). As with other attributes of God, God’s eternity is a source for praise and thanksgiving, and for meditation on God’s goodness.

God exists forever into the future (“your years have no end,” Ps. 102:27), and he existed forever back in the past (“of old you laid the foundation of the earth,” v. 25). God exists at all times, past, present, and future: he is the one “who is and who was and who is to come” (Rev. 1:4). (See fig. 6.1.)

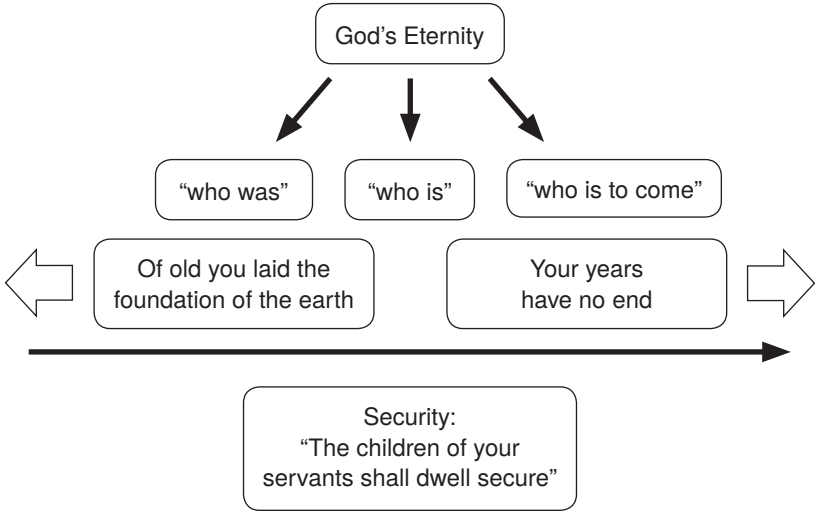


Fig. 6.1. God’s Eternity

It is tempting to think of God’s eternity merely as an infinite prolongation of the time that we experience. When we read words about God’s existence at past times and at future times, we could imagine that his existence is just like ours with respect to time. But God is not just a human being blown up to a large size, so that he continues to live for a long time. God is the infinite Creator. He is not subject to the limitation of time, such as we experience.

The succession of times characteristic of our human experience

belong to us as finite creatures. This human experience has its own mysteries.¹ More broadly, the rhythms in time in the created world, such as the daily cycle of the sun, the yearly cycle in the stars, and the cycle of seasons in agriculture, came into being with the creation of the world (Gen. 1:14). By contrast, God always exists, and would exist even if he had never created a world. It is no wonder that Peter declares that “with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day” (2 Peter 3:8).² God interacts day by day with the world that he has created, and with us on whom he has set his love. We experience his love and care day by day. He met Abraham and talked with him. He brought Israel out of slavery in Egypt. He redeems us by bringing us out of slavery to sin. But he is not another human being, who would merely stand alongside us and share our limitations, by being subject to the passing of time. His own life is eternal, not subject to time.

We know that Christ took on human nature when he became incarnate (John 1:14). With respect to his human nature, he enters into our human experience. He *does* share in the gradual passing of time, and in the gradual experience of the fading of the past and the coming of the future. But he also remains God, with a divine nature as well as a human nature. The two are not confused. With respect to his human nature, he shares in our experience of time as a created rhythm; with respect to his divine nature, he is superior to the creation and not limited by it. (See fig. 6.2.)

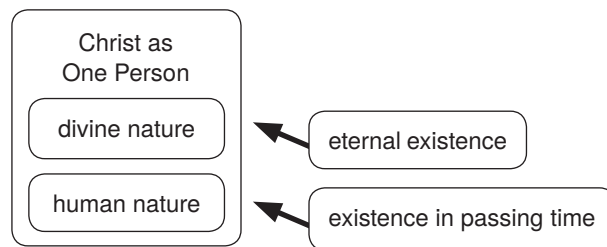


Fig. 6.2. Christ as One Person with Two Natures

1. Vern S. Poythress, *Knowing and the Trinity: How Perspectives in Human Knowledge Imitate the Trinity* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2018), app. H.

2. Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison Jr., trans. George Musgrave Giger (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1992), 1.204, III.x.13.

How do we understand these two truths together? It is a mystery. We know that both sides must be true, not only because of explicit teaching in the Bible (such as John 1:14), but because of how these truths contribute to our salvation. Christ has to be divine to have the divine power to save us. He also has to be human in order to be one with us and serve as our High Priest (Heb. 2:11–18). But we do not see *how* both sides are true. That is one aspect of our limited character as finite human beings, finite in knowledge (chap. 2 above). It is a cause to humble ourselves and adore God the Father and Christ the Son and the Holy Spirit our teacher, rather than to feel frustrated because we are not equal to God.

The Eternity of God in the Resurrection of Christ

How is the eternity of God displayed in the resurrection of Christ? The resurrection of Christ is an event at a particular time in history. So, superficially, it might not seem to be a fruitful starting point for understanding eternity. But let us consider it more closely.

The resurrection of Christ signifies that he has entered a condition in which he is *permanently* free from death: “We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will *never die again*; death no longer has dominion over him. For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God” (Rom. 6:9–10). “The life he lives he lives to God” *eternally*, without death. The text draws an immediate application for us: “So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus” (v. 11). Christ has entered into eternal life.

In union with Christ, we too have entered into eternal life. We too have a spiritual life with God that never passes away: “For you have died, and your *life* is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ *who is your life* appears, then you also will appear with him in glory” (Col. 3:3–4). In a similar manner, the Gospel of John promises eternal life, not merely in the future, but *now* to those who believe in Christ and feed on him: “Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has *eternal life*, and I will raise him up on the last day” (John 6:54; see 3:16; 11:25–26).

We should make a distinction. We who believe in Christ have

what might more technically be called *everlasting life*. We continue to live forever into the future. But we still have the normal human experience of the passing of time. And we did not live forever in the past. What God gives us is eternal life or everlasting life that *reflects* his eternity. But we as creatures do not become the Creator. So we are still subject to the passing of time in a way that God is not. When we look at God's promise of eternal life for us, we understand that only an eternal God, a God who is God and not a creature, can provide it.

We can see a reflection of the eternity of God in the resurrection of Christ. As we said, the resurrection itself is located at a particular moment in time. But it has significance and implications for all times. Before the foundation of the world, God planned to send Christ into the world as a sacrifice for sin and a Savior from sin:

He [Christ] was foreknown *before the foundation of the world* but was made manifest in the last times for the sake of you who through him are believers in God, who *raised him from the dead* and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God. (1 Peter 1:20–21)

So the significance of the resurrection of Christ extends to eternity in the past. And that significance is indeed part of its meaning. The resurrection is not just a bare event. It is not just that some strange, unheard-of event took place. Rather, it took place “in accordance with the Scriptures”: “that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures” (1 Cor. 15:4). The prophecies and types in the Old Testament bear witness to the plan of God before the ages. Thus, once we note that the resurrection of Christ is the work of *God*, we see in it a testimony to the eternity of God, who rules over all times.

Next, note that the resurrection of Christ is the foundation for salvation, not only in the New Testament, but in the Old. For Old Testament saints to have new life and reconciliation with God, they must have new life *in Christ*, just as much as we do. There is no other one who is “the way” or “the life” (John 14:6). So anyone who is saved in the Old Testament is saved through Christ, and in particular through his resurrection, which is the climactic event by which Christ actually accomplishes salvation.

It is mysterious, but the benefits of new life in Christ had to be

applied to the Old Testament saints in anticipation of a later event in time, namely, the resurrection of Christ. The benefits had to be there in order for people to be saved, even before the event that furnished the benefits took place. Therefore, in the Old Testament we see reminders of the promise of new life. Isaac is spared from death by the substitute of a ram (Gen. 22:13). Noah's family is spared from death by the provision of the ark. The function of the ark anticipates salvation through Christ, who was yet to come. Christ's righteousness receives its reward in his resurrection (Phil. 2:9–11). That reward was already being applied to Noah and his family in the time of Noah. And so it goes for Abraham, Moses, David, and all the saints.

Therefore, the power of salvation in the resurrection of Christ extends to all times. It does so because God is eternal and surpasses all times. It is God whose power raised Christ and whose power is the power of salvation. The resurrection of Christ shows us the eternity of God in action. The resurrection of Christ is, moreover, the resurrection of the *Son of God* (Rom. 1:4). The Son of God has our humanity, in the flesh, and he is also God the Word (John 1:14; also Titus 2:13; 3:4). He has the eternity of God.

We can confirm this idea by focusing on the concluding verses of John 8. The context is one in which Jesus has been talking about continuing forever in fellowship with God (v. 35), in contrast to dying “in your sin” (v. 21). Then he holds out a promise: “Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death” (v. 51). He is speaking of everlasting life for human beings, future life. The Jews are offended (v. 53). After a further exchange, he states, “Before Abraham was, I am” (v. 58). Then the Jews are ready to stone him, but he hides himself (v. 59). Verse 58, with the expression “Before Abraham was,” extends Jesus' discussion of everlasting life into the past. He, unlike other human beings, existed in the far past. But then the climactic expression follows: he says, “I am,” not “I was,” which would be the normally expected tense for past existence. The Jews think it is blasphemy, because they understand that he is taking on himself the unique divine name “I AM” from Exodus 3:14.

The point to notice here is that Jesus reveals not only his deity, but his eternal existence. And that existence does not take the form of a gradually passing existence in the indefinite past. He does not

say, “I was.” “I am” is mysterious, as are all of God’s ways, but it says something more than and different from “I was.” Jesus is not subject to the passing of time, in the way that all creatures are. He is the Creator. And who he is is the basis for what he promises, namely, eternal life in communion with him (John 8:32, 35–36, 51). We know from the rest of the Gospel of John that this eternal life comes to us through Jesus’ resurrection. Jesus’ resurrection is displaying for us the one who is “I am.”

John 11:25 says, “I am the resurrection and the life.” The present tense is there again: “I am,” not “I will be.” And then Christ proceeds to raise Lazarus from the dead, both as proof and as exhibition of his claim (vv. 43–44). John 11 foreshadows the resurrection of Christ himself in John 20. Yet it presents the resurrection of Christ not as a simple one-time event in the history of Christ, but as an exhibition of what Christ *is*. He *is* the resurrection. He does bring resurrection and life to Lazarus, and then to believers at the last day. Yes. But he does not simply bring it. He *is* the resurrection. And within that claim in John 11:25 is the famous expression “I am,” reminiscent of John 8:58, and then Exodus 3:14. The resurrection of Christ is the work of Christ, who is God. As God, he has the mysterious eternity of “I am.” He is able to bring and does bring resurrection and life to his people through all times, and climactically at the last day.

The resurrection of Christ manifests the eternity of God.

In all this, we should remember that after his incarnation, Christ has both a divine nature and a human nature. With respect to the divine nature, he is eternal, as are the Father and the Spirit. With respect to his human nature, he experiences the passing of time, as we do. As usual, the relation between the two natures is mysterious.

Applying Eternity to Us

The application of eternity to us lies in two directions. On the part of God, it means that because God is eternal and Christ is eternal, God will not fail us. On our own part, it means that we have eternal life—everlasting life—that is secure through all time.

Key Terms

divine nature
eternal, eternity³
everlasting
human nature
time

Study Questions

1. What is the meaning of God's eternity?
2. How is God's eternity illustrated in John 8:58?
3. How does God's eternity affect how we think about him? How should we respond to God, knowing that he is eternal?
4. How is it that we can say that Christ as incarnate is subject to the passing of time? How does this harmonize with the eternity of God?

For Further Reading

Bavinck, Herman. *Reformed Dogmatics*. Vol. 2, *God and Creation*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004. Pp. 160–64.

Prayer

Thank you that you have made a world of time. Thank you that you are superior to the world and time, and that we can rest in you in the midst of the changes we experience. Thank you for making yourself known in the resurrection of Christ.

3. Key terms in bold are defined in the glossary at the end of this volume.

Immutability (Unchangeability)

GOD IS IMMUTABLE.

What Is Immutability?

God does not change. Indeed, he *cannot* change, because he is God and he cannot be other than the God he is. The Bible affirms this truth directly: “For I the LORD *do not change*; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed” (Mal. 3:6). His unchangeable character also is on display in the verses we quoted earlier from Psalm 102:24–28. The passing away of human generations and the passing away of heaven and earth contrast with the abiding character of God. So verse 27 says that “you are the same.”

When we look at the context of these verses, we see that the unchangeability of God has practical value for believers. We need to rely on it. As Malachi indicates, God’s unchangeability is why “you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed” (Mal. 3:6). God is faithful to his promises and to his covenantal relation to the children of Jacob. They can count on him because he does not change from his commitments. And he does not change from his commitments because he does not change from being the same God.

Psalm 102:24–28 focuses more on the contrast between the unchanging God and the changing elements in creation, including the change from one generation to another: “take me not away in the midst of my days—you whose years endure throughout all

generations!” (v. 24). God is faithful from one generation to another in the covenant because he is the same (v. 27). But even beyond the relevance for human benefit, we should admire and adore God because he shows his superiority, his infinitude, and his majesty in being the same, in contrast even to the heavens and the earth, which remain for many human generations but still do not endure forever.

God in Action in the World

God’s unchangeability has given rise to a question: how, if God is unchangeable, does he act in such vigorous ways and varying ways through the course of history? I suspect that most of the time, people who are concerned to adore God in worship and to follow his ways do not worry. They do not treat God as though he were primarily an intellectual puzzle. Rather, they accept who he is.

It is natural for people with a mind renewed by the Holy Spirit to see the compatibility, indeed the harmony, of the two sides. Precisely because God is majestic and independent of the world, he can act in the world and bring about events in the world without his changing. Because he does not change, he continues in his covenant bond with the children of Jacob (Mal. 3:6). He relates to each person in the world personally, and that often involves different actions in differing circumstances. He gives grace to one; he punishes another for injustice. In both circumstances, he himself is the same; he is gracious and just. (See fig. 7.1.)

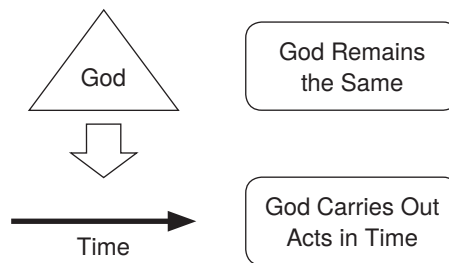


Fig. 7.1. God’s Acting

We will find mysteries when we think about how God acts. They are mysteries because God is greater than we—indeed, infinitely

greater. But they are mysteries rather than contradictions or puzzles. God himself finds no “difficulty” in remaining the same God and in acting in the world in a multitude of ways. He acts in each situation in harmony with his unchanging character. His character as the good God, a just God, a merciful God, leads to action (see Ex. 34:6–7).

Thinkers can produce difficulties if they mire themselves in unbelieving philosophy. They may take off into the air, using their reasoning as though they were autonomous and could dictate to God what he is like.¹ They may think of God’s immutability as though it were a total immobility, an inability to actually do anything. But that is not what God is actually like. If we absorb the Bible’s teaching at a practical level, we know better.

We will address later some of the philosophical questions that people have raised.

Immutability in the Resurrection of Christ

Does Christ change in his resurrection? He definitely does. His body changes by being transfigured. Before the time of his resurrection, like us he had a “natural body,” in the sense of 1 Corinthians 15:44–46. He was born as a human being, a descendant of Adam through Mary. He came “in the likeness of sinful flesh,” that is, Adamic flesh, though he had no sin himself, and in his work “he condemned sin in the flesh” (Rom. 8:3). His resurrection transfigured and transformed the preresurrection body (Phil. 3:20–21). After his resurrection, he had a “*spiritual*” body (1 Cor. 15:46–49). *Spiritual* here does not mean “ethereal” or “vaporous.” As we observed, his body was “flesh and bones,” which could be touched and handled (Luke 24:39). *Spiritual* means consummately filled with and enlivened with and glorified by the Spirit of God. He remains the same to this day in his heavenly reign.

1. Note Francis Turretin’s criticism of speculations, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison Jr., trans. George Musgrave Giger (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1992), 1.263, III.xxiv.16; 1.266–67, III.xxv.6, cited in Steven J. Duby, *Divine Simplicity: A Dogmatic Account* (London/New York/Oxford/New Delhi/Sydney: T&T Clark, 2016), 68n33.

So there is a pronounced change with respect to Christ's body. But the resurrection makes sense only if there is continuity between Christ before and Christ after his resurrection. The tomb was empty. The preresurrection body was not discarded, but transformed. Moreover, it is the *same* person, the person of Christ. Without that sameness, there is no salvation. How can Christ, who reigns today at the right hand of the Father, give us life and salvation unless he is the same Christ who died and rose? Clearly, we absolutely depend on this sameness, this constancy of the person of Christ.

Hebrews 1 underlines the same point. Hebrews 1:10–12 quotes from Psalm 102:25–27, a key passage that proclaims the immutability of God. It applies this passage to Christ the Son (Heb. 1:8). The words “You, Lord” in verse 10 designate the Son of verse 8. The Son “laid the foundation of the earth in the beginning” (v. 10). The heavens will perish, but you, the Son, “remain” (v. 11). You, the Son, “are the same, and your years will have no end” (v. 12). Hebrews 1 uses this passage from Psalm 102 in order to affirm the superiority of the Son to angels (Heb. 1:4–5, 13–14). His immutability is one way in which he is superior. His superiority is necessary for our salvation (1:3–4; 2:2–3).

Hebrews 1 recognizes a complexity. In verse 4 it talks about the Son's “having *become* as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.” It acknowledges a “becoming.” Against their Old Testament background, the quotations in verse 5 show that Hebrews has in mind the Davidic king, who is a type or prefigurement of the coming Messiah. Jesus the Messiah accomplished his work in time and space. As we have already seen, he was exalted as a result of his finished work. As man, as the last Adam, as the Messiah who is the son of David, he lived a human life, undergoing changes such as a human being undergoes (Luke 2:52; Heb. 5:7–10). “After making purification for sins, he *sat down* at the right hand of the Majesty on high” (Heb. 1:3).

But Hebrews 1 has also indicated that Christ “is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of *his nature*” (v. 3). He has the nature of God. He is God, and he is the imprint of or image of God. “He upholds the universe by the word of his power” (v. 3), a description that can apply only to God. Precisely because he is God forever,

God unchangeable according to Psalm 102:25–27 and Hebrews 1:10–12, he can obtain “eternal salvation” (Heb. 5:9).

The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office, but he holds his priesthood *permanently*, because he *continues forever*. Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he *always lives* to make intercession for them. (Heb. 7:23–25)

Hebrews has already made the point that with respect to Christ’s humanity and his human role as High Priest, he was *appointed* (Heb. 5:5). But Hebrews 7:23–25 also uses language that indicates how the divine nature of Christ supports his priesthood and makes the salvation eternal. The expression “continues forever” in 7:24 has a link to the expressions “remain” and “have no end” in 1:11–12. Since Christ is the same forever (1:12), and always lives (7:25), he is the same High Priest and offers the same access to God the Father forever.

The resurrection shows us the immutability of God’s plan, in that Christ was “foreknown before the foundation of the world but was made manifest in the last times” (1 Peter 1:20). The manifestation begins in a sense with his incarnation, but it includes the climactic manifestation in his resurrection. This manifestation was foreknown. If we wished, we could trace through the Old Testament the types and symbols that prefigured his resurrection, such as the transition of Noah’s family from the death represented in the flood to new life in the renewed world after the flood.

The resurrection also shows the immutability of God’s promises. For example, Acts 2:25–28 quotes from Psalm 16:8–11 and discerns in it a promise looking forward to Christ’s resurrection.² It thereby also shows the immutability of God’s faithfulness to his promises.

The resurrection shows the immutability of God’s justice, a justice made manifest in Christ’s vindication through his resurrection (Phil. 2:8–10).

2. Some interpreters have found in Psalm 16:8–11 only a narrow discussion of physical deliverances of David. But the psalm in its depth delves into the broader

The resurrection is the crucial point in Christ's work of salvation. It reveals an eternal salvation, and therefore also the eternal, unchanging Son who brings this eternal salvation. The resurrection of Christ manifests the immutability of God.

Immutability Applied to Us

God's immutability gives us security, as Psalm 102:27–28 reminds us:

but you are the same, and your years have no end.
The children of your servants shall dwell secure;
their offspring shall be established before you.

Because God is immutable, Christ's resurrection is secure and irreversible. Its effects and benefits are irreversible. And they are irreversible *for us*, in application to us. Christ himself remains the same through the ages: "Jesus Christ is *the same* yesterday and today and forever" (Heb. 13:8). This encourages us to have confidence:

Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you."
So we can confidently say,

"The Lord is my helper;
I will not fear;
what can man do to me?" (Heb. 13:5–6)

It also encourages us not to be led away by false teachings. We have already obtained from God truth that is permanent. The verse immediately following Hebrews 13:8 makes this point: "Do not be led away by diverse and strange teachings, for it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by foods, which have not benefited those devoted to them" (v. 9).

question of life in the presence of God (v. 11), which is possible only through salvation that permanently reverses death.

Key Terms

immutable, immutability³
unchangeable, unchangeability

Study Questions

1. What is the meaning of God's immutability?
2. How is God's immutability illustrated in Psalm 102:23–28?
3. How does God's immutability affect how we think about him?
How should we respond to God, knowing that he is immutable?
4. How is the resurrection of Christ consistent with the immutability of God?

For Further Reading

Bavinck, Herman. *Reformed Dogmatics*. Vol. 2, *God and Creation*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004. Pp. 153–59.
Berkhof, Louis. *Systematic Theology*. 4th rev. ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939. Pp. 58–59.

Prayer

Lord, thank you that you are unchanging. Sometimes we struggle with doubts, but you are always here, always faithful. Your salvation is secure for us through Christ's work. We praise you for the security that you have provided. We praise you that you are always the same.

3. Key terms in bold are defined in the glossary at the end of this volume.

God's Knowledge (Omniscience)

ANOTHER ATTRIBUTE OF God is *omniscience*. *Omniscience* means that God knows everything. He knows himself comprehensively. And he knows everything about the world that he created. God's "understanding is unsearchable" (Isa. 40:28). "God is greater than our heart, and he knows *everything*" (1 John 3:20).

Some people have argued that God does not know everything about the *future* because the future is not here yet and cannot be a genuine object of knowledge until it is here. But this view disagrees with the Bible. The Bible indicates that God knows everything about the future as well as everything about the past because he has sovereignly planned everything. He knows what will happen before it happens because he is the one that brings everything about according to his plan: we are "predestined according to the purpose of him who works *all things* according to the *counsel* of his will" (Eph. 1:11).

Isaiah 46:10 describes his plan:

declaring the end from the beginning
and from ancient times things not yet done,
saying, "My *counsel* shall stand,
and I will accomplish all my *purpose*."¹

1. See also Vern S. Poythress, *Chance and the Sovereignty of God: A God-Centered Approach to Probability and Random Events* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), pt. 1.

The fact that God can declare future things presupposes that he knows them.

In addition, God knows things comprehensively for the purpose of evaluating them. He is the Judge of the world (Gen. 18:25). “And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must *give an account*” (Heb. 4:13).² (See fig. 8.1.)

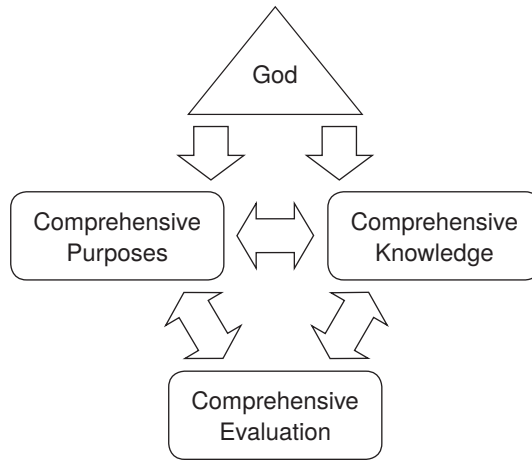


Fig. 8.1. God's Knowledge

This comprehensive knowledge is a comfort to believers. Because of his knowledge, he is able to care for, protect, and comfort them, and to lead them through trials:

For the eyes of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to give *strong support* to those whose heart is blameless toward him. (2 Chron. 16:9)

Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows. (Matt. 10:29–31)

2. Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison Jr., trans. George Musgrave Giger (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1992), 1.209, III.xii.13.

Omniscience in the Resurrection of Christ

The omniscience of God is displayed in the resurrection of Christ both in the wisdom that it displays and in the way in which it confirms that Christ is the one from whom we should seek all wisdom. First, the resurrection displays the wisdom of God in the way that he brought about salvation. The resurrection interprets the meaning of the preceding events of the crucifixion.

Let us then consider the crucifixion in the light of the resurrection. The subsequent resurrection says that no one should think of the crucifixion of Christ as merely the death of one more criminal in the Roman Empire. The crucifixion took place according to the plan of God: “this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite *plan* and *foreknowledge* of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men” (Acts 2:23). Foreknowledge is knowledge beforehand. It is a particularly striking and impressive form of knowledge because we human beings in our limited knowledge do not possess foreknowledge of events. We may be able to guess and hope and hazard predictions, but we do not *know* beforehand. God knows. This knowledge displays in a striking way that he is all-knowing. The subsequent resurrection is also according to the foreknowledge of God, as Peter demonstrates by quoting from Old Testament prophecies that foretell it (Acts 2:23–36).

Once we see how the crucifixion has a central role in God’s plan for salvation, we see that the crucifixion shows the wisdom of God, in contrast to the worldly evaluation of Gentiles (1 Cor. 1:22–23). That God would bring about salvation through weakness and disgrace in the cross looks outwardly foolish. Precisely because it is so surprising, even shocking, it shows the depth of wisdom in God:

Christ [is] the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. (1 Cor. 1:24–25)

As a result, the apostle Paul magnifies the wisdom of God, which is another side of his knowledge. He declares that Christ is “wisdom” (1 Cor. 1:30). He continues to magnify the wisdom of God

by connecting the gospel with the Holy Spirit, who “searches everything, even the depths of God” (2:10). It is the Spirit who empowers Paul’s understanding of the gospel and his preaching (vv. 1–5). “We impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory” (v. 7). This wisdom surpasses all wisdom in the world (v. 8). This wisdom has come to Paul in the knowledge of the crucifixion and the resurrection of Christ. He was first converted to it when the risen Christ appeared to him on the road to Damascus.

We can see a similar connection between Christ’s resurrection and his wisdom in Colossians 1–2. Colossians 1:18–20 proclaims the centrality of Christ in God’s work of salvation. Included in the picture is the affirmation that Christ is “the firstborn from the dead” (v. 18), a reference to his resurrection. The mystery of God’s way was not understood earlier (v. 26), which leads Paul to the affirmation that wisdom is found in Christ: “in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (2:3). The word *all* indicates the omniscience of Christ. This has become manifest through his work of salvation, and in his resurrection in particular.

Omniscience Applied to Us

Some of the implications are set out in 1 Corinthians 1–3 and Colossians 1–2. We are to grow in knowledge and wisdom through seeking Christ and believing in him, and not to be distracted by worldly claims or heretical claims promising special or deep knowledge.

What Next?

We could go on to consider God’s sovereignty, his goodness, his justice, and other attributes. But we will skip over these attributes in order to consider just one more: his simplicity.

First, let us praise God for what we have seen of his attributes.

Key Terms

foreknowledge

knowledge

omniscience³

Study Questions

1. What is meant by *omniscience*?
2. Why do some people think that there is a special problem about knowing the future?
3. What is the practical value of knowing that God is omniscient?

For Further Reading

Bavinck, Herman. *Reformed Dogmatics*. Vol. 2, *God and Creation*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004. Pp. 191–207.

Berkhof, Louis. *Systematic Theology*. 4th rev. ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939. Pp. 66–69.

Prayer

God, we thank you for who you are. You are infinite. You are so majestic and powerful. We are in awe of you. We thank you for your wisdom and knowledge. We thank you for making yourself known, and for healing through the work of Christ and the Spirit the sins in our mind and our heart that prevent us from worshiping you as you deserve.

3. The key term in bold is defined in the glossary at the end of this volume.

The Simplicity of God

NOW WE CONSIDER one more attribute of God, his *simplicity*.¹ What does it mean?

What Is Simplicity?

When applied to God, the words *simple* and *simplicity* have a special, technical meaning. Being simple is the opposite of being composed of *parts*. God cannot be decomposed into parts.

Physical Decomposition

Let us illustrate the contrast between being simple and having parts. Consider an apple. A single apple is an individual fruit, which we recognize as having its own integrity. It is a single whole. But it can be decomposed into parts. We can cut it in half. Or we cut it into several slices around the core, and leave the core as a distinct part in addition to the slices of the flesh of the apple. Each of the pieces into which we cut it is a part of the original whole apple. We can peel off the skin, and leave the skin as a separate part, distinct from the rest of the apple.

1. Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison Jr., trans. George Musgrave Giger (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1992), 1.191–94, III.vii.

The apple illustrates a more general truth about material things. Any ordinary material thing, including material things with their own recognizable integrity such as apples, can be decomposed into parts. God is the Creator, not a created thing. He is not material. So he cannot be decomposed into parts. Instead of being decomposable, he is *simple*; he is indecomposable.

One of the difficulties here is that we are dealing with the Creator-creature distinction. The word *part* makes sense to us when we talk about spatial distinguishable parts of an apple. Does it still make sense if we try to apply it to God? If it applied at all, it would have to apply in a way *analogous* to what we find with apples. And then how would the analogy work? What would it mean to say that God had *parts* or that he did not have them? God is mysterious, so we do not know in a precise way exactly what we are saying. We do need to say that God is not comparable to decomposing an apple into parts.

Is It in the Bible?

This discussion may seem a little strange. Unlike some of our discussion of God's attributes in the previous chapters, this discussion may seem remote from Scripture. Where does Scripture directly say that God is simple or indecomposable or without parts? It is difficult to come up with a specific verse. Francis Turretin, whose work we mentioned earlier, offers a discussion of a number of attributes of God. In most cases, he cites several texts from the Bible that talk about a single attribute. But the topic of simplicity is difficult. What does a person cite? Turretin does cite three verses (Ex. 3:14; Rom. 11:36; Heb. 12:9).² But it takes some further work for him to explain how they might be related to the topic of simplicity.

Further reflection may suggest that the absence of direct references in the Bible is not so strange. The person who comes to know God understands something of his majesty and absoluteness.

2. Turretin, *Institutes*, 1.191–94, III.vii. Herman Bavinck cites passages that state that God “is the truth, righteousness, life, light, love, and wisdom (Jer. 10:10; 23:6; John 1:4–5, 9; 14:6; 1 Cor. 1:30; 1 John 1:5; 4:8)” (Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004], 2.173). But it takes some additional discussion to see how this manner of expression implies simplicity.

Therefore, such a person understands, without its being said in so many words, that God is not another material thing. He understands also that God is the *ultimate* source for everything. So there cannot be parts behind him, which would prove to be more ultimate than he is. Nor can there be parts “ahead of him,” so to speak, into which he might be decomposed so that God as the whole God would no longer be there. The very word *part* cannot work with respect to God. The lack of explicit teaching about the simplicity of God is explained by the fact that ordinary people already intuitively understand that God is a unified whole. The simplicity of God is presupposed in the fact that God is God and is absolute in his majesty.³

Such a question about the simplicity of God does, however, arise when unbelieving philosophy creeps in. The history of Western philosophy—with some notable exceptions, of course—is largely a history of unbelief.⁴ It is a history of human beings’ trying to account for themselves and the world by unaided reason, apart from revelation. And, we might add, philosophers use reason in *resistance* to revelation, because general revelation is always all around them and even in them (Rom. 1:18–23). When a person comes to the doctrine of God with this mindset, he wants to know what is most ultimate. He will not stop with the mystery of who God is, but will want to analyze God himself into more ultimate constituents. So the question whether God has parts becomes a real point of discussion, rather than a foolish question whose obvious answer is “No, God does not have parts.”

Decomposition into Qualities

In addition to the idea of decomposition into parts, there is another, more subtle form of decomposition in which philosophers have been interested. It arises when we consider the distinction between a thing and its qualities. The apple that we considered earlier

3. Jordan P. Barrett finds further biblical support for the concept of simplicity in the coalescence of divine names and in the inseparable operations of the persons of the Trinity (Barrett, *Divine Simplicity: A Biblical and Trinitarian Account* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017], chap. 5, 133–62).

4. John M. Frame, *A History of Western Philosophy and Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2015).

has various qualities that we ascribe to it: it is red, it is juicy, it is round, it is shiny, it is about 2½ inches (6 cm.) in diameter. The qualities cannot actually be separated from the apple in the same way that its parts might be separated. We cannot take a knife and physically cut off redness, while leaving all the other qualities of the apple intact. (Cutting off redness is not the same as cutting off the *skin*, which is a *part* of the apple and without which the apple is skinless.) So in an elementary sense, we cannot physically decompose an apple into its qualities.

But a quality such as redness in some sense precedes the apple itself. There are other things that are red, and redness existed as a possibility for perception even before this particular apple existed. The existence of the apple makes sense only when we have a host of qualities already in place, qualities that can conceptually be imagined, preceding the existence of any one apple. So there is a sense in which an apple can be decomposed *conceptually* into various qualities. These qualities are semi-independent of the apple because the same qualities can be manifested in other things—let us say a red ball or a red sunset.

Decomposition by Classes

Besides the decomposition into qualities, there is another kind of conceptual decomposition, namely, a decomposition into genus, species, and particular instance. Let us continue with our illustration using an apple. We can look it up: apple trees belong to the genus *Malus*. One species within this genus is *pumila*, which is the species cultivated for apples that people eat. So an individual apple can be analyzed as one instance of the class of apples that is its species: *Malus pumila*. The species in turn is one grouping within the larger class that is the genus, *Malus*. The genus and the species have a certain priority to the individual case, because they both existed before the particular apple tree existed, and the particular tree existed before it bore fruit in the form of a particular apple. The apple is conceptually being decomposed into classes that help to explain what it is.

Even when we are not dealing with biological genus and species, we can classify items by using larger classes. A single serving spoon

is one instance of the class of all serving spoons. The class of serving spoons is part of the larger class of spoons of all kinds. And the class of spoons is part of the class of kitchen and dining implements.

God as Unique

So is God decomposable by qualities or by classes? No. There is a trivial sense in which God is a member of the “class” of all existent things. But God is unique. He does not really belong to a larger class of the *same* kind of things as himself. The Bible from its opening page indicates that God is God and that everything else is a creation of God. We confront two levels of existence, and the two should never be confused. So God is not one instance of a larger class of things of the same kind.

What about decomposition into qualities? As we observed with the case of an apple, the qualities are typically considered as preexisting the apple. But nothing preexists God. Moreover, God’s absoluteness implies that there are no qualities behind or above him, which would dictate from the outside what he has to be. For example, *eternity* is not an abstract quality outside God, existing forever, and determining from its own meaning what God has to be. On the contrary. God, as it were, defines eternity, rather than eternity’s defining God. God simply is eternal. Eternity does not precede him. We know about eternity because God, who is already eternal, tells us about himself. (See fig. 9.1.)

There is much mystery here. How do we conceive of eternity? How do we conceive of God’s comprehensive knowledge? God has to tell us. And he tells us not by appealing to resources *outside* himself, resources more ultimate than he is, but by telling us about himself. He is his own ultimate resource. What else would we expect? Of course, we cannot fully comprehend exactly what is happening. We cannot because God is God and we are not. That is all right. God knows what he is doing. We must trust him. Who is more worthy of our trust?

Now, verses in the Bible typically do not explain things with this specific kind of vocabulary—abstract vocabulary concerning things and qualities and classes and conceptual resources. There is no need to do so with ordinary believers. We see from what the Bible does say

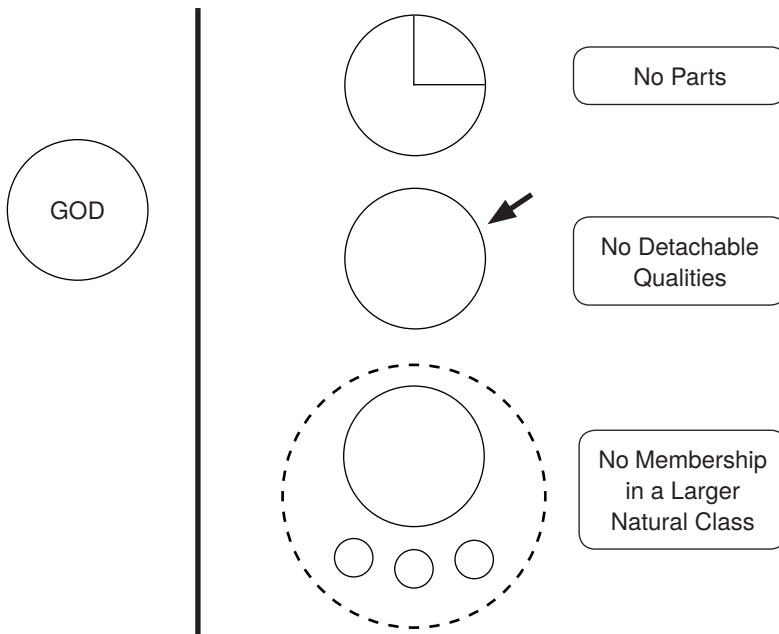


Fig. 9.1. God as Simple

that God is absolute. He needs no resources outside himself. *Everything* comes from him. Not only does every created thing come from him, but the conceptual resources he supplies come from his hand. But when unbelief arises in philosophy, people may try to produce plausible arguments to find something more ultimate than God.

At a practical level, the doctrine of God's simplicity tells us to beware of these arguments that postulate something more ultimate than God. We may meditate on and imitate the view expressed by the apostle Paul in his praise:

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!

“For who has known the mind of the Lord,
or who has been his counselor?”

“Or who has given a gift to him
that he might be repaid?”

For from him and through him and to him are *all things*. To him be glory forever. Amen. (Rom. 11:33–36)

Simplicity in the Resurrection of Christ

How does the resurrection of Christ display the simplicity of God? It is the simplicity of God about which we are asking, not the simplicity of the resurrection as an event in history. We can see a tacit understanding of simplicity when we note the reaction of the apostle Thomas when, after doubting, he finally meets the risen Christ. He exclaims, “My Lord and my God!” (John 20:28). His reaction is one of reverence and awe and worship. And worship must be offered to one God with our whole heart. The unity of worship presupposes the unity of God. God is not decomposable, and so the worship offered by Thomas is not decomposable into worship that he would offer to some part of God or some isolated quality of God. Thomas does not need to have reasoned out all these conclusions thoroughly, explicitly, and self-consciously in order to react in the way that he should. His reaction shows that in confronting Christ, he is confronting the one undivided God, the God who is simple.

The same holds for the experience of Saul when he meets Christ on the road to Damascus. He asks, “Who are you, Lord?” (Acts 9:5). As a person trained in the understanding of the Old Testament (22:3), he would have known that he was seeing a theophany, an appearance of the God of Israel, similar to what happened to Moses (Ex. 33:20–23), Isaiah (Isa. 6:1–13), and Ezekiel (Ezek. 1:1–28). His initial response, “Lord,” is reverent. As with Thomas’s, Saul’s response presupposes the unity and simplicity of God. He follows with another question, “What shall I do, Lord?” (Acts 22:10). He expresses the desire to serve the Lord with his whole heart, and the wholeness of service presupposes the unity and simplicity of the one he serves. Only the one true God deserves worship. Both Thomas and Saul show by their responses that they know that Christ is the one true God (with the Father and the Spirit).

In sum, the resurrection of Christ and his exaltation proclaim his deity, and with that deity his worthiness to be worshiped. We can see the implications for worship from several passages. Philippians 2:9–10 states:

Therefore [in response to Christ's death in obedience] God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth.

The exaltation leads to the response of "every knee should bow." The worship of Christ implies the unity and simplicity of one God, who Christ is. Ephesians 1:20–21 also links Christ's exaltation to his worthiness:

[His great might] he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come.

As a result of Christ's resurrection, he has an incomparable position, above "all rule and authority."

We can also see that the idea of simplicity implies that *all* of God's attributes are displayed through the resurrection of Christ, not just *some*. Of course, some attributes, such as his omnipotence, are more prominently displayed. But no attribute can be "broken off" and separated from the rest. So all the attributes are present when God works in raising Christ from the dead.

Implications of Simplicity for Us

We should respond to God's simplicity with the reverence of undivided worship, as Thomas and Saul did. And we should respond in our *thinking* and our theological reflection by resisting any temptation to divide God conceptually, by postulating eternal abstract concepts in back of God. Whenever we read about God in the Bible, or think about how he is at work in providence in our lives, we should realize that God is there with all his attributes, not just some.

Key Terms

decomposition
genus
part
philosophy
revelation
simple, simplicity⁵
species

Study Questions

1. What is meant by *simplicity* as a term describing God?
2. What, if anything, is the biblical basis for saying that God is simple?

For Further Reading

Berkhof, Louis. *Systematic Theology*. 4th rev. ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939. Pp. 62–63.
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Prayer

Lord, thank you that you have shown that “the LORD our God, the LORD is one” (Deut. 6:4). Thank you for the unity in our lives that comes from healing our divided allegiances. Thank you for the reconciliation to you that you have accomplished in Christ. May we serve you with our whole heart (v. 5).

5. Key terms in bold are defined in the glossary at the end of this volume.

PART 3

THE TRINITY—MYSTERIES IN DIVERSITY

We consider the plurality of persons in the
Trinity and their relations to one another.

The Mystery of the Trinity

NOW WE COME to consider the doctrine of the Trinity, in order to lay a foundation for enhancing our understanding of God and his attributes.

Does the idea of simplicity exclude the Trinity? No, it does not, when properly understood. One God is three persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. That is a summary of the doctrine of the Trinity. But the three persons are not three *parts* of God. It is not true that one of the persons is a third of a god. Neither are the persons merely qualities of God. Neither are they instances that belong loosely to some larger conceptual class, to which we give the name *God*. The Father is God, not a part of God. The Father manifests in himself the whole of what God is. He has all of God's attributes, including simplicity. And so it is with the Son. The Son is God, fully God. The Holy Spirit is God.

This is a mystery. We cannot comprehend it because God alone is God and we are not. Nothing in the created world offers a full model for the Trinity.

The Biblical Doctrine of the Trinity

The doctrine of the Trinity has been expounded and summarized many times. For fuller expositions, we refer readers to other sources.¹ Here is a brief summary of some of the biblical support.

1. John Owen, *A Brief Declaration and Vindication of the Doctrine of the Trinity* (1669), in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold (repr., Edinburgh/Carlisle,

There is only one true God: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is *one*” (Deut. 6:4; see Mark 12:29).

The Father is God: “there is one *God, the Father*, from whom are all things and for whom we exist” (1 Cor. 8:6).

The Son is God: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word *was God*” (John 1:1). The later context in John shows that the Word “became flesh” (v. 14) and is Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

The Holy Spirit is God:

But Peter said, “Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie *to the Holy Spirit* and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land? While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to man but *to God*.” (Acts 5:3–4)

The Father and the Son are distinct: “the Word was *with* God” (John 1:1).

The Son and the Spirit are distinct: “But when the Helper [the Holy Spirit] comes, whom I [Jesus] will *send* to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who *proceeds from the Father*, he will bear witness about me” (John 15:26). This and other verses also show that the Father is distinct from the Spirit.

We may summarize in a diagram (fig. 10.1).

Simplicity Misconstrued

Does the simplicity of God conflict with the idea of the Trinity? No.² God is who he is. Our view of simplicity has to conform to who

PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1965), 2.365–454; Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship*, rev. and expanded (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2019); John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002), 619–735; Vern S. Poythress, *Knowing and the Trinity: How Perspectives in Human Knowledge Imitate the Trinity* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2018), chap. 6. What appears in the present book is a condensation from this last source.

2. Note that Francis Turretin, in discussing simplicity, anticipates the possibility

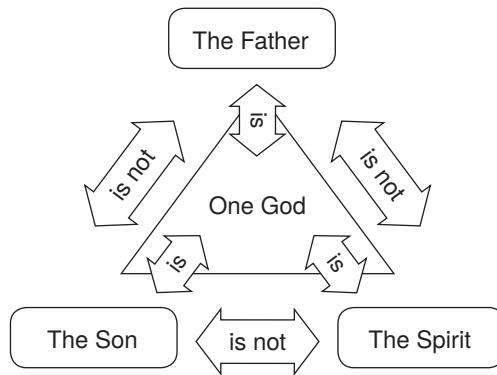


Fig. 10.1. Three Persons in One God³

he is, not vice versa. Yet it is easy to see that autonomous reasoning could misconstrue the idea of simplicity and bring it into conflict with who God is. Someone could reason that “simplicity” forbids *any* kind of distinction within God. He would conclude that God is one God, and *not* three persons.

At one level, the reply can be simple: “how do you know that you have the right view of simplicity?” In order for us to know, we need to have God reveal himself. And he does reveal himself, as the Bible indicates, according to the Christian view of immanence, corner 2 in Frame’s square. You cannot dictate to God what he must be. That would be a non-Christian view of immanence, corner 4 in Frame’s square.

A person could also get into difficulty in a more subtle way. To steer people away from looking for concepts or qualities more

of bringing simplicity into conflict with the Trinity, and rejects such a possibility (Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison Jr., trans. George Musgrave Giger [Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1992], 1.192, III.vii.5; 1.193, III.vii.8, 9; and 1.194, III.vii.16).

3. A diagram similar to this one, called the *Shield of the Trinity*, can be found in a number of places, such as J. Hampton Keathley III, “The Trinity (Triunity) of God,” May 18, 2004, <https://bible.org/article/trinity-triunity-god>, accessed February 20, 2017; <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Shield-Trinity-Scutum-Fidei-compact.svg>, accessed January 20, 2020. It appears in Cotton Faustina manuscript B. VII, folio 42v, from about A.D. 1210 (British Library; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Petrus_Pictaviensis_CottonFaustinaBVII-folio42v_ScutumFidei_early13thc.jpg, accessed January 20, 2020).

ultimate than God, expositors of simplicity have sometimes said that God's attributes are identical with his essence.⁴ But such language can be abused in a way that would put it in tension with the Trinity. How so?

The Son is God. But the Son is also uniquely the Son. We must allow ourselves to recognize the propriety of speaking of his sonship. That feature, that quality of his being Son is not simply, without further explanation, to be identified with God's essence (what God is). The Father is God, but we do not allow ourselves to confuse him with the Son by saying that he has the same feature of sonship.

Once we understand the biblical teaching on the Trinity, such things ought to be obvious. And they are, I think, obvious intuitively to many Bible readers. But there is always the danger that people may let their reasoning fly off in a way independent of the Bible. They move words about on the page, and move concepts about in their minds, without really considering God and standing in awe of the God about whom they attempt to speak. Even Christians can do it when they temporarily forget their heritage in Christ. Instead, we should be constrained by the fullness of biblical teaching. This principle holds for the idea of simplicity as well as elsewhere.

The Eternal Generation and Procession

We should briefly consider one other aspect of the doctrine of the Trinity, the eternal relations between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The Nicæan-Constantinopolitan Creed affirms that

4. "Whatever in God is essential and absolute is God himself. Thus the absolute attributes may be *identified* really with the divine essence and are in it essentially, not accidentally" (Turretin, *Institutes*, 1.193, III.vii.14, italics mine). Here, the absolute attributes (things such as God's eternity) are identified with the divine essence (who God is). The purpose, I think, is to head off having people treat them as something outside God or conceptually preceding him. Note how careful Turretin is to speak of "absolute attributes" and thereby exclude "the personal property of the Son" (Turretin, *Institutes*, 1.194, III.vii.16) and "relative attributes" (Turretin, *Institutes*, 1.193–94, III.vii.15). In my opinion, he makes these exclusions not on the basis of autonomous reasoning, using a preformed idea of simplicity, but on the basis of biblical teaching, which he uses to shape the way in which we should understand simplicity. Turretin's view of simplicity is a Trinitarian-informed simplicity.

the Son is eternally begotten by the Father: Jesus Christ is “the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds.” The creed goes on to say that Jesus Christ is “begotten, not made.”⁵ It thereby distinguishes the eternal begetting from the human analogue, in which a human father begets or fathers a son.

The language is analogical and deeply mysterious. We cannot specify exactly how the analogy works because God is incomprehensible. The language about eternal begetting affirms that the conception of Jesus Christ in the womb of Mary has a deeper, eternal background. The ultimate basis for the incarnation lies in who God always is. Jesus Christ incarnate truly reveals the eternal Son, and his conception by the work of the Father in Mary truly reflects the eternal relation between the Father and the Son. So Luke 1:35 declares:

The Holy Spirit will come upon you [Mary], and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the *Son of God*.

As usual, we must respect the nature of God’s transcendence and immanence when we consider our knowledge. As an implication of immanence, we affirm that the incarnation truly reveals God. The relation of the Father to the Son in the incarnation reflects an eternal relation. We express this eternal relation by affirming that there is an eternal begetting. This affirmation of eternal begetting underlines the fact that God truly shows us who he is, and he shows us also the true nature of eternal relations among the persons of the Trinity. This affirmation protects us from non-Christian transcendence, according to which God becomes unknown and the incarnation reveals something less than what God always is.

In addition, as an implication of transcendence, we affirm that the eternal begetting is mysterious. It does not imply that the Son was “made.” God is Creator, and we are creatures. The incarnation involves the adding of human nature to the Son, the addition of a creaturely nature, which is not the same as the eternal begetting, a divine reality.

5. Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom with a History and Critical Notes*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1919), 2:58.

Similar truths hold with respect to the Holy Spirit. In the context of redemption, John 15:26 affirms that the Holy Spirit is sent: “But when the Helper comes, whom I [Christ] will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me.” As an implication of immanence, we affirm that this work of redemption truly reveals who God always is. So we infer that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son eternally. That is to say, there is a background in the nature of God for how God works in redemption. As an implication of transcendence, we affirm that this eternal proceeding is mysterious, and is distinguishable from the work of the Spirit in redemption, which reflects the eternal relations. The Nicæan-Constantinopolitan Creed says that the Holy Spirit “proceedeth from the Father.” The Western form adds “and the Son,” affirming that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son.⁶

We must refer readers to other works for a fuller discussion.⁷

The Trinity in the Resurrection of Christ

How does the resurrection of Christ display the Trinitarian character of God? All three persons participate in the resurrection of Christ, but they do so in ways that distinguish the persons. Romans 8:11 contains an excellent summary: “If the *Spirit* of *him* who raised *Jesus* from the dead dwells in you, *he* who raised *Christ Jesus* from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his *Spirit* who dwells in you.”

God shows his infinite power in the resurrection. It is one God, acting to bring us salvation. So the unity of God is on display. At the same time, we can see the distinction of persons. God the Father is the one who raised Jesus. The Spirit is the source of life for us in applying the resurrection of Christ to us. He “dwells in you.” The parallel between God’s raising Christ and God’s giving life to “your mortal bodies” suggests that the Spirit is the source of life in both cases.

6. Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 2:59.

7. A good starting point can be found in Letham, *Holy Trinity*. For my own brief discussion, see Poythress, *Knowing and the Trinity*, chaps. 24–25.

So the Spirit was involved in the resurrection of Christ in imparting resurrection life to his body.

The distinction between the persons in the resurrection shows that the doctrine of the Trinity is implicit in Romans 8:11, and implicit in the resurrection itself, which intrinsically involves the unity of God and the distinct modes in which the three persons participate in the resurrection.⁸

The Bible also indicates that it is appropriate to apply the language of begetting to Christ's resurrection:

And we bring you the good news that what God promised to the fathers, this he has fulfilled to us their children by raising Jesus, as also it is written in the second Psalm,

“You are my Son,
today I have *begotten* you.” (Acts 13:32–33, quoting from
Ps. 2:7)

The Father gave new life to Christ when he raised him from the dead. This work of the Father analogically reflected the eternal relation of begetting in the Trinity. The resurrection is therefore a window through which we can see the relation of eternal begetting.

The Trinity in the Resurrection for Us

If we belong to Christ, we are united to him. And so the resurrection of Christ implicates us in new life:

If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. (Col. 3:1–3)

8. “The Father does it [gives communion] by the way of *original authority*; the Son by the way of communicating from a *purchased treasury*; the Holy Spirit by the way of *immediate efficacy*” (John Owen, *Communion with the Triune God*, ed. Kelly M. Kapic and Justin Taylor [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007], 104, italics original).

This new life is a life proceeding from the Father, through the Son, who lives forever, and given in the Holy Spirit, who unites us to our Savior. The Trinitarian character of the resurrection has its effect on us.

Key Terms

attributes⁹

essence

mystery

persons

simplicity

Trinity

Study Questions

1. What is the doctrine of the Trinity?
2. What is the biblical basis for the doctrine of the Trinity?
3. Is the doctrine of the Trinity fully comprehensible to human beings? If not, why not?
4. Why is the doctrine of the Trinity important?
5. How is the doctrine of the Trinity illustrated in the resurrection of Christ?
6. What is *eternal begetting*?

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9. Key terms in bold are defined in the glossary at the end of this volume.

Goold, 2.365–454. Reprint, Edinburgh/Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1965.

Poythress, Vern S. *Knowing and the Trinity: How Perspectives in Human Knowledge Imitate the Trinity*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2018. Chaps. 24–25.

Prayer

Our God and our Father, through Christ the Son, we thank you that you have given us salvation and communion with you by the power of the Holy Spirit. Thank you that the Holy Spirit has united us to Christ the Son. We thank you that you are the majestic, Trinitarian God, just as you have revealed yourself to be in the Bible. We pray that we may always honor you in our thoughts and words, and not let our thoughts or words stray into the paths of autonomous philosophy. May our understanding of your attributes grow and deepen in accord with what you actually say about yourself in the Bible.

Coinherence

WE SHOULD TAKE note of another feature concerning the Trinity, namely, the mutual indwelling of the persons of the Trinity.

Biblical Basis

The Gospel of John indicates that the Father is *in* the Son and the Son is *in* the Father:

Do you not believe that I am *in* the Father and the Father is *in* me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who *dwells in* me does his works. Believe me that I am *in* the Father and the Father is *in* me, or else believe on account of the works themselves. (John 14:10–11)

The Bible also indicates that the Holy Spirit dwells in God (1 Cor. 2:11), and that through the Holy Spirit the Father and the Son dwell in believers (John 14:17, 20, 23).¹ We infer that each of the persons of the Trinity dwells in each other person. This mutual indwelling has been called by various terms. We will use the term *coinherence*.

1. *Coinherence* is also called *circumincessio*, *circumcessio*, *circumcession*, and *perichoresis*. See Vern S. Poythress, *Knowing and the Trinity: How Perspectives in Human Knowledge Imitate the Trinity* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2018), chap. 7 and app. J.

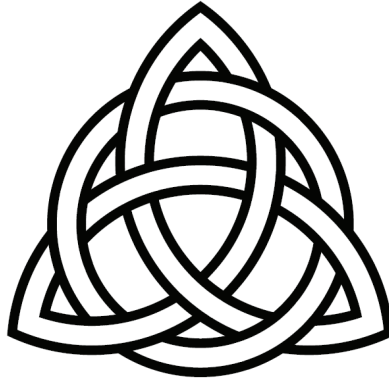


Fig. 11.1. Triquetra Symbol for the Trinity and Coinherence²

Implications for Joint Action

The coinherence of the persons means that each is completely present to the others. Each has complete knowledge of the others. Each acts with the others in the works of God in creation, redemption, and consummation.

We have already seen one implication in observing that the Father and the Son, and not merely the Holy Spirit, dwell in believers when the Spirit dwells in them. In Romans 8:9–10, the text moves directly from “the Spirit of God” to “the Spirit of Christ” to “Christ . . . in you”:

You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God *dwells in* you. Anyone who does not have the *Spirit of Christ* does not belong to him. But if Christ is *in* you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness.

So though each person is *distinct* from the other two persons, each person is never in *isolation* from the other two persons. The persons are not *separable*. This relation of persons is unlike the situation

2. AnonMoos, public domain (<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Triquetra-circle-interlaced.png>).

with human beings. Each human being not only is distinct from others, but can be separated, both in thought and in spatial location. The coinherence of persons in the Trinity does not have any equivalent within creation, though there are analogies.³

Coinherence presents us with a kind of harmonious bridge between the biblical teaching on the unity of God (one God) and the biblical teaching on the distinction of persons. The persons are indeed distinct, but they are also profoundly one, through coinherence. Each person is fully God, the one God.

Coinherence in the Resurrection of Christ

We can see coinherence illustrated in the resurrection of Christ. We earlier observed that in Romans 8:11 each person has a distinct role in the resurrection. God the Father raises Christ; Christ is the one being raised; and the Spirit is the power of the resurrection. But at the same time, we have *one* resurrection event. The persons act in harmony, and each is present in the action of the other two. Thus, Christ also says in John 10:18 that he has authority to “take it up again,” that is, to take up his life that he has laid down. He takes up his life as a person indwelling the Father, who raises him from the dead. This joint participation in divine action by each person of the Trinity is highly mysterious because there is nothing quite like it among human persons. It is incomprehensible, just as God is incomprehensible. It is mysterious, but it is also glorious. How majestic are God’s ways!

Coinherence Applied to Us

This coinherence of persons in the Trinity has implications for us. The Holy Spirit dwells in us who believe in Christ. Through his indwelling, the Father and the Son also dwell in us (John 14:23). We have communion with God, and we participate in the benefits of Christ’s work, because Christ and the Spirit are coinherent.

3. For many analogies in threefold perspectives, see Poythress, *Knowing and the Trinity*.

Key Terms

coinherence, coinherent⁴

indwelling

knowledge

mutual

persons

Study Questions

1. What is meant by *coinherence*?
2. What is the biblical basis for the idea of coinherence?
3. What is the practical importance of coinherence?
4. What does coinherence imply about the limits of our knowledge of God?

For Further Reading

Poythress, Vern S. *Knowing and the Trinity: How Perspectives in Human Knowledge Imitate the Trinity*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2018. Chap. 7.

Prayer

We thank you, God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, for the mystery of one in three. We thank you for the benefit we receive in having each person dwell in us.

4. Key terms in bold are defined in the glossary at the end of this volume.

Trinitarian Action Revealing God

LET US CONSIDER a way in which the Trinity offers the foundation for how God reveals himself to us. God reveals himself in *action* in history. These actions are Trinitarian.

The Actions of Three Persons

The actions of God in time, like the creation of plants (Gen. 1:11–13), the dividing of the waters of the Red Sea (Ex. 14:21), or the provision of manna in the wilderness (Ex. 16:14–15), are always actions of the one true God, who is three persons. All three persons are present in the actions. And yet we can also see a differentiation in the *mode* in which each person acts in bringing about the major turning points in history.

God the Father is preeminently the one who *plans* and *ordains* and *initiates* the course of history and the events that take place. The Father *sends* the Son into the world to accomplish redemption. The idea of sending presupposes that the Father has already determined a mission for the Son. What the Son accomplishes is what the Father has planned. The Holy Spirit applies the accomplishments of the Son to those who are united to the Son by faith. (See fig 12.1.)

So we have three aspects: planning, accomplishment, and application. In the large story of redemption, these aspects have a succession in time. The planning belongs to the past. God has already planned from before the foundation of the world what he would do in redemption (Eph. 1:4; 1 Peter 1:20; Rev. 13:8). The accomplishments

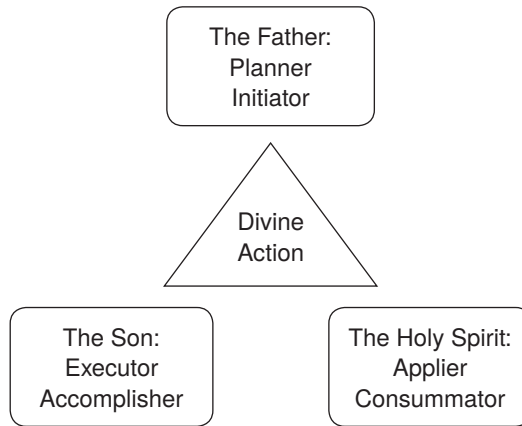


Fig. 12.1. Trinitarian Action

belong especially to the time of the earthly life of Christ, including his death and resurrection (“made manifest,” 1 Peter 1:20). The application belongs especially to the time when the Holy Spirit is at work from Pentecost onward.

A Broader Pattern of Structured Accomplishment

But we need to add two notable features to this picture. The first is that the structure of planning, accomplishment, and application is a pattern that has more than one exemplification in history.

For example, on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2), God pours out the Holy Spirit according to what he had already planned and promised (Luke 24:49; compare Joel 2:28–29). The pouring out of the Holy Spirit is a historical watershed for the whole people of God. But also on the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit actually comes on particular individuals. And this aspect of his coming is an application of redemption to those distinct individuals. The coming of the Holy Spirit has a Trinitarian structure: “[Jesus] being therefore exalted at the right hand of God [the Father], and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he [Jesus, the Son] has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing” (Acts 2:33). Jesus’ exaltation is one aspect of his accomplishment, which is *from* the Father. And it leads to the giving of the Spirit to the church and to individuals in it.

Likewise, the exodus from Egypt involved God's plan, its accomplishment, and its application to the people of Israel in their new experience of freedom and becoming a holy nation under the law of God. God announced beforehand to Moses that he would accomplish the exodus. Then he carried it out. And the people were organized into a new nation at Mount Sinai (Ex. 19:5–6).

The exodus takes place in the time of the Old Testament, before we receive in the New Testament the clearer and more detailed revelation concerning the Trinitarian character of God. But we know that God was *already* Trinitarian in the time of the Old Testament. We know that he would have acted in harmony with his Trinitarian character. So we can infer that the work of the exodus involved a differentiation of persons. The Father was preeminently the planner. The Son was the accomplisher or executor of the plan. He was symbolized by the Passover lamb and by the language describing God as divine warrior (depicted later in Revelation 19:11). He fought against Pharaoh to deliver Israel (Ex. 15:3–7). The Holy Spirit too was present, in association with the pillar of cloud and fire (see Isa. 63:10–13).¹

Though there is a logical sequence from planning to accomplishment to application, some aspects of application may be simultaneous with accomplishment. The pouring out of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost is an accomplishment in the history of redemption, and at the same time an application to the individuals who received him. The accomplishment of the exodus is simultaneously the application of that accomplishment, since each individual Israelite is taken out from under slavery in Egypt.

The Involvement of All Three Persons Together

The second point to add is that all three persons are involved in all three phases of divine action because they indwell one another (coinherence, chap. 11). We have said that the Father is *preeminently*

1. For more on the association of the Holy Spirit with the cloud of glory, see Meredith M. Kline, "The Holy Spirit as Covenant Witness" (ThM thesis, Westminster Theological Seminary, 1972); Meredith G. Kline, *Images of the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980); Vern S. Poythress, *Theophany: A Biblical Theology of God's Appearing* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), chap. 17.

the one who plans redemption. But in the fellowship of the persons of the Trinity, the Son and the Holy Spirit mysteriously participate in the planning too.²

Consider next what happens when the Son comes to earth and accomplishes redemption. The Son *executes* the mission of the Father in time. Jesus is preeminently in focus in this execution. But Jesus proclaims, “The Father who dwells in me does his works” (John 14:10). The Father is there, as a person who “dwells in” the Son, in the very events in which the Son is the preeminent actor and executor. These acts also take place by the power of the Holy Spirit, who has been sent from the Father at the time of Jesus’ baptism (Matt. 3:16; Luke 3:22; 4:1, 18–19).

Finally, when the Holy Spirit comes to believers, he comes as the Spirit who comes from the Father and the Son (John 15:26). Through his presence, the Father and the Son dwell in believers (14:23).

The Differentiation of Personal Activities

The indwelling of the persons of the Trinity means that we cannot *separate* the activities of the three persons. For example, it would be wrong to say that at one point only the Father is operating, in *isolation* from the Son and the Spirit, and then at another point only the Spirit is operating. They are all present. And yet, along with this truth, we have the complementary truth that the Bible teaches a differentiation. It is the Son, and not the Father and not the Spirit, who became incarnate. It is the Son whose work is in focus in the accomplishment of redemption on earth. Since God is always the Trinitarian God, and he always acts in harmony with who he is, we can infer that a similar differentiation in the participation of persons occurs in the exodus, at Pentecost, and everywhere through the entire history of the world.

The differentiation occurs even in God’s works of creation. First

2. John Owen, Πνευματολογία, or *A Discourse concerning the Holy Spirit*, in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold (repr., Edinburgh/Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1965), 3.161–62; Benedict Bird, “John Owen and the Question of the Eternal Submission of the Son within the Ontological Trinity,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 80, 2 (2018): 329–31.

Corinthians 8:6 declares that “for us there is one God, the Father, *from whom* are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, *through whom* are all things and through whom we exist.” The expressions “from whom” and “through whom” are not interchangeable. Colossians 1:16–17 and John 1:1–3 imply a similar differentiation. In Genesis 1, by implication, God the Father is the speaker, saying, “Let there be light” (v. 3). The words uttered reflect the presence of the Son as the eternal Word. The Holy Spirit is present, “hovering over the face of the waters” (v. 2). His presence expresses his intimate contact with the world. His hovering hints at the fact that he is the one who applies the word of God in personal presence to the things that are made.

Our earlier labels, *planning*, *accomplishment*, and *application*, invite us to think of three works of God that take place at different times. But if we think only about distinct actions that take place at distinct points in time, it is a simplification. To stress the simultaneity of the presence of the three persons, we could use somewhat different labels: *initiation* (*from* the Father), *mediation* (*through* the Son), and *production* (*in* the presence of the Holy Spirit).³ (See fig. 12.2.)

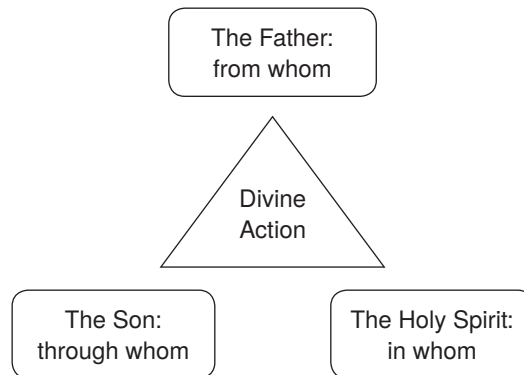


Fig. 12.2. Trinitarian Actions in Distinct Modes

3. Note that in Colossians 1:17 the created order is described by saying that “in him [the Son] all things hold together.” The preposition *in* is used. Various prepositions can be used with respect to all three persons of the Trinity, depending on the context. We simplify this complexity anytime we do a summary.

Whatever labels we use, the Trinity remains as mysterious as ever. All these works are the work of *one* true God. They all intimately involve all three persons. At the same time, the Bible shows us a differentiation in the mode or way in which each person acts in relation to the others and in relation to the total work. The work of creation, for example, is from the Father and through the Son (1 Cor. 8:6).

Trinitarian Action in the Resurrection of Christ

How does the resurrection of Christ display the Trinitarian action of God? Trinitarian action is clearly there in Romans 8:11: “If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.”

The role of the Father is not merely in planning, but in actually bringing about the resurrection of Christ, according to his plan (1 Peter 1:20). But what actually takes place in the world before human eyes is the resurrection of Christ, in his person. So Christ is still in focus in the execution of the plan. The Holy Spirit is the one who applies: “he [the Father] . . . will also give life to your mortal bodies *through his Spirit* who dwells in you.” The preceding clauses in Romans 8:11 show that this work of the Spirit applies the resurrection of Christ, which has already been accomplished.

Key Terms

accomplishment
action
application
differentiation
mode
plan
send
Trinity⁴

4. The key term in bold is defined in the glossary at the end of this volume.

Study Questions

1. How is the doctrine of the Trinity reflected in the works of God?
2. What kind of differentiation is there in the works belonging to one person of the Trinity?
3. How do the works of God illustrate the coinherence of the persons of the Trinity?

For Further Reading

Poythress, Vern S. *Knowing and the Trinity: How Perspectives in Human Knowledge Imitate the Trinity*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2018. Chap. 9.

Prayer

We honor you and thank you for the mystery of who you are and the mystery of your acts.

PART 4

THE TRINITY AND LANGUAGE

We consider the Trinitarian basis for divine communication.

The Origin of Language

HOW MIGHT WE further enrich our thinking about God in his majesty? We consider how God reveals himself in language. This focus is important because it affects how we think about the language both in the Bible and in theology that is used to describe God.

Exploring an Implication of Simplicity

The idea of simplicity, properly understood, itself provides a suggestion for how we might deepen our appreciation for God. As we observed in chapter 9, one of the functions of simplicity is to steer us away from trying to find concepts in back of God, concepts more ultimate than God himself. Consider the concept of omniscience. God is omniscient. His knowledge is complete and infinite. Omniscience is not something in back of God, a concept preexisting God. It is not something logically preceding God, to which he is forced to conform. Rather, it is one way in which we describe God for who he is. The source for our thinking is always in God, not in something in back of him.

Since God is the Creator, he is the source for everything concerning every creature: “from him . . . are all things” (Rom. 11:36). God’s ultimacy should affect not only how we think about created things, but how we treat the created structure of the human mind, and the structure and composition of each human language in the world. These all derive from God. God, as we have already observed,

does not need any “resources” outside himself in order to create the world as a whole. And neither does he need any resources to craft the structures of human thinking and language.

Producing Thought and Language

So how does God have within himself resources that would serve as a source for human thinking and language? It will not work simply to try to deduce what the resources might be, while ignoring God’s revelation. For such a deduction would take place *within* human thought or language or both. How could we within our limitations know for sure what those limitations might be? Fortunately, in the Bible God himself has given indications concerning how our thinking and our languages come about.

Let us begin by focusing on thinking, not language. God himself thinks. To be sure, his thinking is not on the same level as ours. He is the infinite Creator, while we are only creatures.

For my *thoughts* are not your *thoughts*,
neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD.
For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my *thoughts* than your *thoughts*. (Isa. 55:8–9)

At the same time, the use of the key word *thoughts* in Isaiah 55:8–9 indicates a relation between God and man. God’s thoughts are higher than man’s thoughts. But it is the case that God has *thoughts*. If there is no relation at all between God’s thoughts and man’s, then the word *thought*, when applied to God, has no meaning. It would be as though Isaiah 55:8 were to say, “For my kemlats are not your thoughts.” The use of the same word *thought*, in the plural, implies that there is a similarity of some kind between the two. The details of this similarity are, however, left mysterious. They must be mysterious, precisely because God’s thoughts are not ours. As we observed earlier, only God knows God comprehensively (chap. 2).

How could there be any relation at all between God’s thoughts and ours? God must be the source both of human thoughts *and* of

the relation of those thoughts to his own. He is the source by virtue of having created human beings. When we go back to Genesis 1, we find out more specifically about his work of creation:

Then God said, “Let us make man *in our image, after our likeness*. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.”

So God created man in his own *image*,
in the *image* of God he created him;
male and female he created them. (Gen. 1:26–27)

God says that man is made “in our image, after our likeness.” Genesis 5:3 picks up on this same theme, and applies it when it describes Adam’s fathering Seth: “he [Adam] fathered a son in his own *likeness*, after his *image*, and named him Seth.” The English in Genesis 1:26 and 5:3 (ESV) faithfully reproduces what is going on in the original Hebrew. The two verses switch the order of the two key words, *image* and *likeness*, and the verses link these two words with *in* and *after* in a reverse way. This switching shows that we should take the two key words as having overlapping meaning. God made man to be like God. And the likeness extends to more than one point, so that we can see man, and not just one feature about him, as being like God.

In what ways is man like God? In many ways. Genesis 1:28 discusses dominion. Human dominion over animals and plants reflects on a lower level the original dominion of God over all creation. But this dominion is only one feature that links God to man. Genesis 1:26–27 and 5:3, when taken together, invite us to understand that there may be more features, and that in a coherent way these features are so structured that human beings as whole creatures are like God, while being on the level of creatures.

Included, then, in this likeness is the matter of thought. God has thoughts. Human beings in turn have thoughts. In doing so, they reflect God’s ability to have thoughts. And when their thinking follows the truth, the truth that they know originates in God. They reflect God’s thoughts and God’s truths. (See fig. 13.1.)

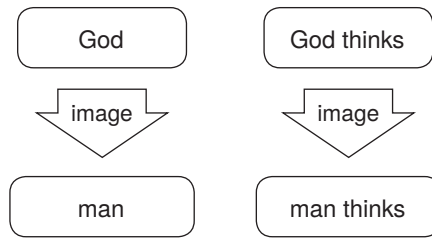


Fig. 13.1. God's Thoughts and Man's

What about languages? The likeness to God extends to language. To begin with, God speaks. He speaks in the process of creating the world. He speaks several times: “And God *said*, ‘Let there be light’” (Gen. 1:3). “Let there be an expanse in the midst of the waters” (v. 6). “Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together into one place” (v. 9). Other verses in Genesis 1 continue the same pattern. In leading up to the creation of mankind, God speaks to himself: “Then God *said*, ‘Let *us* make man in our image, after our likeness’” (v. 26). Then God speaks to address human beings directly: “And God said to *them*, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion” (vv. 28–30). This last speech indicates that mankind has the ability to receive and understand speech. As we see later in Genesis, he also has the ability to speak in turn. Adam names the animals (2:19). Man speaks in imitation of God's speech. (See fig. 13.2.)

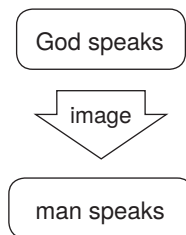


Fig. 13.2. God's Speech and Man's

The Foundation in God

The Bible shows that the foundational resources exist in God for creating man in the image of God. God has the ability to create; then

he shows this ability in his powerful words of command at several points in Genesis 1. But it is also important that man is made specifically in the image of God. This aspect of mankind distinguishes him from animals and plants. Mankind has a spiritual nature, and is crafted by God so that he can have personal communion with God. This personal communion is at the heart of what makes mankind distinct from animals. Included among the distinct abilities of mankind is the ability to think and to communicate with language. Man has these abilities as a gift from God, in imitation of God. These abilities are in use when we receive what God tells us in the Bible, and when we think about what he tells us. If we are listening and thinking as we ought to, empowered by the Holy Spirit, we are imitating God and we are experiencing truths that God has given us, truths that have their origin in God himself, who is the God of truth (Isa. 65:16), who is the source of all truth (Rom. 11:36), who knows all truth comprehensively (Isa. 40:14, 27–28; 46:10). We are experiencing personal communion with God, which is what we were made for.

The theme of the image of God is first mentioned in Genesis 1:26. But theologically it has deeper roots, as is shown in the New Testament. The idea of image applies to God the Son in his role as Creator: “He [the Son] is the *image* of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him” (Col. 1:15–16). Hebrews 1:3 contains a similar affirmation using different words: “He is the radiance of the glory of God and the *exact imprint* of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power.” Philippians 2:6 speaks of the Son as being “in the *form* of God.”

All three New Testament verses describe the relation of the divine Son to the Father in a manner that precedes redemption. We infer, therefore, that the Son is the image of the Father always, and not merely with respect to his role in redemption. When God created man in his image, God already had within himself an original pattern of imaging. Namely, the Son is the image of the Father.¹

1. Vern S. Poythress, *Knowing and the Trinity: How Perspectives in Human Knowledge Imitate the Trinity* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2018), chaps. 8, 11.

We also know that the Holy Spirit is in fellowship with the Father and the Son. The Spirit was involved in the work of creation (Gen. 1:2; compare Job 33:4; Ps. 104:30). So the Spirit was also involved in creating man in his image.

God is one God. His unity is the firm guarantee that the created world that he made will have harmony and will be fundamentally unified. But God also has resources in himself that are the foundation for the *diversity* in the created world. The world as a whole is created, and is *distinct* from its Creator. Man, made in the image of God, is *distinct* from God. This distinction rests on the deeper distinction *within* God. The Son as the image is distinct from the Father, who is the pattern *for* the image. The Son is the *divine* image. Man is a created image. But still, man's distinctness rests on a deeper distinctness, the distinctness of the Son from the Father. (See fig. 13.3.)

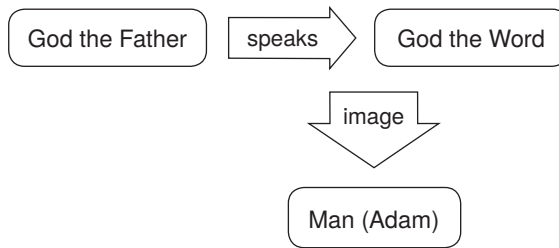


Fig. 13.3. Two Images

God's Speech

We can see similar truths when we focus on language.² As we already observed from Genesis 1, God speaks to bring the world into existence, and his word also specifies distinctness and structure within the world. God speaks, for example, to separate the waters from the waters (v. 6), to separate the sea from the dry land (v. 9), and to specify the creation, structure, and function of the heavenly lights (vv. 14–15). God also gives distinct names to some of the things that he has created (vv. 5, 8, 10). He thereby shows that his gift of language

2. See further Vern S. Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language—A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009).

includes distinctions. Indeed, the distinctions in his language precede the distinctions in the world of things, because his commands precede the existence and structure of the things created by his commands. Psalm 33:6 summarizes Genesis 1 by saying, “By the *word* of the LORD the heavens were made, and by the *breath* of his mouth all their host.”

God’s words of command have a deeper foundation in God himself, as John 1:1 reveals: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” The expression “in the beginning” and the discussion of creation in verses 2–4 show that verse 1 of John 1 is alluding to Genesis 1. The specific words that God issues in command in Genesis 1 reflect the reality of the eternal Word, who was in the beginning with God. As John 1 unfolds, we learn that this Word “became flesh” (John 1:14). Jesus Christ, who was and is the eternal Word, became incarnate. The distinction between the Word and God the Father is the ultimate foundation for distinctions in the distinct words of command in Genesis 1. And the words in turn create distinctions in created things, such as the distinction between the waters below and the waters above (Gen. 1:6–7). (See fig. 13.4.)

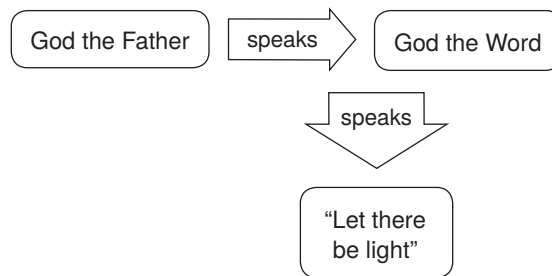


Fig. 13.4. God’s Speaking to the World

The Holy Spirit is also involved with the word of God. He is sometimes represented as being like the “breath” of God that brings the power of God to bear on its object (Ezek. 37:9–10, 14). He is also the recipient or hearer of the word of God: “whatever he [the Holy Spirit] *hears* he will speak” (John 16:13). The two functions are not so far apart, because in human speech, breath carries the speech to its destination, to those who hear. (See fig. 13.5.)

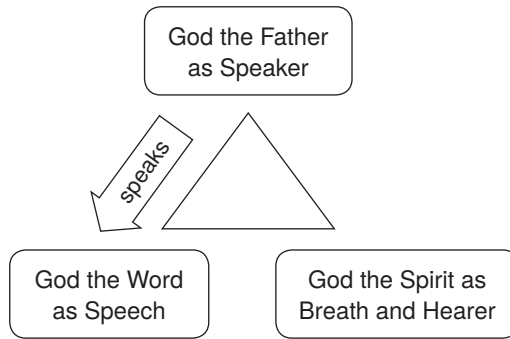


Fig. 13.5. The Trinitarian Source for Language

The Importance of Diversity in God

God is one God. There is only one. And God is simple, as we saw in chapter 9. But God is also three persons. The unity of God does not compete with the distinction of the three persons because the persons are coinherent. Divine simplicity is the simplicity of this one God in three persons, not a simplicity that we just conceive and define out of our own heads. If it just comes out of our heads, we are really trying to think independently of God.

A danger is present, because people could conceivably define simplicity as a *kind* of unity that would be in tension with any diversity whatsoever. And indeed, something like this route has been traveled by Plotinus, a Neoplatonist, who stressed the ultimacy of what he called “the One.” This “One,” he thought, was beyond all description, because any human words of description would be distinct from other words and would in the end fall short of the ultimate, pure unity of “the One.”³ But Plotinus at this point contradicts Scripture, which shows us that God can describe himself truly and accurately by using a plurality of words.

In addition, the idea of simplicity has been construed to mean that every attribute of God is identical with God (more precisely, with the divine essence). We have seen that there is a commendable impulse

3. John M. Frame, *A History of Western Philosophy and Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2015), 78–80.

here, namely, to make sure that we do not conceive of some attribute as an abstract concept that is more ultimate than God. Nothing functions as a divine determiner *behind* God. But there is some danger of possible misunderstanding of what is meant by *identical*. People could infer that every attribute is identical with every other attribute. They might say that there can be no real diversity in attributes because diversity would undermine unity. Do they then deduce that there is no difference in meaning between *eternity* and *omniscience*? If there is no difference in meaning, we do not know what either term means.⁴

But God has provided us with language that *does* contain differences in meaning. Genesis 1 shows that God himself speaks diversely. He gives a variety of commands, and each one has meaning. The diversity of commands in Genesis 1 comes from God. God has resources in himself that enable him to produce this diversity. The speeches in Genesis 1 reflect the Word of God mentioned in John 1. The diversity in speeches has its foundation—mysteriously, of course—in the diversity of persons, the diversity of Father and Word and Spirit. The Bible designates the distinct persons with distinct *terms*. So the diversity of terms ultimately derives from the diversity of the persons. And then, with a further diversity in terms, God speaks to create diversity in the world. (See fig. 13.6.)

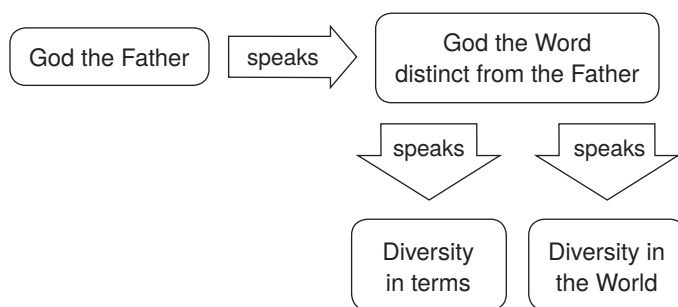


Fig. 13.6. Diversity in God and in the World

4. Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison Jr., trans. George Musgrave Giger (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1992), 1.188–89, III.v.8–12, discusses this point. We will consider what he says in more detail in chapter 30. See also Thomas Aquinas, *The “Summa theologia” of St. Thomas Aquinas* (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1920), 1.158, [1a] Q. 13, art. 4, “I answer.”

We can make similar observations about the speeches in which God tells us about himself. He uses a variety of words and sentences with distinct meanings (Ex. 34:6–7; Isa. 40:12–31). Some of the words correspond to divine attributes—God is merciful, gracious, slow to anger, loving, faithful, great, powerful, glorious, majestic, exalted. God supplies in language a diversity of meanings, as well as affirming that he is one God to whom all the meanings pertain. From where does the diversity of word meanings and attributes come? If we follow the principle of God’s self-sufficiency, we may say that God has resources in himself for giving us this diversity. All diversity is in some way a reflection of the original diversity, namely, the diversity of distinct persons in the Trinity.

Diversity runs deep, just as deep as does unity. God is the archetype, the original pattern for unity. He is also the archetype for diversity. Manifestations of unity and diversity that we receive as human beings are what we might call *ectypes*, reflections of the archetype.

Distinctions and Variation: In Goodness

Let us consider another kind of manifestation of unity in diversity. We have considered unity and diversity displayed in the unity of one God with diversity of attributes. But we can also consider a single word such as *good* that designates an attribute of God. God is good. He is the source for all reflected instances of good on earth. We know what the word *good* means because it has an integrity or unity, in contrast to other words such as *evil*. Here, the unity of God is reflected in the unity of the meaning of the word *good*. The word *good* also has a spectrum of uses. We use it to say that God is good (Pss. 86:5; 119:68; etc.). But God himself uses it also in describing the goodness of things he has made: “And God saw that the light was *good*” (Gen. 1:4). “And God saw that it was *good*” (v. 10). There are two levels of good. God is the archetype of goodness. The things he has made may reflect goodness. But they do so on the level of the creatures.

God gives good things to us who are human beings. And these good things testify to God’s goodness: “Yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did *good* by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness” (Acts

14:17). We know the goodness of God through the goodness of his gifts. The two ought not to be separated from each other, as if they had nothing to do with each other. But if we listen to what the apostle Paul is saying in Acts, we also recognize an important distinction. God is the Creator, and the rain and the food are creaturely things.

Thus, both unity and diversity are built into the way in which the word *good* functions. This unity and diversity are due to the sovereign control of God over language—over English, Greek, Hebrew, and every other natural language. Moreover, the unity and diversity function within *contexts* of meaning and personal communication. When we say that God is good, we can tell from context that we are talking about the level of the Creator, the divine level of goodness. When we say that food is good, we can tell from context that we are talking about the creaturely level of goodness. But the creaturely level exists within the context of God's work of creation and providence. This context indicates that the creaturely goodness of food testifies to the divine goodness: "Yet he did not leave himself without *witness*" (Acts 14:17).

God himself is the archetype for unity and for diversity and for context. Each person of the Trinity is diverse (distinct from the other persons); each person loves in the context of the other persons. There is mystery in unity and diversity and context within language because this mystery reflects the original mystery of one God.

We can distinguish, but not separate, the three aspects in the word *good*, namely, unity of meaning, diversity in meaning, and context in meaning. Since these three are distinct, it is natural to trace this distinctness back to the plan of God. God specified them as distinct. That specification is in accord with God's own ability.

As usual, we can say that God has resources in himself to specify the nature of the word *good*. The ultimate resources are found in who God is. He is one God, which is the foundation or archetype for why the three aspects in the meaning of *good* cannot be separated. God is also three persons. When God acts, his action is always consistent with who he is, the one God in three persons. And this principle extends naturally to embrace how God specifies the structure of the word *good*. The Father, as ungenerated, is the archetype for the unity in the meaning of the word *good*. The Son, as eternally begotten or

eternally generated, is generated as *distinct* from the Father. The Son is in this way the archetype for the diversity or variation in the meaning of the word *good*.

What about the Holy Spirit? The Spirit functions with us human beings as the bond by which God dwells in us. It is he who unites us to Christ and to the Father. The Spirit is the *context* for our union with God. This work of the Spirit reflects within the context of salvation an eternal relation in the Trinity, according to which the Spirit expresses the love that the Father has for the Son:

For he whom God has sent utters the words of God, for he gives the *Spirit* without measure. The Father *loves* the Son and has given all things into his hand. (John 3:34–35)

The Spirit functions as the bond of love, or the context of love.⁵

The particular function of the Spirit in the Trinity and in salvation is analogous to the way in which meaning exists in *context*, in relation to an environment of meaning.

In dealing with language and created things, particular labels have been developed for designating the three aspects of words such as *good*. First, the word *good* has a unity and identity. Its unity involves a contrast with other words. The unity is in focus when we look at what we may call *contrastive-identificational features* of the word. For short, we call this aspect *contrast*. Contrast in words reflects the unity expressed preeminently in God the Father.

Second, the word *good* has a diversity of uses, and at least some diversity in nuances of meaning in these diverse uses. This diversity is called *variation*.⁶ Variation within a single word reflects the diversity in God, expressed preeminently in God the Son.

5. Poythress, *Knowing and the Trinity*, 68–71.

6. The three terms occur in Kenneth L. Pike, *Linguistic Concepts: An Introduction to Tagmemics* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), pt. 2; see also Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word*, chap. 19. For further confirmation and development of this thinking, see Vern S. Poythress, “Reforming Ontology and Logic in the Light of the Trinity: An Application of Van Til’s Idea of Analogy,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 57, 1 (1995): 187–219; Poythress, *Knowing and the Trinity*, chap. 8 and app. F; Vern S. Poythress, *Logic: A God-Centered Approach to the Foundation of Western Thought* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), chap. 18.

Third, the word *good* occurs in *contexts*, which color how we understand it. The linguistic label for these contexts is *distribution*. The distribution of the word *good* consists in the contexts in which it is found, or could typically be found. Distribution reflects the fact that within God himself, each person acts in the context of the other two. The Holy Spirit preeminently expresses this contextual reality in God. (See fig. 13.7.)

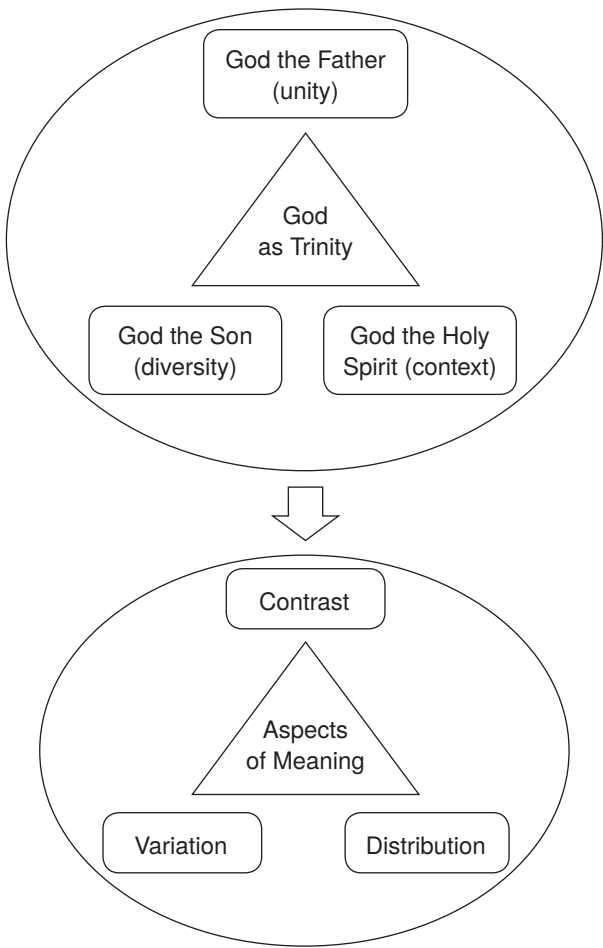


Fig. 13.7. Unity and Diversity in Meaning

Altogether, each word, like the word *good*, has contrast, variation, and distribution operating simultaneously. The three are not really

separable, but always occur together. In fact, each is *in* the others. Any element of contrast itself has contrast, variation, and distribution, or we would not be able to consider it. This interlocking of the three aspects of meaning reflects the coinherence in the persons of the Trinity.⁷

The Meaning of *Fatherhood*

We may see the wisdom of God displayed also in the word *father*. God the Father is the original Father. Human fathers are created analogues. There are two levels of meaning. The two meanings are related because we really do mean something when we say that God is our Father. On the other hand, the two meanings can be distinguished because divine fatherhood is the archetype. Human fathers die, but God does not. A human father fathers his biological children by means of biological processes, but God is the Father of the divine Son forever, without any biological process. Contexts enable us to distinguish the two levels. But the levels are also related, rather than isolated from each other. God created all human fathers in such a way that they reflect divine fatherhood, and God is present to empower human fathers in their fatherly care toward their children.

The word *father* has contrast, variation, and distribution. First, it has *contrast*. A particular meaning attaches to it. The word *father* has not only its own meaning, but its own spelling and its own pronunciation, which *contrast* with other words and allow us to identify the word *father* as the particular word that it is. Without this unity in the word, we could not appreciate the connection between God the Father and human fathers.

Second, the word *father* has *variation*. We use it to designate any number of human fathers. More notably, we use it to designate God the Father, who is Father on the archetypal level. *Variation* is there whenever we have two levels.

Third, the word *father* has *distribution*. It appears in contexts. The

7. Poythress, *Knowing and the Trinity*, 389, 396. Contrast, variation, and distribution function as three interlocking *perspectives*. For the roots of perspectives in the Trinity, see Poythress, *Knowing and the Trinity*, chaps. 30–31.

contexts enable us to discern how the identity and variation in meaning occur in different cases. (See fig. 13.8.)

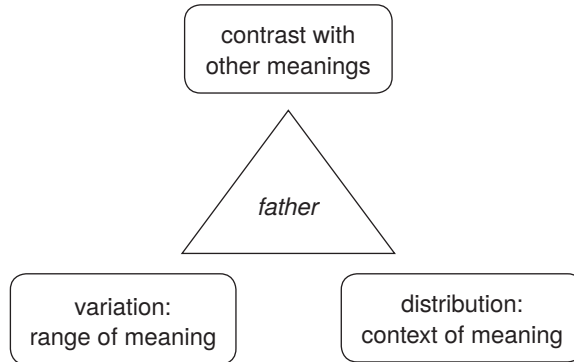


Fig. 13.8. The Meaning of *Father*

The Meaning of *Omniscience*

Consider now the word *omniscience*. Does it have two levels of meaning, one for the Creator and one for creatures? No. The *omni-* part of *omniscience* already creates a specialized meaning. *Omni-* is derived from the Latin word for “all.” To be omniscient is to be *all*-knowing. The word *omniscience* applies to God alone. God alone is all-knowing, and human beings are not. It might seem, then, that this word has a kind of “pure” meaning, unrelated to creation. It might seem that it is not entangled with analogy and with a spectrum of meanings, that is, the spectrum of variation.

But that is not the whole story. The word *omniscience* also includes within its spelling a second piece, namely, the *-science* piece. If we trace it back to its origin in Latin, that piece is associated with the idea of knowledge. God’s knowledge is actually knowledge. And human knowledge is knowledge. So we still have to say that there are two levels of knowledge. God’s knowledge is the original, the archetype; human knowledge is derivative, an ectype. God’s knowledge is complete, infinite; human knowledge is finite and partial. This distinction of levels does not look so different from the distinction between God’s goodness and the goodness of food.

We can arrive at a similar result by asking, “How do we know what omniscience is?” We do so partly by analogy or comparison. We say that God knows, and we mean by it that God has about him something similar to what we have when we have human knowledge. It might be well to add that the idea of ascribing knowledge to God is not a kind of optional add-on to the meaning of *knowledge*. It is not as though we could manage perfectly well with a merely human level, as if God did not exist. And then we would later on apply the word *knowledge* to God, by a kind of unnatural and debatable stretch. Rather, God who knows is always the sustainer of human knowledge. All truth has its root in God, who is the original knower, not in the human being who knows the truth. In the Bible, God tells us that he knows (Isa. 40:28).

What does the *omni*- prefix do for us? The *omni*- prefix is not a magic elixir for meaning, automatically creating a meaning with no subsequent relation to other meanings available in human language. In fact, *omni*- is related to the Latin word *omnis*, which means roughly the same as the English word *all*. To be omniscient is to be “all-knowing.” Within the two-word expression *all-knowing*, the word *all* functions as part of a context that tells us to think in terms of the divine level of knowing. But the words have their meaning in relation to a context that includes other uses of *all* as well as other uses of *know*.

For example, human beings *know* that darkness follows after daylight. Even animals “know” in a kind of diminished sense, analogous to human knowledge: “The ox *knows* its owner, and the donkey its master’s crib” (Isa. 1:3). The word *all* also has a multitude of uses. *All* residents of Jerusalem normally live in Jerusalem, and nearly *all* of them normally go to sleep at night. These are the kinds of uses of the words *know* and *all* that children encounter as they grow up and hear language being used. If they hear English, they learn the meanings of *know* and *all*. The words have meaning in relation *both* to situations in the created world and to God, who sustains them.

The main point here is that even a word such as *omniscience*, which in a direct way applies only to God, has connections with a larger area of meaning. If it had no connections at all, it would have no meaning. The meanings that we receive come to us in relation

both to God and to the world that reflects the bounty, goodness, and omniscience of God.

Moreover, if we are dealing with a child who has never heard the word *omniscient*, we have to explain what it means. We say that it means “all-knowing.” From then on, the words *all* and *know* have provided part of the distribution of the new word *omniscient*. In a way, the child has to carry along in his memory the meanings of *all* and *know* for all future uses of the word *omniscient*. Each new use is a use of the *same* word, which has an identity and contrasts with other words. Each new use is also a *variation*, because we see that it is a new use. Each new use has its own context, which is its distribution. The word *omniscient* has contrast, variation, and distribution because that is always true of words in the languages that God has given us. And it is truly reflective of the nature of God, who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in inseparable unity and coinherence.

The Meaning of *Infinity*

Similar observations apply to a word such as *infinity*. Only God is infinite, just as only God is omniscient. We do sometimes use the word *infinite* in other ways. We may say, hypothetically, that “even an *infinite* amount of money cannot buy happiness.” Or we use exaggeration: “It took me an *infinite* amount of time to deal with the tax audit.” In practical life, the word *infinity* and the corresponding adjective *infinite* have meanings that intersect with a considerable number of contexts. We have distribution in these contexts; we have variation in meaning. We also have the single word *infinite*, which is a unique, identifiable word contrasting with other words. We understand partly by contrasts in meaning: what is infinite is not finite. It is not bounded or limited.

But we understand also by comparison. We may talk loosely about an “infinite number of options” when we have in mind a large number of options, which could be multiplied indefinitely if we exercised our imaginations.

God is, as usual, both like and unlike these examples within the created world. When we say that God is infinite, the meaning of the word *infinite* becomes colored in a subtle but still notable way by the context in which it is used. We are talking about God, and God is

the Creator, while we are creatures. That fundamental distinction is always there in the background when we talk about God, whether or not we acknowledge it. And that distinction, the distinction between Creator and creature, depends, as we saw, on the still more fundamental distinction between the persons of the Trinity. God in himself is already diverse with respect to the persons. Otherwise, no creation and no created diversity are possible.

We may return to our earlier point. The Father is the preeminent archetype for the unity of God, and this unity is reflected in the unity of meaning in all the occurrences of the word *good* or the word *knowledge* or the word *infinite*. The Son is the preeminent archetype for diversity in God because he is the eternally begotten One. The archetypal diversity in the persons of God is then reflected in the variation in different uses of the word *infinite*. The archetypal contextual role of the Holy Spirit in the Trinity is reflected in the distribution of the word *infinite*.

The Meaning of *Meaning*

Our approach to meaning has some nuances to which not everyone is accustomed. We may illustrate with three pictures representing ways that people think about meaning.

(1) In the first picture, meaning is a sharp point of a spear. Many people who do not normally think about language may imagine that the meaning of a word or a phrase can be made perfectly clear by just focusing on it and analyzing it. This view is somewhat like trying to have only contrast (no variation and distribution).

(2) In the second picture, meaning is a flat tabletop. There is a range of meaning, represented by the extent of the table. But the range extends only so far, to the edge of the table. This is like trying to have contrast, plus a token form of variation.

(3) The third picture, corresponding to the triad of contrast, variation, and distribution, represents meaning as a hump with relations or arms connecting it to neighbors. The boundaries of just where meanings fade off are not necessarily sharp; rather, they depend on the “neighbors,” that is the verbal, literary, and communicative contexts. (See fig. 13.9.)

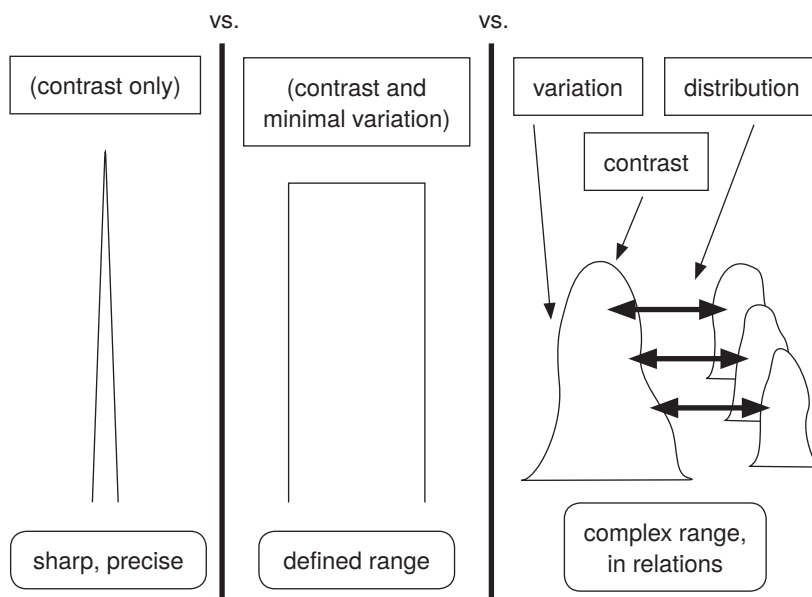


Fig. 13.9. Three Views of Meaning

Pictorially and metaphorically, contrast is represented by the peak, variation by the gradually sloping sides, and distribution by the relations with neighbors. These three reflect within language the unity and the three persons in the Trinity. All three aspects are necessary for the coherent functioning of meaning.

Truths about Thinking

We have been focusing mostly on language, rather than on thought. But the two are closely related. We often think by using language, and communication in language expresses in accessible form the thoughts of the people who are communicating. What is true of language is true also concerning human thought. Thoughts have integrity; they contrast with other possible thoughts. They also have variation. We think not with infinite precision, but with thoughts that cover a range. “The ox knows its owner” (Isa. 1:3) covers more than one ox, and more than one observation about how oxen behave in relation to their owners. When we think about an ox, we think often

in this kind of way. Particulars (“this ox”) are thought about in the context of other instances (“any ox”).

The Nature of Thought and Language

In short, both thought and language have complexities about them. Human thought reflects divine thought, but at the level of the creature. Human speech reflects divine speech, but at the level of the creature. Both have structure reflecting the mystery of the Trinity. The unity, diversity, and contextuality of a word meaning reflect the mystery of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit in their coinherence. Similarly with the meaning of thoughts.

We cannot master either our thoughts or our language because there is mystery all the way through. We are made in the image of God. And as we have seen, being in the image of God itself has its root in God, in the person of the Son, who is the eternal Image of the Father (Col. 1:15; Heb. 1:3). Our language reflects the Son, who is the Word of the Father (John 1:1). We can see several ways, not only one way, in which God has resources in himself that offer the only ultimate foundation for the functioning of our thoughts, our words, and our whole persons, in imitation of God or in a process of reflecting God. God is incomprehensible. And derivatively, our own thoughts and language and use of language are incomprehensible precisely because they reflect God, who is incomprehensible.

This mystery continues with us when we endeavor to use thoughts and words to describe God and his attributes. We can describe truly, and we can know God truly. God has crafted languages and human minds so that that can happen. But our description and our knowledge are never comprehensive. Once again, God’s display to us of his majesty should be a motive for praise.

Language in the Resurrection of Christ

How does the resurrection of Christ display the origin of language? What it displays more directly is that God is the origin of the new creation. He created the world originally (Gen. 1). That is in the background when he brings the new creation in Christ (2 Cor.

5:17). The resurrection body of Christ, as we indicated earlier, is the beginning of the new world beyond death. Christ himself is like the foundation stone for that world. He is the “firstborn from the dead,” as Colossians 1:18 states, and the “firstfruits” (1 Cor. 15:23).

Christ called Lazarus back from the dead in John 11:43. That foreshadows the fact that God calls Christ forth from the dead in his resurrection. And that idea is confirmed when we remember that it is God who has sent out words promising the resurrection. Psalm 2:7 sets forth God’s word:

I will *tell* of the *decree*:
The LORD *said* to me, “You are my Son;
today I have begotten you.”

Acts 13:32–33 indicates that the Old Testament promise is fulfilled in the resurrection of Christ:

And we bring you the good news that what God promised to the fathers, this he has fulfilled to us their children by *raising Jesus*, as also it is written in the second Psalm,

“You are my Son,
today I have begotten you.”

The resurrection of Christ also results in sending out new words from God, as the message of the gospel multiplies in the book of Acts (12:24). These new words from God reflect the deeper fact that in the original creation in Genesis 1, God sent out new words.

The word of the gospel in Acts, like the words of God in the original creation in Genesis 1, has Trinitarian structure. God the Father is the source of the gospel (Isa. 52:6–7). Its content, its “word,” is Christ himself. It announces what Christ has already done and that he is reigning. The announcement takes place in the power of the Holy Spirit, who was poured out at Pentecost (Acts 2:33). The giving of the Holy Spirit fills the disciples so that they have power and boldness in their proclamation: “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my *witnesses* in Jerusalem and in all

Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8; compare Luke 24:49).

Language Affecting Us

We experience God’s Trinitarian nature when we receive the gospel. We receive Christ, and the Holy Spirit dwells within us to enable us to understand the things of Christ (1 Cor. 2:12).

Key Terms

context

contrast, contrastive-identificational features⁸

distinctions

distribution

diversity

father

good

image of God

imitation

infinity

language

meaning

Plotinus

revelation

thought

truth

unity

variation

Study Questions

1. How is God the origin of language?
2. What is the significance for human language and thought of man’s being made in the image of God?

8. Key terms in bold are defined in the glossary at the end of this volume.

3. What is the foundation within the Trinity for the theme of reflection or imaging?
4. What is the archetype within the Trinity for divine speech?
5. What is the ultimate foundation for distinctions existing between things in the world?

For Further Reading

- Poythress, Vern S. *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language—A God-Centered Approach*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009. Chaps. 2–4. Also pp. 154–55.
- . *Knowing and the Trinity: How Perspectives in Human Knowledge Imitate the Trinity*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2018. Chaps. 8, 11. Also p. 389.

Prayer

God, thank you that you are who you are, as the ultimate source for unity and diversity. Thank you for the unity and diversity in your thoughts and words, and for the ways in which these are reflected in the unity and diversity in our thoughts and words. Thank you for giving to us the gifts of thought and language. Thank you for the wonderful display of your wisdom in the gospel, which gives us Christ himself.

God and Anthropomorphism

WE HAVE A challenge to appreciate the ways in which language and human thinking are gifts from God. They are gifts through which we may know him, and in fact do know him. We know him truly but not comprehensively, as we noted in chapter 2. Our understanding of what we in fact know can be subtly influenced by how we think about language and our own thought. Let us consider it.

Anthropomorphism

When people use language to describe God and his attributes, we can observe at least three styles of approach (with some overlap between them). In this chapter, we consider the first style, which we may call *anthropomorphic*.¹ God can be described by using language appropriate for human beings. When we say that God is our *Father* or that God *loves* his people, we use words such as *father* and *love*

1. *Anthropomorphic* etymologically derives from the meaning “in the form of man.” More than once, Francis Turretin uses the term *anthrōpopathōs*, with the sense “as having human feelings” (Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison Jr., trans. George Musgrave Giger [Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1992], 1.206, III.xi.11; 212, III.xii.27). He means that God is described with terms for human feelings, such as *anger* and *joy*. The point is similar to what is achieved with the term *anthropomorphic*. We are using the term *anthropomorphic* broadly, to designate language describing God in a manner similar to how we would describe human beings.

that can also describe human characteristics. The Bible can also use language that draws analogies with human eyes or other bodily parts: “For the *eyes* of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to give strong support to those whose heart is blameless toward him” (2 Chron. 16:9). God does not have a body, so the language about his “eyes” does not refer to a bodily part in him, but describes him “anthropomorphically,” by analogy with the function of human eyes for a whole human person.²

This style describes God in analogy with human beings. The Bible makes it clear that God is not a human being:

God is not *man*, that he should lie,
or a *son of man*, that he should change his mind. (Num. 23:19)

The contextual fact that a verse describes God, and the fact that the Bible elsewhere describes this God as the Lord of heaven and earth, makes a difference. As readers, we are expected to grasp that analogy is not an identity. In some ways God’s knowledge is like ours, and in other ways not. (See fig. 14.1.)

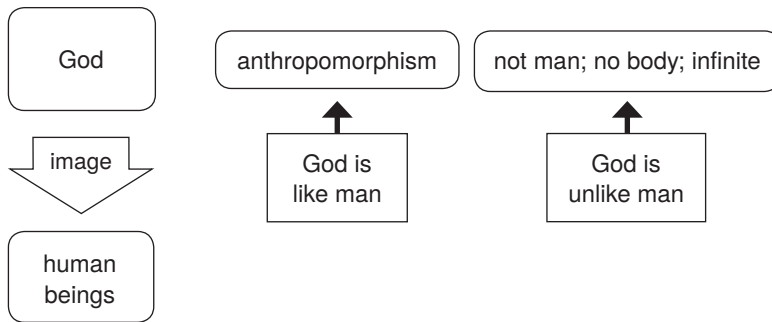


Fig. 14.1. Anthropomorphism

So we have to make sense of the total teaching of the Bible, and adjust to the fact that a comparison of God’s knowledge to man’s does not imply a limitation on God’s knowledge. God’s knowledge is not limited just because man’s knowledge is limited. So, for example, in the

2. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 2:99–101.

Bible we find references to God's coming down to see a situation, that is, to evaluate it (Gen. 11:5; 18:21). If a human being or an angel came down, and we heard a similar description, it might be reasonable to think that the human being observed the situation in order to find out more than he knew before, in order to evaluate it. If a human being felt that he could not rely on someone else's report, he would have to get close to a person or a city and make many observations in detail in order to make sure that he was thoroughly informed. If he were appointed to make an official decision as a judge, he would take pains before making any authoritative evaluation of a person or a situation.

But the same is not true with respect to God. Because God is God, the analogy concerning knowing and seeing remains very much an analogy. We must respect that. In Genesis 11:5 and 18:21, the language with respect to God assures us that God minutely takes into account everything about the situation, even more so than a carefully observant human being or an angel might. God is thoroughly knowledgeable. And God uses his knowledge in action when he brings positive commendation and blessing or when he brings negative judgment and curse.

Neither of the two verses says that God did not know the facts beforehand and that therefore he came down. Some people might infer that he did not know. But it is an inference. And it is a precarious inference, given that the language is analogical, anthropomorphic. In the end, it is a false inference because it contradicts other biblical texts. God *does* know, as we have already said (Isa. 40:28; 46:9–11; chap. 8 above).

Kinds of Comparisons

The Bible includes many comparisons between God and human beings. We might expect as much, because man is made in the image of God.

Some descriptions of God use comparisons with human beings that rely primarily on one point of similarity or a limited number of points. For example, Exodus 15:3 says, "The LORD is a *man of war*." Both the Lord and a man can wage war. But they wage war in two different ways: God as Sovereign Creator and man as a creature.

Sometimes also the wars they wage are on two different levels. God through Christ defeats Satan (Gen. 3:15), while human wars are primarily against human enemies.

Consider another example: “The LORD is my shepherd” (Ps. 23:1). His care is like a shepherd’s. But there is also a difference between God and a human shepherd. God shepherds human beings rather than animals. We have to take into account that the similarities between divine and human action do not extend to every detail about human shepherds’ relations to their sheep.

In addition, the Bible sometimes uses references to parts of the body in comparisons. So it talks about the *eyes* of the Lord, or the *mouth* of the Lord, or even his *feet* (Isa. 60:13). Perhaps these expressions are somewhat more challenging, because the comparison is not directly about the relation of divine eyes to human eyes, but the *function* of eyes in being a means of knowledge. Still, it is not hard for someone informed by the Bible to discern the main point. There are also passages that make a comparison with some particular kinds of human *action*. God’s speech is analogous to human speech. God’s planting a garden (Gen. 2:8) in Eden is analogous to a man’s planting a garden.

God’s Love

We can illustrate the point about language with an example, namely, our understanding of God’s *love*. What does it mean to say that God loves us in Christ? If our picture of love starts with merely human love, we might project every piece of this picture onto God. We get a picture that may make God like a superman, but may still treat him as if he were finite. In this view, God is merely human love writ large.

At the other extreme, we may be tempted to infer that God is not like that in any way. Let us consider a particular person (call him Don), who begins by emphasizing the ways in which God is *not* like a human being. Let us also suppose that Don thinks that the word *love* always means merely human love. Instead of saying that God loves with a divine love, Don may say that he does not love at all. It merely “seems as if” he loves, because the effects are like human love.

But clearly that is not satisfactory. It minimizes the nature of God's love, and the wonderful grace that we experience in being the objects of God's love when we do not deserve it. It also contradicts the biblical texts that say that God loves us. The proper way forward is not merely to think about every example of human love that we know, but to think in the way that God himself provided in Christ. "By this we know *love*, that he [Christ] laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers" (1 John 3:16). "But God shows his *love* for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8). It is Christ who opens for us the true knowledge of God (chap. 2).

God *does* love us in Christ. He says so in the Bible. And his words are true. He does not merely seem to love us. But his love is not exactly parallel to instances of human love that we may have in mind. We are reckoning with the Creator-creature distinction. (See fig. 14.2.)

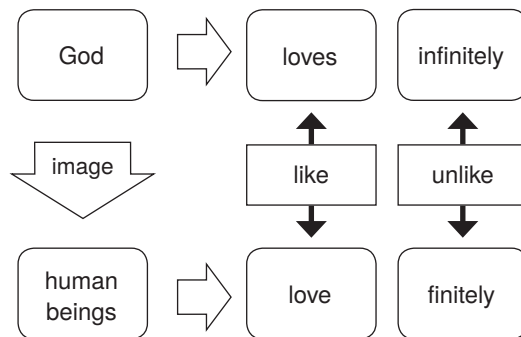


Fig. 14.2. God's Love and Human Love

And, we might add, we are reckoning with the fact that man is made in the image of God. When we talk about God and man, we have not only a distinction, the Creator-creature distinction, but a relation, the relation of imaging. And this fundamental creational relation then blossoms into the relation of covenantal intimacy, personal intimacy, in personal communion between God and man. God planned for this intimacy from the beginning. It has been broken by the fall, but it is restored, and even advanced, by the work of Christ, the last Adam.

The appropriateness of using a word such as *love* both for God and for human love goes back to the whole pattern of creation that God established when he made man in the image of God. And then we might add further that this pattern of being an image has its archetype in the eternal Son, who is always the image of God. The word *love* thus has Trinitarian roots. God the Father is distinct from the Son, and God the Father loves the Son (John 3:35; 5:20). The Father loves the Son in the Spirit (3:34–35).

The word *love* has a range of uses—it has variation. It also has contrast and distribution, and these three reflect a Trinitarian foundation. We may therefore robustly affirm the truth that God loves us. It is not the case that it merely “seems as if” he loves us. But we understand the meaning of love within the context of God’s work in Christ. And the deeper context for this work in time and space is the context of Trinitarian love: the Father loves the Son.

We can make a similar point by reflecting on language as the gift of God. Human language reflects the eternal Word, who is with God and who is God (John 1:1). When God speaks to us, his speech to us is an ectypal reflection of the eternal Word. He speaks truth, and the truth that he speaks reflects the truth that he is in himself, in which the Word is the truth of God. So through truth expressed in words sent to us, God reflects and actually causes us to know the truth about God himself, including the one who as the second person of the Trinity is the truth. When God says to us that the Father loves the Son, as he does in John 3:35, what he says reflects the eternal Word, who is the truth with God. The Father does indeed love the Son, before ever the world began.

Is the language about God’s love anthropomorphic? Of course it is. God himself loves, in himself, in the relations of the persons of the Trinity. Out of his love, he has so structured the world and mankind, and so given us the gift of languages, that we may see a reflection of God’s love in human love. We may then use language according to the way God designed, in order to confess and think about and pray to and worship God, who has shown us such love (Rom. 5:5–11).

We know God’s love through Christ. But also, in Christ, through the Holy Spirit, God has opened our spiritual eyes (Eph. 1:17–18). So we understand what he means by *love* partly, but not exclusively,

by seeing and experiencing instances of human love. These instances are genuinely related to God's archetypal love; they are ectypes. They reflect God's love, but on the level of the creature. They are in fact empowered by God's love and animated by the presence of God's love, whether in special grace or in common grace. The word *love* has a meaning. And always, not merely sometimes, it is related to God's love, which is the archetype. There is no such thing as "merely" human love, as though it could exist without God's presence and empowering, or without its being a reflection of God's archetypal love.

The Father loves the Son. It is possible in a fallen world that we will read something that tells us that such a statement about God is *merely* anthropomorphic and therefore ultimately only a "seeming." It is possible also that we will be tempted to believe it. In that case, we had better put down what we are reading, and read the Bible instead, until God restores our bearings.

Differentiation of Personal Activities in Anthropomorphic Style

The differentiation of personal activities of persons of the Trinity discussed in chapter 12 operates *within* the anthropomorphic style. How could it be otherwise? God's work of revealing himself is itself a work involving personal activities of planning to reveal, accomplishing the revelation in the world, and applying the revelation to believers in their minds and hearts.

In fact, the differentiation in personal activities unfolds in two distinct ways. First, it unfolds in the *process* in which God reveals things to human beings. The process involves planning/initiation, execution, and application. Second, it unfolds in the content of *what* is revealed. God shows how he is God in action. And in these actions, he shows himself to be Father, Son, and Spirit in planning/initiating, executing, and applying.

Both kinds of unfolding have a natural relation to the anthropomorphic style. Among human beings, planning, accomplishment, and application are activities in which human beings engage. We do these things in imitation of God, who is the archetypal planner, and executor, and giver of application. The way we are describing God

is therefore a special example in which we are using anthropomorphic language. *Planning*, *accomplishing*, and *applying*, when used to describe God, are anthropomorphic uses of the terms.

As usual, as with all anthropomorphisms, we need caution. God's planning is not parallel in every detail to the way that human beings plan. Nor are his acts of accomplishment or application. That is an implication of his transcendence. At the same time, God in the gift of language gave us language that *does* describe how God acts. He does plan, and execute, and apply, in accord with his divine character. That is an implication of his immanence. And this differentiation reflects the archetypal differentiation in the persons of the Trinity. God's acts in the world truly reflect who he is, including his differentiation in three persons who act *distinctly*.

Could it be that the differentiation in acts in time would have no archetype in God's eternal nature, apart from time? We can see that there is an archetype, if we think about the meaning of the eternal generation of the Son. The Son is begotten *from* the Father. As a reflection of this eternal reality, when God acts in time, his acts proceed *from* the plan of the Father, to the execution in the Son, and to full realization of consequences in the Holy Spirit. We can also think about the meaning of the Son's being the eternal Word of God. The eternal Word is spoken *from* the Father, and the speech of the Father issues in the Word, who is the expression of the Father. This order from Father to Son is reflected in time when divine action moves from the plan and initiation of the Father to the execution by the Son. Or consider what it means that the Son is the eternal Image of the Father (Col. 1:15). The image derives *from* the original, who is the Father. In addition, God decided to create the world. So the eternal order of imaging from Father to Son is reflected in time in the movement from the Father's plan and initiation (the original) to the Son's execution (the copy and manifestation of the plan).³

3. We could also explore how the Trinitarian character of God is reflected in the well-known expression, "For *from* him and *through* him and *to* him are all things" (Rom. 11:36). This verse, which expresses the sovereign independence of God, also expresses in a reflected manner the Trinitarian differentiation of persons. His acts are from the Father, and through the Son, and to the Holy Spirit as the consummator. See Vern S. Poythress, *Knowing and the Trinity: How Perspectives in*

God's Infinity

This book may not be relaying these truths as clearly or as effectively as it could. But its intent is that God's people would know him. If the book were to succeed, or rather if the Holy Spirit should use its words in order to bring about knowledge, you would know God. In that case, you know the true God. You know that the Father loves the Son. You know what John 3:35 means. Then in knowing this truth, you know also the absoluteness and the infinity and the immensity and the eternity and the omniscience of God. You see the truth about God described in those attributes because God's love, which you now understand, is infinite and immense and eternal and omniscient. Moreover, there is no other absoluteness or infinity or immensity than just this absoluteness that you know in knowing that the Father loves the Son.

The attribute *infinity* is innately Trinitarian, not unitarian. It is mysterious and incomprehensible.

Anthropomorphism in the Resurrection of Christ

We can see these principles confirmed in the resurrection of Christ. The resurrection of Christ is an event in history that involves the actions of all three persons of the Trinity. The Bible describes the actions of the three persons in ways that often use comparisons with human action. According to Romans 8:11, the Father "raised Jesus from the dead." The same Greek word for "raised" occurs in Matthew 12:11, where Jesus talks about a man's raising a sheep out of a pit. In Mark 2:9 and 11, Jesus tells the paralytic to "rise," using the same word for "raise." Here we have human actions, and these illustrate the personal purposes that typically accompany raising or taking up. The resurrection represents a special instance, of course, and no mere man can do that. But in order to understand the meaning, it still helps to have the comparison with human actions.

Romans 8:11 also involves personal action with the Holy Spirit.

Human Knowledge Imitate the Trinity (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2018), chaps. 24–25 and app. I.

The Spirit “dwells in you” and “will also give life.” These actions can be compared by analogy with a human being’s dwelling in a house, or a human being’s giving a gift. The underlying Greek word for “give life” could also be translated “make alive.” Human beings do not have power to make someone alive. But they do have limited power to make situations different. So here again, we have an analogy between the divine action of the Spirit and various human actions of dwelling and giving and making.

The language in Romans 8:11 and other passages is so natural that we may not notice that it is anthropomorphic. That is because so much language in the Bible describes God’s action in terms comparable to human action. All these comparisons go back to the reality that man is made in the image of God, and in addition the reality that God has given us language that has capabilities of appropriately describing divine action as analogous to human action.

Anthropomorphism Benefiting Us

This anthropomorphic language is highly beneficial to us because God talks to us not simply in a way that is true, but also in a way that makes sense and has deep appeal to us who are human.

Key Terms

anthropomorphic, anthropomorphism⁴

application

Creator-creature distinction

execution

knowledge

love

plan

war

4. Key terms in bold are defined in the glossary at the end of this volume.

Study Questions

1. What is meant by *anthropomorphic* language?
2. What are the uses and limitations of anthropomorphic language? What are its practical benefits?
3. What is the justification for using anthropomorphic language? In the example of Scripture? In the image of God? In the origin of language?
4. What dangers exist of overestimating or underestimating the truths that we receive in the anthropomorphic language in Scripture?

For Further Reading

Berkhof, Louis. *Systematic Theology*. 4th rev. ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939. Pt. 2, chap. 3.

Poythress, Vern S. *Knowing and the Trinity: How Perspectives in Human Knowledge Imitate the Trinity*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2018. Chap. 8.

Prayer

Our Creator and God and our Father, thank you for really loving us and sending your Son. Thank you for raising him from the dead and describing what you have done in ways intelligible to us.

15

An Example: Dealing with Regretting

LET US CONSIDER another example of how the Bible uses comparisons between God and man. In 1 Samuel 15:11, the Lord states, “I *regret* that I have made Saul king.” A few verses later, using the same underlying Hebrew word, Samuel tells Saul, “And also the Glory of Israel will not lie or have *regret*, for he is not a man, that he should have *regret*” (v. 29). Finally, the chapter concludes with a summary that reminds us of verse 11: “And the LORD *regretted* that he had made Saul king over Israel” (v. 35). (See fig. 15.1.)

1 Samuel 15

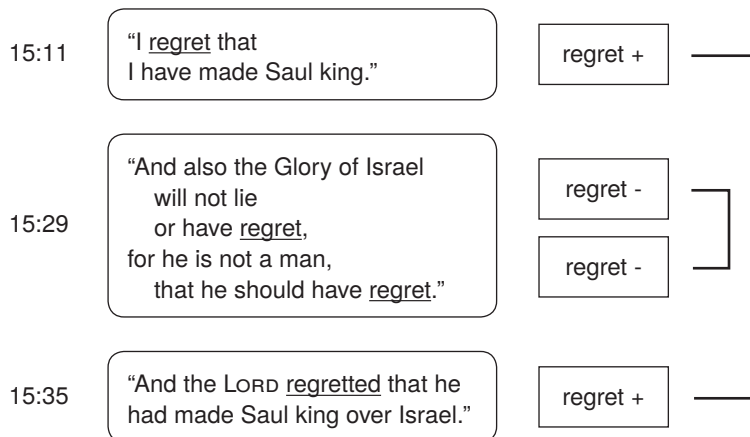


Fig. 15.1. God’s “Regretting”

This passage is challenging. How do we understand the three key verses, 1 Samuel 11, 29, and 35? The passage invites extensive meditation and analysis, more than we can provide here. But we will venture to explore a bit. Using this one passage, we want to explore how the Bible wants us to deal with anthropomorphic language more broadly. One of the keys is to take into account context, and not to assume that the same word must have exactly the same meaning in all its occurrences in different contexts.

The human author of 1–2 Samuel is well aware that the chapter as a whole has set up a challenge. And surely the same is even more true for the divine author. How does 1 Samuel 15:11 mesh with verse 29? What could the author mean by placing verse 29 between two other verses, 11 and 35, that appear to say nearly the opposite? The chapter as a whole, by its framing, positively invites readers to think deeply.

Could we solve the difficulty with a different translation? The *ESV*, which we have quoted, uses the word *regret* four times. Each time, the underlying Hebrew verb is a form of the same Hebrew root (*nhm*, נחם). Other English versions may choose different wordings, but the underlying difficulty is the same, because it is there in Hebrew. In one context within 1 Samuel 15, God “regrets,” and in another, he does not have “regret.”

God “regrets” in 1 Samuel 15:11 in a manner that is both like and unlike human instances of regretting. Human beings, for example, often regret a previous decision once they have further information or see the consequences of their decision, because they have grown in knowledge. God does not grow in knowledge. And in the overarching narrative of 1–2 Samuel, it dawns on a sensitive reader that God knew from the beginning that Saul would fail as a king. God intended that David would succeed him as king. God’s long-range purposes include his plan for the Davidic dynasty, a line of kings leading to blessing (2 Sam. 7). Ultimately, the Old Testament looks forward to the offspring of the woman, already promised in Genesis 3:15, and identified in Genesis 49:10 as belonging to the line of the tribe of Judah. A second Adamic figure will accomplish the great, climactic deliverance from Satan and from evil. That figure belongs at the far end of the Davidic line of kings. The final king in the line of David is the great king, the Messiah (2 Sam. 7, in the light of Isa. 9:6–7 and 11:1).

The larger vista of 2 Samuel 7, taken in the light of the rest of the Old Testament, underlines the reality that God knows the end from the beginning. The word *regret* in 1 Samuel 15 is used with sensitivity to context, and has to be interpreted in context.

Verse 11 of 1 Samuel 15 is more focused on God's evaluation of the course of Saul's reign in the past. Verse 29 is more focused on the future. Will God allow Saul to continue? Absolutely not. It is useless for Saul to plead at this point for another chance, because God has sovereignly decided to close that door. Verse 35 returns us to verse 11. By so doing, and by standing at the end of the passage as a whole, it wraps things up. It underlines for us that in God's own evaluation, Saul's kingship was a failure. It sets us up for 1 Samuel 16, where God undertakes to have Samuel anoint the future king, King David, who contrasts pointedly with Saul. David falls into sin with Bathsheba (2 Sam. 11). But he genuinely repents. It will never come to the point that God "regrets" that he made David king and removes him from his kingly position (though it seems, for a time, to come close during Absalom's rebellion, 2 Sam. 15:26).

In addition, verses 11 and 35 of 1 Samuel 15 both bring the Lord's regret into immediate proximity to *Samuel's* reactions. In verse 11, the Lord takes the initiative to tell Samuel that Saul's kingship is at an end, and expresses it in a striking manner: "I regret . . ." In reaction, Samuel "was angry, and he cried to the LORD all night." Samuel's feelings may have been mixed. He "was angry," but was he angry at the Lord? Or was he angry at Saul, and the painful remembrances that the Lord's announcement stirred up in him? Or was he confusedly angry over the whole situation? Samuel would have also had feelings of *regret* about Saul's becoming king. *Regret* is a much milder word than *angry*. And yet does the verse suggest that the Lord's ways are partially aligned with Samuel's because Samuel was a godly man whose thinking reflected and imitated God? The word *regret* then helps us to see the complicated way in which a man may imitate God and at the same time struggle with the reality of what God has shown him.

First Samuel 15:35 also juxtaposes Samuel and the Lord, but in the reverse order (a fitting literary close). It says, "Samuel *grieved* over Saul." And immediately the text adds, "And the LORD *regretted* that he had made Saul king over Israel." It is fitting that the Lord's activity

opens and closes the entire event. But Samuel is also there, grieving. In the original Hebrew, the word for *grieved* is not the same word as any of those used in verse 11. But it still suggests a continuation of some aspects of Samuel's negative reaction and his emotionally laden struggle with the whole course of Saul's kingship. Once again, Samuel's reaction partially aligns with the Lord's. It is fitting that Samuel should grieve. And this grieving mysteriously reflects the Lord's "regret."

And now, in between these two complex verses, 1 Samuel 15:11 and 35, we have verse 29, which announces bluntly that the Glory of Israel "is not a man, that he should have regret." And it is Samuel who makes this very pronouncement! Once again, Samuel's views seem to align with God's. God is speaking through Samuel as a prophet, and Samuel himself is speaking, agreeing in intent with the meaning of what the Lord is saying. (See fig. 15.2.)

1 Samuel 15	The Lord acts	Samuel responds
15:11	"I <u>regret</u> that I have made Saul king."	"Samuel was angry, and he cried to the LORD all night."
15:29	"And also the Glory of Israel will not lie or have <u>regret</u> , for he is not a man, that he should have <u>regret</u> ."	Samuel spoke the word of the Lord.
15:35	"And the LORD <u>regretted</u> that he had made Saul king over Israel."	"Samuel grieved over Saul."

Fig. 15.2. Samuel's Responses

Verse 29 of 1 Samuel 15 functions as something of a climax and center point for the whole chapter. It has a suggestion, at least, of poetic parallelism:

the Glory of Israel will not lie
or have regret,

for he is not a man,
that he should have regret.

Verses 28 and 29 in their main thrust underline what Samuel has already announced in poetry in verses 22–23, especially the second half of verse 23:

Because you have rejected the word of the LORD,
he has also rejected you from being king.

Samuel repeats this point in verse 26, in response to Saul's plea in verses 24–25.

First Samuel 15:29 clinches the whole thing, because it roots the announcement in the very character of God himself, God who is “the Glory of Israel.”

Samuel himself, and not merely the author of the book of Samuel, seems to know that there are complexities about the whole series of events. Earlier in 1 Samuel 15, in verse 11, he heard with his own ears when the Lord said, “I regret” Now, only a day later, he announces with his authority as a prophet that the Lord does *not* “have regret.” How can Samuel in verse 29 straightforwardly say what superficially is the *opposite* of verse 11? Verse 11 and verse 29 together show the complexity.

In fact, in the single verse 1 Samuel 15:29, the key word *regret* occurs not once but twice: “And also the Glory of Israel will not lie or have *regret*, for he is not a man, that he should have *regret*.” Each occurrence of the word *regret* in verse 29 is reinforced by a corresponding negative expression that reinforces the point: God “will *not* lie,” and he “is *not* a man.” Altogether, what we have here is a strong affirmation of an irrevocable decision and an irreversible turning point in the history of Israelite kingship.

It is as though the two occurrences of the word *regret* in 1 Samuel 15:29 formed counterweights to the two other occurrences, one in verse 11 and the other in verse 35. In verse 29, the first occurrence of *regret* is paired with the assurance that God “will not lie.” This point reinforces the fact that God's statement in verse 11 is irrevocable. Verse 11, as an affirmation of the God who cannot lie, functions as

part of his announcement to Samuel that Saul's kingship is at an end. This announcement is irreversible because God cannot lie. Paradoxically, verse 29, which seems superficially to be the opposite of verse 11, ends up assuring us that verse 11 is completely true. If verse 11 is true, it means that the Lord's determination to remove Saul will be carried out. Verse 11 thereby actually forms the basis and background for the transition that the Lord has determined to bring about.

First Samuel 15:28 goes a step further by directly assuring us of the consequence. Then verse 29 backs up verse 28 by appealing to the character of God. And this character of God, we see, is already there in verse 11. It is the Lord, the Glory of Israel, who says that he regrets, and in this declaration he cannot lie, but is true to himself. The truth will not change. He will not undo his regret. Did Samuel cry "to the LORD all night" in an endeavor to intercede for Saul in order for the Lord to allow Saul to continue to be king? If so, his intercession—even "all night"—was completely unsuccessful. The Lord's determination stands. And that again underlines the fact that the Lord's "regret" is not like merely human regret, but includes sovereign determination that will not be reversed.

The other expression in 1 Samuel 15:29, "is not a man," aligns more closely, perhaps, with verse 35. Verse 35 sums up the whole passage and ends the episode as a whole. It has a fullness of expression in the phrase "king over Israel," rather than simply "king" in verse 11. It gives us a picture in which Samuel, a man, is grieving, and perhaps earlier was trying to find a way around the ending of Saul's kingship. In contrast, the Lord's "regret" is the prelude to moving on and appointing David. Moreover, in verse 31, Samuel "turned back after Saul." He changed his mind from what he had said in verse 26, "I will not return with you." God is not a man. He does not reverse what he said in the manner that Samuel did. He goes forward with his plan, which will bring progressively more humiliation to Saul.

At the heart of the passage, Samuel's statement in 1 Samuel 15:29 expresses both the Lord's view and Samuel's. It invites readers to hope that they too can understand the whole series of events in a logically harmonious way, but at the same time in a way that vigorously affirms the sinful, unsatisfying, "regretful" character of Saul's kingship.

To some extent, each passage must be studied according to its

own texture. At the same time, it is relevant to say that God is not man (as indeed 1 Samuel 15:29 says explicitly), and that the difference in level between Creator and creature should always be borne in mind.

Such passages can, I think, be partially understood by many ordinary readers. They understand that they are reading a complex narrative within a complex Bible. But there are two dangers.

On the one hand, a reader may press a passage to say more than it will bear. For instance, a reader may insist, in the end, that various passages must have God doing something exactly in parallel with human action at every point. Some Bible readers have gone to the extreme of postulating that God must have a physical body. Others have argued that 1 Samuel 15:11 shows that God does not know the future. This view is a form of what has been called *open theism*. This view alleges that the future is radically “open” and that even God does not know it. This is one kind of extreme. It contradicts what the Bible says in other places. Moreover, the interpretation by open theism does not respect a most basic principle of context, namely, that God and man are not on the same level. And there is also the principle, developed in chapter 2, that we are not the controllers who have the right to specify exactly who God is, on the basis of our notions about God and our notions of what we want texts to say. In every area of knowledge, we are the servants of God; we are not lords whose thoughts can rule over God.¹

The second danger is the opposite. We may minimalistically *underestimate* the meaningfulness and truth of what God is saying in verses such as 1 Samuel 15:11. Let us consider the reader whom we earlier called Don. Don said earlier that God only “seemed” to love. Don uses the same strategy with 1 Samuel 15:11. He claims that verse 11 does not really mean that God regrets. Don says, “It only means to say that it ‘seems as if’ God regrets. God appears to human eyes to regret, but actually he does not. He does nothing of the kind. In fact, he does the opposite. He continues as he always is.”

Now, we can sympathize with an analysis of this kind, because

1. For a further discussion of open theism, see John M. Frame, *No Other God: A Response to Open Theism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2001).

it is trying to take account of the fact that God knows all things beforehand and plans all things beforehand. His eternal plan does not change (Isa. 40:9–11). But paradoxically, Don is in a way making the same mistake as the previous interpretation, the open-theism interpretation. The open-theism interpretation insisted that God and man must “regret” in exactly parallel ways in detail. Like the open-theism analysis, Don thinks that *regret* must always mean precisely the same thing, namely, human regret, with all the details that go into human regret. In the case of human regret, regret arises from not having good knowledge or wisdom earlier, and then later having grown in knowledge. So, thinks Don, this picture of human regret is built into the meaning of *regret*. It must always mean exactly that. And therefore, to protect God, Don must argue that the key verses are about a mere “seeming” to regret.

In reasoning this way, Don agrees with the open-theism interpretation almost until the end. But when he is about to get to the end, he realizes that this interpretation is in conflict with teachings about God elsewhere in the Bible. So he knows that something must be done. His problem is that he does *the wrong thing*. He continues to insist on his own meaning of *regret*, which he imposes on the verse. And since the verse cannot have the meaning that would then be ascribed to it, Don says that God does not “regret,” still using his own meaning of human regret. He is correct, but he has ignored the actual meaning of the verse. Rather, he has read into the word *regret* a specificity that is not actually there. He treats the word virtually as a technical term, which he thinks can apply *only* when absolutely every feature about merely human regret is present in force.

Don is not letting all the words in the verse—and in the neighboring verses throughout 1–2 Samuel—interact in meaning, in order to produce as a result a complex meaning that nuances our understanding of what in fact God is doing. God does not “regret” *in the exact sense* that Don attributes to the word. Yet as the verse indicates, God does regret that he has made Saul king, but *in a way* that is colored by the full context, including the context of 1 Samuel 15:29! For Don merely to say that God does not regret, with Don’s meaning, is true enough, but probably is not going to communicate well to others. And if Don goes on and says that the verse *actually* means that God

merely “appears” to human beings to have regretted, he misses what the verse actually communicates positively. Included in that positive communication in the verse is an aspect of evaluation, in that God is negatively evaluating Saul’s past performance. He is also acting as Judge, and on the basis of that evaluation he is going to remove Saul from being king, as is confirmed by verse 29. The “regret” mentioned in verse 11 is one aspect of his evaluation. (See fig. 15.3.)

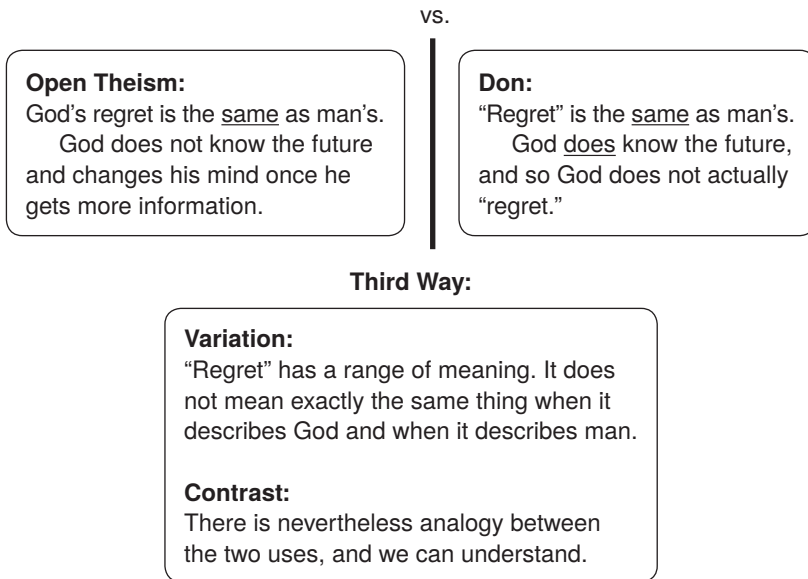


Fig. 15.3. Unbalanced Interpretations

The word *regret* also helps us to see that God’s evaluation applied at the point in time of 1 Samuel 15 differs from the evaluation that he would have had earlier, before he appointed Saul to be king. Any earlier evaluation would evaluate what Saul had already done before the point when he was evaluated. God is not confined to time, but he does judge human works done in time. And this and other passages show how God acts. God judges works when they have been done. He also judges motivations, of course, but in the course of time motivations often come out into the open in the form of works. That is what happened with Saul. God himself is fully aware of the difference in history between Saul back in 1 Samuel 9 and now in 1 Samuel 15. Of

course, that leaves mystery for our understanding, because we are not God. We have to be content to let God be God, and be “the Judge of all the earth” (Gen. 18:25).

In addition to all this, we need to take into account the further observations about the relation of God’s evaluation to Samuel’s reactions in receiving this evaluation. The word *regret* has a depth to it because it is not isolated, but in context draws our attention to the complex relation between Samuel as a human prophet and the Lord, who directs this prophet according to his perfect understanding. In this perfect understanding, the Lord knows the end from the beginning, but he also knows in incomprehensible depth the meaning and complexity of Samuel’s feelings and struggles, his pains about the situation, and all the complexities in the developments in Saul’s life and character. And Samuel as a prophet and a godly man is reflecting aspects of God’s character in his own reactions.

One point to gain from 1 Samuel 15 is that we should interpret verses in context. Another is that we should interpret *words* in context. The word *regret* (or the corresponding Hebrew word) in fact has a range of uses. It can be used not only for typical cases of human regret, but also for divine “regret,” *which is not the same, and which does not represent exactly the same meaning in detail*. As usual, we are dealing with contrast, variation, and distribution in a word. These three reflect mysteriously the differentiation in the persons of the Trinity. (See fig. 15.4.)

First, the word *regret* is the *same* word in all four occurrences in 1 Samuel 15. This sameness expresses unity and contrast, and reflects God the Father. This sameness is very important because the text wants us to bring all four occurrences into close relation to one another.

Second, the four occurrences have variation. Each is *different* from the others, and the differences include meaning differences. The sense in which God regrets is not exactly the same as that in which he does not regret. Even verse 11 of 1 Samuel 15 differs from verse 35, because verse 11 stands at the beginning, and we need to find out from the succeeding narrative what nuances we should ascribe to *regret* in verse 11. Verse 35 stands at the end, and by looking back we ascribe nuances to the word and the sentence in which it is embedded.

Third, each occurrence has a *distribution*, in verse 11, in 1 Samuel

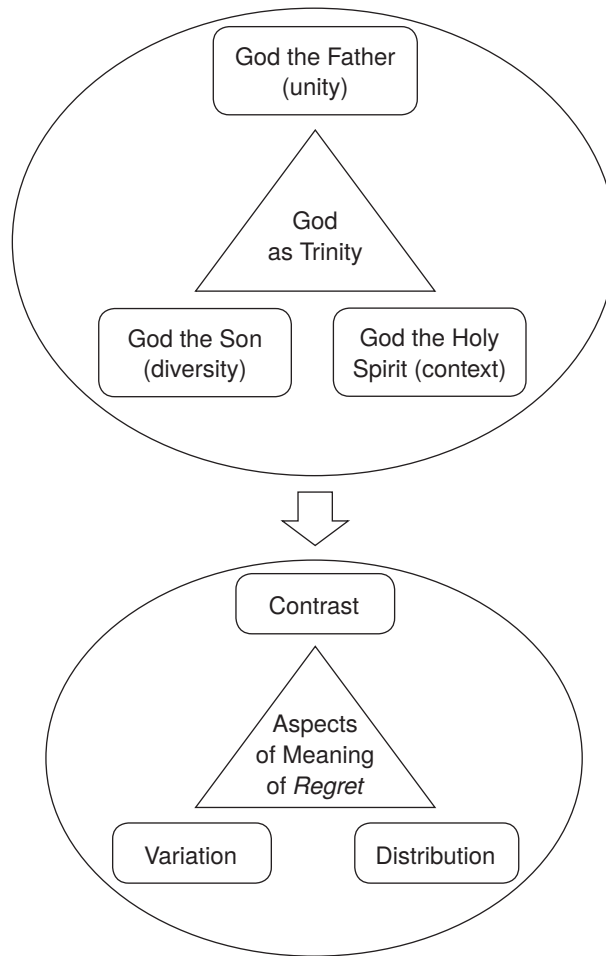


Fig. 15.4. Richness in *Regret*

15:29, and in verse 35, respectively. Both the sameness (repetition of the word) and the meaning differences do not spring to life in a vacuum, but spring up in a way that is guided by distribution.

We therefore read with attention to contrast, variation, and distribution, and in the way that they interlock. Good readers do this instinctively, even without having a special vocabulary to describe what is happening in technical terms. In particular, we attend to *context*. Meanings can be both the same (contrastively) and different because they occur within complex contexts.

If we recognize this principle, we are on our way to letting the Bible say what it says, and to mean what it means. God *does* regret, as indeed 1 Samuel 15:11 says. But this affirmation belongs in a context, and will be misunderstood if we rip it out of context and pretend that it is some kind of contextless general principle about God. Rather, as interpreters have often said, the language is *anthropomorphic*. Indeed, it is. The label *anthropomorphic* is useful as a reminder of the complexities.

But the label by itself does not magically solve all the temptations to go to extremes, either in overinterpreting or underinterpreting, or more generally in misinterpreting the complex way in which the occurrences of the word *regret* function in a complex context. In this context, the four occurrences of the word obviously resonate with one another, and we are meant to notice this. But we are also meant to notice how each occurrence functions within its verse and its immediate context. The occurrences cannot simply be equated and smashed together.

Does any of this make a difference? As we observed, ordinary readers may sometimes succeed in interpreting 1 Samuel 15 reasonably, because they can sense nuances and see the progress of the narrative. But they too can get tripped up if they slow down too much and forget the chapter as a whole. Then the chapter may *seem* to involve a direct contradiction between verse 29 on the one hand and verses 11 and 35 on the other hand.

We have in 1 Samuel 15 a rather extended illustration of the principle of unity and diversity in the use of words—in this case, the word *regret*. There is unity among all four occurrences in the chapter, and this unity is a reflection of the unity of God preeminently presented by God the Father. There is also variation in meaning, particularly in the contrast between verse 29 and verses 11 and 35. This variation reflects the principle of variation or diversity in God, and preeminently the diversity expressed in the Son as the one distinct from and begotten by the Father. Both unity and diversity exist within a distribution of interacting meanings. This distribution reflects the eternal archetypal context of the person of the Holy Spirit, in whom the Father is distinct from the Son.

Let us venture to consider context a bit more. Verses 11 and 29

and 35 of 1 Samuel 15 occur within a whole chapter of narrative. The whole narrative, and more broadly the narration of 1–2 Samuel as a whole, offers a significant context that colors the meaning of all the verses taken together. The narrative of 1–2 Samuel includes the contrasts between Saul and David. And these contrasts lead us to reflect on God’s continued steadfast love for David and his descendants leading to Christ, in contrast to the termination not only of Saul’s kingship but of the possibility of a line of kingship (through Jonathan, perhaps?). God’s “regret,” as we have already said more than once, is not a contextless generality about God’s attributes, still less a datum from which we might (wrongly) deduce limitations in his knowledge. Rather, it is a “regret” in the light of an eternal purpose to choose David and an eternal pleasure in the divine Son, who will be sent: “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased” (Matt. 3:17; 17:5).

The divine regret in 1 Samuel 15:11 and 35 expresses a depth of knowledge and righteousness in God. God does understand Samuel’s grief and anger, even more deeply than Samuel understands himself. God not only understands, but perceives in Samuel, in the midst of human sins, a reflection of his own righteous and infinitely wise evaluation of the course of human sins and their consequences. He understands Samuel not as though he were a God far off, but in love. He loves Samuel; and, more broadly, he loves his people. He expresses his love in sending his Son to save us and to provide the final remedy for all human regret: “He [God] will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away” (Rev. 21:4).

“And he who was seated on the throne said, ‘Behold, I am making all things new’” (Rev. 21:5).

Key Terms

anthropomorphic, anthropomorphism²
contrast

2. Key terms in bold are defined in the glossary at the end of this volume.

David
distribution
evaluation
knowledge
open theism
plan
regret
Samuel
sovereign
variation

Study Questions

1. What does it mean for God to “regret”? How does it differ from human regret?
2. How do we harmonize 1 Samuel 15:11, 29, and 35?
3. How does it help to know about contrast, variation, and distribution?
4. What mistakes can be made in overestimating or underestimating what is being communicated with anthropomorphic language?

For Further Reading

- Berkhof, Louis. *Systematic Theology*. 4th rev. ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939. Pp. 100–108.
- Pike, Kenneth L. *Linguistic Concepts: An Introduction to Tagmemics*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1982. Pp. 41–65.

Prayer

Our Lord, we pray that we may be able to interpret with wisdom the cases in which the Bible talks about your “regretting” or uses other terms that at first may not seem to be compatible with who you are. Give us humility to trust you.

God and Creaturely Language

AS A SECOND style for describing God, the Bible uses language for creatures other than human beings. We might call this style the style of *creaturely comparison*.¹

Comparisons with Created Things

Let us consider some examples. Psalm 18:2 declares that God is “my rock and my fortress . . . , my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.” God is compared to a rock, a fortress, a shield, and so on. Other verses use other comparisons. “God is light” (1 John 1:5). He “is a consuming fire” (Heb. 12:29). In all these instances, God is being compared to some created thing. (See fig. 16.1.)

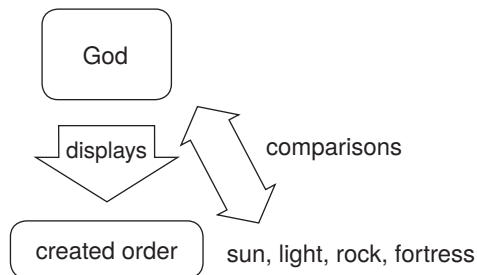


Fig. 16.1. Creaturely Comparisons

1. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 2:101.

Jesus uses several comparisons to explain himself and his work. He says, “I am the bread of life” (John 6:35); “I am the light of the world” (8:12); “I am the door of the sheep” (10:7); “I am the vine” (15:5). These verses too use comparisons with creaturely things, such as bread.

In Psalm 18:2, God is “my rock.” The recurrence of the word *my* indicates that the comparison focuses on ways in which God comes to us and blesses us. In Deuteronomy 32:4, God is “The Rock,” rather than “my rock,” but the overall point is similar. Later on in the poetic song of Deuteronomy 32, God is “the Rock of his [Israel’s] salvation” (v. 15), “the Rock that bore you” (v. 18), “their Rock” (v. 30), “our Rock” (v. 31). We understand that while God is stable and rocklike in himself, the main point is that he is stable and helpful with respect to Israel (Deut. 32) and with respect to an individual psalmist or singer of the Psalms (Ps. 18:2, 31, 46). Similarly, Jesus’ statement about the bread of life uses a reference to a created thing, bread, in an analogical way to describe something of the significance of who he is on our behalf, through his work in saving us.

In each case, we as readers are invited to contemplate some similarities between God on the one hand and the created thing on the other hand. The similarities are real, partly because all created things testify to their Creator (Ps. 19:1–6; Rom. 1:18–23), partly because God crafted many specific created things for the benefit of human beings. We experience the blessings of God in common grace through food, rain (Acts 14:17), light, and the sun (Matt. 5:45). But the context in which a word appears also has a major influence. Jesus does not say simply that he is “bread,” in some general way, but states that he is “the bread of life.” And he illustrates his meaning by the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand, which he performed the preceding day (John 6:1–14). He also makes a comparison with the manna in the wilderness (vv. 31–32). And he has an extended discourse in which he talks about the promise of eternal life to all who feed on him (vv. 25–58). Thus, comparisons with specific created things such as bread belong to larger explanations of God’s blessings to his people.

Similarities and Differences with Anthropomorphic Language

These comparisons do not use anthropomorphic language in the narrow sense. That is to say, they do not compare God with human actions or parts of the human body such as arms, hands, and eyes. But there are still some similarities between the two types of use. As with anthropomorphic language, God has crafted creational language in order to communicate to human beings in robust, intelligible ways. Anthropomorphic language relies on there being a created world with human beings in it in order to make the comparison. Likewise, language that compares God to various created things relies on there being such things in the world. In addition, for us to understand what God says, we need some understanding of and familiarity with the things mentioned. We need to know about rocks, and fortresses, and bread, and vines, and so on.

As in the case of anthropomorphic language, there are two extremes to avoid. On the one hand, we need to avoid overinterpreting the language and pressing the parallels between God and the thing to which he is compared. When we say that God loves, we ought not to think that he loves in exactly the same way that a human being loves. We do not ascribe to God the limitations and failures that we might find in human love. Likewise, when we say that God is a rock or a fortress, we do not mean that he is made out of mineral crystals or that he has stone walls with gates in them. The temptation to overread is perhaps not so strong when God is compared with a rock, because the differences are so obvious. But it is still worthwhile to say explicitly that any comparison or analogy, because it compares two things that are in fact not the same, will involve limitations, in accord with what is similar between the two things.

We also need to acknowledge the danger of another extreme, in which we depreciate or despise the meaning that we have been given. We say to ourselves, perhaps, that God is obviously *not* a rock, and that language comparing God to a rock is dependent on creaturely things. Therefore, we might reason, it cannot really tell us about God as he really is.

Now, God is not captured by a created thing or by our understanding using a created thing. He is transcendent, according to the Christian view of transcendence. But the other side of the truth is that he is also immanent, according to the Christian view of immanence. As we already observed, created things do testify to their Creator. We *know* God through general revelation, which comes to us through created things. When God himself tells us, through Scripture, that he is our rock or our fortress, he speaks truly about who he really is. Yes, he uses words that allude to created things. But he has crafted both the things themselves and the words he uses so that he can actually tell us who he is. When we are in a favorable covenantal relation to God, such as David experienced (2 Sam. 22:3), God really is our rock and our fortress. It is *God* who is our rock. We know and experience God in his goodness, faithfulness, mercy, and omnipotence.

Longer Descriptions of God

We may also observe that in the Bible, God gives us knowledge about himself that includes larger descriptions. We receive in the Bible not only short equative statements, such as “God is my rock,” but longer narratives and longer poetic descriptions. Deuteronomy 32 has *several* references to God as a rock, and these references are further illumined by the entire poem, which concerns the many aspects of God’s covenantal relation to Israel. Psalm 18, which says near the beginning that “God [is] my rock,” offers an extended meditation on God’s care for David. The whole psalm expands our ideas of the implications of God’s being a rock and a fortress. John 6 not only has Jesus’ statement “I am the bread of life,” but contains the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand and Jesus’ discourse on eating his flesh and drinking his blood.

We also see that God cares for his people in the way he acts toward Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, and Moses. We see it in the history of the monarchy in 1–2 Samuel, 1–2 Kings, and 1–2 Chronicles. We see it in prophetic literature. We see it climactically in the earthly life of Christ, recorded in the Gospels. All these portions of the Bible are full of evocations of created things. The created things often serve

as the background for divine action and divine blessing to human beings. We know God through descriptions of his actions, such as his creating plants (Gen. 1:11–13), making promises (3:15), and leading Israel through the wilderness. And when we come to the teaching material in the New Testament letters, the teaching frequently refers us to earlier events that show us who God is and what his covenantal commitments mean.

So these larger descriptions are also rich sources for our knowledge of God. They use created things as the environment when they describe God's actions. We can make the same observations as we did earlier about anthropomorphic language and creaturely language. Often, in extended narratives, we have to do extensively with both human beings and a larger created environment with which they interact. God enters the picture not simply when a narrative or a poem directly compares him to human actors, and not simply when it compares him to the functions of created things such as rocks, but in a complex, robust way that includes both of these in interaction. Because more is involved than merely a single comparison with a human action, these sources for our knowledge of God can best be classified as extended cases of creaturely language. The language constantly has reference both to human beings and to their environment.

The Possibility of Misreading

As usual, we should avoid two extremes. We avoid misreading the ways of God by making God just like a human being or just like a created thing. Equally, we avoid misreading the ways of God by depreciating the real character of the knowledge that God offers us. God is as he is described to be in interacting with human beings in their environments, environments that God himself controls for his own wise purposes.

Trinitarian Mediation of Knowledge

All our knowledge of God comes from the Father through the Son by the teaching of the Holy Spirit, who dwells in us. The same is true for our knowledge through the style of creaturely comparison.

Reflections of the Trinity in our knowledge include not only the way it comes to us through the Son, as Mediator, but various ways in which the content of the truth is structured.

The truth is structured by the word of God. We recall that God's archetypal speech is the eternal Word, mentioned in John 1:1. As an expression or reflection of this eternal Word, God speaks the world into existence, as we see in Genesis 1. In particular, he speaks rocks into existence. God governs the whole world, including rocks, by his word: "he upholds the universe by the word of his power" (Heb. 1:3). Concerning other aspects of nature, the Bible proclaims:

He sends out his *command* to the earth;
his *word* runs swiftly.
He gives snow like wool;
he scatters frost like ashes.
He hurls down his crystals of ice like crumbs;
who can stand before his cold?
He sends out his *word*, and melts them. (Ps. 147:15–18)

There is every reason to believe that the same power of his word governs everything about rocks.

If God's word structures the rocks, it structures them comprehensively. It structures every use of rocks through the entire course of history. So at the right time and in the appropriate context, these very rocks have meanings from the word of God that allow them to serve in an analogical way in comparison with God, so that the Bible declares, "God is my rock."

Next, we can see how the Trinity is involved in the relation between a rock and God, according to which the rock *reflects* or offers a kind of *picture* of God.

We must be careful. As we have observed, God created man in his image, and this creation of man stands in contrast to the lesser created things, not only rocks but plants and animals, the sun and moon and stars. Man is *uniquely* made in the image of God. At the same time, when God chooses to reveal himself, he sometimes uses creaturely media that represent or reflect him. Thus, the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night represent the presence of God

to Israel. In the appearance of God to Ezekiel in Ezekiel 1, fire and gleaming metal and brightness play a role (vv. 27–28).² Even though man is uniquely made in the image of God, created media can be used by God when he appears, and these media reflect the glory and majesty of God.

God appears to the people of Israel in a special way in the events recorded in Exodus 17:1–7. The people grumble about having no water. God promises, “Behold, I will stand before you there on the *rock* at Horeb, and you shall strike the *rock*, and water shall come out of it, and the people will drink” (v. 6). God gives the people water, and when he stands on the rock, the rock becomes a symbol of God and his provision of water. This functioning of the rock has its own flavor, not quite the same as in Psalm 18:2, yet it illustrates how the style of creaturely comparison can work.

Now, instances when God appears involve images or reflections. The manlike figure at the center of God’s appearance in Ezekiel 1 is “the appearance of the *likeness* of the glory of the LORD” (v. 28). The figure is manlike, which evokes the fact of man’s being created in the image of God in Genesis 1. Going forward in time, it also anticipates the coming of Christ, who is God and who takes on full human nature. Christ in his appearance in Revelation 1 has some of the features of Ezekiel 1:27.

Now, if what we have in Ezekiel 1:27 is an image of Christ, and if the rock in Exodus 17:6 offers us a reflection of God’s presence, all of this visual representation of God has a deeper root, namely, that the eternal Son is also the eternal *Image* of God (Col. 1:15).³ Thus, the relation between the Father and the Son is the archetype for images and reflections. The rock functions as a reflection of God because, at a deeper level, the Son is the eternal reflection of the Father.

Similar truths hold for other uses of creaturely comparison. Consider the comparison between God and a fortress in Psalm 18:2. A fortress is a humanly constructed structure of protection. God has given human beings creativity, enabling them to plan and then

2. On theophany, see Vern S. Poythress, *Theophany: A Biblical Theology of God’s Appearing* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018).

3. Poythress, *Theophany*, chaps. 15–17.

construct out of created materials an object with protective uses. Human beings in their creativity and in their understanding of the value of protection are imitating God. God is the original Creator. And he is also the original Protector. Human beings are made in his image. But behind this reality once again stands the eternal Son, who is the eternal Image. Since human beings are made in God's image, God's archetypal protection is reflected in human instances of protection. That is one reason why it is appropriate to say that God is a fortress.

Trinitarian Roots for Word Meaning of *Rock*

As we have seen before (chap. 13), word meanings depend on God in his Trinitarian character. Let us illustrate by using the word *rock*. *Rock* has a unity of meaning, and this unity reflects especially the unity of God in God the Father. The word *rock* has a diversity of meaning, that is, variation in its uses. This variation reflects the archetypal diversity that exists between the Father and the Son. The Son is the One begotten by the Father. The word *rock* has meanings colored by its distribution, that is, by its literary context and by a created environment. This coloring by *context* reflects the function of the Holy Spirit, who is the archetypal context for the loving fellowship between the Father and the Son.

To understand that "God is my rock," we need all three of these aspects together. First, we need *unity* of meaning in the word *rock*. If, by contrast, there is no relation between rocks made of minerals and the use of the word *rock* to designate God, then the word *rock* in Psalm 18:2 really has no meaning. It is as though we said, "God is my kemlat." So the word *rock* in Psalm 18:2 must retain the power of evoking that unity of meaning, and making us think about rocks made of minerals, in order then to see how, in context, God is my rock.

Second, we need *diversity* of meaning, reflecting the Son. God is the Creator, and must be distinguished from rocks within the created world.

Third, we need *context*, a context reflecting the function of the Holy Spirit. Context enables us to distinguish which nuances of

meaning we find activated at a particular point in a text or communication. The context of Psalm 18:2, a context of God's acting to save David, illumines the fact that the word *rock* is used analogically, and that the statement "God [is] my rock" is about God's faithfulness in standing by David to deliver him.

Differentiation of Activities in the Style of Creaturely Comparison

Like the anthropomorphic style, the style of creaturely comparison builds on Trinitarian action. Psalm 18:2 says, "God [is] my rock." He is David's "rock" in action. God the Father is preeminent in securing the stability and safety of David's life beforehand through his comprehensive plan for his life and for the defeat of his enemies. God the Son is preeminently active in empowering David as a type of the coming messianic King, and in the works of power that deflect the schemes of David's enemies. God the Spirit is preeminently active in his presence with David and in David, so that David actually absorbs in himself the rocklike security of God.

God as rock is analogous to a rock made out of minerals. A rock made out of minerals comes into existence according to the plan and initiative of the Father. It is sustained in existence by the executive power of the Son, who "upholds the universe by the word of his power" (Heb. 1:3). It has its existence in contact with the Holy Spirit, who like a hovering bird (Gen. 1:2) brings the power of God in contact with the rock through his presence.

Or we may focus on the actual comparison between God and a rock that takes expression in Psalm 18:2. This comparison, and the analogies that make it possible, was planned before the foundation of the world by the Father, brought about in creation by the execution of the Son, and applied in Psalm 18:2 when it is actually written in the power of the Spirit by David (2 Sam. 23:1–2).

In all of God's acts, he is the one God because that is who he is; and he always acts in a manner that is in harmony with who he is. In all of God's acts, God acts with a differentiation of persons because that is who he is; and he always acts in harmony with who he is as three persons. Is it mysterious? Yes. Is it incomprehensible? Yes.

Creaturely Comparison in the Resurrection of Christ

In what way does the resurrection of Christ illustrate the practice of creaturely comparison?

The resurrection of Christ is a work of God in the context of the created world in which Christ has done his work. As the Apostles' Creed says, "He suffered under Pontius Pilate." Pontius Pilate gives us a temporal and geographical reference point, in order to underline that both the crucifixion and the resurrection took place in the world of space and time. In particular, the resurrection narratives in the Gospels show an empty tomb, in a garden. They show us frightened soldiers, confused women, unbelieving and then believing disciples. We do not find here a single-stranded comparison between God and human action, or between God and a rock. Instead, we have a rich narrative—in fact, four rich narratives, one in each Gospel.

We do have one simpler instance of comparison, in which Jesus compares himself and his resurrection to a grain of wheat:

And Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a *grain of wheat* falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life." (John 12:23–25)

So yes, the Bible does use creaturely comparison to explain the resurrection.

Benefits of Creaturely Comparison for Us

The language of creaturely comparison benefits us because it grips us in relation to our life in the larger world.

Key Terms

anthropomorphic⁴ language

4. Key terms in bold are defined in the glossary at the end of this volume.

creature, creaturely
creaturely comparison
image
immanence
reflection
rock
transcendence

Study Questions

1. What is the second style of language used in describing God?
2. What does *creaturely comparison* mean?
3. How does God use analogy in instances of creaturely comparison?
4. What are the values and limitations of analogy in the context of creaturely comparison?
5. What is meant by instances of extended use of creaturely comparison?

For Further Reading

Fairbairn, Patrick. *The Typology of Scripture*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1975. Bk. 1, chaps. 3–4.

Poythress, Vern S. *Redeeming Science: A God-Centered Approach*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006. Chap. 20.

———. *Theophany: A Biblical Theology of God's Appearing*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018. Chaps. 12, 21.

Prayer

Our God and Creator, thank you for making a reflective world, a world that reflects truths about who you are. Thank you for the Son, who is the eternal Image of the Father, and who has given us the supreme manifestation of who you are.

God and Technical Language

THE THIRD STYLE for talking about God is the style using more technical language, such as the traditional terms for God's attributes. (See fig. 17.1.)

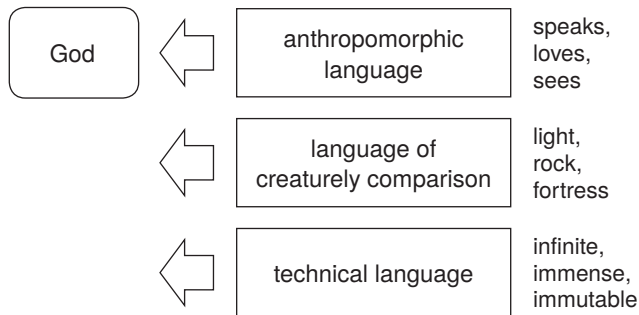


Fig. 17.1. Kinds of Styles in Describing God

We used this style a good deal in chapters 3–9. God is absolute, infinite, immense, eternal, immutable, omniscient, and simple. The list can be extended. This style has in focus terms such as *absolute* and *infinite* that apply in a unique way to God.

Being Aware of Analogies

How does this style differ from the previous two styles? Analogy is not in the foreground. With both the anthropomorphic style and

the style of creaturely comparison, the use of analogy or comparison is obvious. It is particularly obvious with cases of creaturely comparison. God is not a rock or a fortress, if we take the words *rock* and *fortress* to designate physical things and structures. In these cases, an analogy operates with one main focal point. God is stable like a rock, and he gives security like a fortress. So could we make the same point merely by saying that God is stable and that he gives security? Yes, of course. But when we just say “stable” or “he gives security,” the truth may not strike home so deeply as with a more poetic comparison—a rock or a fortress. Stimulated by a poetic comparison, we may picture a rock in the midst of waves or torrents of water (see Matt. 7:24–25). We picture a fortress during a time of enemy attack. It comes home to us that God is involved in real life. We are using a limited analogy, but it can still communicate effectively.

When we compare God to human beings, we are relying on a more robust structural analogy, because man is made in the image of God. Man is like God in a host of ways. The analogies are in some ways more multifaceted and deep. And they carry us into styles that include some special terms such as *omniscience*. The word *omniscience* describes the fact that God knows everything. God knows, and human beings know. But the two are not on the same level. They are analogous. God loves, and human beings love. God exercises power (omnipotence), and human beings exercise power (though limited). The difference between God and man is still there, all the time, to remind us that we have analogies and not a thorough identity between what we mean when we say that God knows and when we say that a human being knows.

No Obvious Analogy with Some Technical Terms

On the other hand, when we use some technical terms, such as *absolute* and *infinite*, we are not immediately aware of analogy. If anything, the focus is on *disanalogies*, that is, ways in which God differs markedly from human beings and also from all other creatures. God is absolute, but no human being is absolute. We are limited, and our power is relative, in comparison with God's. God is infinite and we are finite. God is immense, that is, unlimited and infinite with respect

to any possible spatial thinking. We as human beings occupy a limited space. God is eternal, while we are time-bound.

This kind of language is quite useful because it complements the language by which we evoke positive analogies between God and man (anthropomorphic style) or God and rocks (the style of creaturely comparison), or both (extended descriptions and narrations, with rich creaturely environments). We might say that some technical terms are good at emphasizing transcendence, while the analogical uses are good at emphasizing immanence. Yes, that is true up to a point.

Transcendence and Immanence as Reinforcing Each Other

And yet, in a Christian understanding, transcendence and immanence are like perspectives on each other.¹ Each involves the other. We cannot understand God's transcendence unless he actively *comes* to us and makes himself known to us. When he does so, his coming is an expression of his immanence. Conversely, if we start with immanence, we can ask, "Who is it who is coming to us?" Not a man, and not a creaturely rock, but the Holy One of Israel, the Creator of the ends of the earth! So through his immanence we become aware of his transcendence.

In practice, experiencing God in his immanence makes known his transcendence. Think of Mount Sinai. God "comes down" in immanence:

Behold, I am *coming to you* in a thick cloud. (Ex. 19:9)

The LORD will *come down* on Mount Sinai in the *sight of all the people*. (Ex. 19:11)

Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to *meet God*. (Ex. 19:17)

1. John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987), 13–18; John M. Frame, "A Primer on Perspectivalism," rev. 2008, <http://frame-poythress.org/a-primer-on-perspectivalism-revised-2008/>, accessed November 21, 2016.

The LORD had *descended* on it in fire. (Ex. 19:18)

The LORD *came down* on Mount Sinai. (Ex. 19:20)

But the entire process reveals the majesty, holiness, and power of God. It reveals his infinity. The Israelites themselves were overwhelmed by the experience.

Our Creaturely Understanding of Infinity

In addition, our understanding of the key technical terms, such as *absoluteness* and *infinity*, is still a creaturely understanding. Superficially, because we are *immediately* aware not of a particular analogy, but instead disanalogy, we might think that the key terms are not analogical in any way. It might seem as though, using a few special terms that have no analogy, we could finally be free from the limits of having to use creaturely comparisons. Through these key terms, can we get free from our finiteness? We may feel as though we can get a completely rigorous and transparent vision of who God *really* is, in distinction from what he appears to be. He *really* is absolute and infinite.

But this kind of thinking has a difficulty concealed in it. Of course, we should affirm, with Christians of earlier generations, that God is really absolute and infinite. He really is. But he is also loving. Both kinds of affirmation are true. And both kinds of affirmation are actually adapted to us in our creatureliness.

If we inspect words such as *absolute* and *infinite* carefully, we realize that they are part of the language that God has given to us as a gift, like all the other aspects of language. All God-given language has been given in a way that suits our capacities as human beings. We have the capacity to know God himself. And that is important. But we still know him from our standpoint of being finite human beings. The words *absolute* and *infinite* function for *us*, as human beings.²

Consider the word *absolute*. God is absolute in contrast to creaturely limitations. God has absolute power, whereas human beings

2. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 2:105.

have limited power. But when we speak that way, we are using analogies. We think about illustrations of the power of human beings, and illustrations of various kinds of limitations belonging to human beings and to other creaturely things. We say, rightly, that God is free of such limitations. But our conception of absoluteness arises in the context of illustrations. And the illustrations use creaturely things in their workings.

The lesson about God's absoluteness, in fact, comes home more effectively when we do not just have a negation, such as "God does *not* have limitations." It is more effective when we have heard about Mount Sinai, or if we were to experience it as the Israelites of Moses' time did. We experience God's absoluteness positively when he acts on our behalf (or even against us, in discipline). We experience it, for example, when we hear him speaking the Ten Commandments and it comes home to us that he has absolute authority to command us and we are responsible to obey.

Or consider the word *infinity*. We might picture for ourselves the series of natural numbers, which does not end: 1, 2, 3, 4 We say of the series that it is "infinite." Or we picture an indefinitely extended line in space, and we say that it is infinitely long. Of course, God is not a number series or a geometrical line. But the illustrations help us to picture infinity. By way of what? By way of analogies. We are still using things within our creaturely experience as a starting point. How else would we function? And we must remember that God has so crafted the created world that it is full of analogies that point to our Creator. (See fig. 17.2.)

How to Understand the Meaning of a Word

We can look at the challenge in another way by thinking about how we learn the meaning of a new word. There are a host of complex ways. But for simplicity, we can consider two simple ways: (1) we hear a definition; (2) we hear an illustration or several illustrations that show how the word is actually used. (See fig. 17.3.)

As a particular example, consider how to learn the meaning of the word *horse*. The first route is to hear a definition. So let us give a definition: a *horse* is a mammalian quadruped belonging to the genus

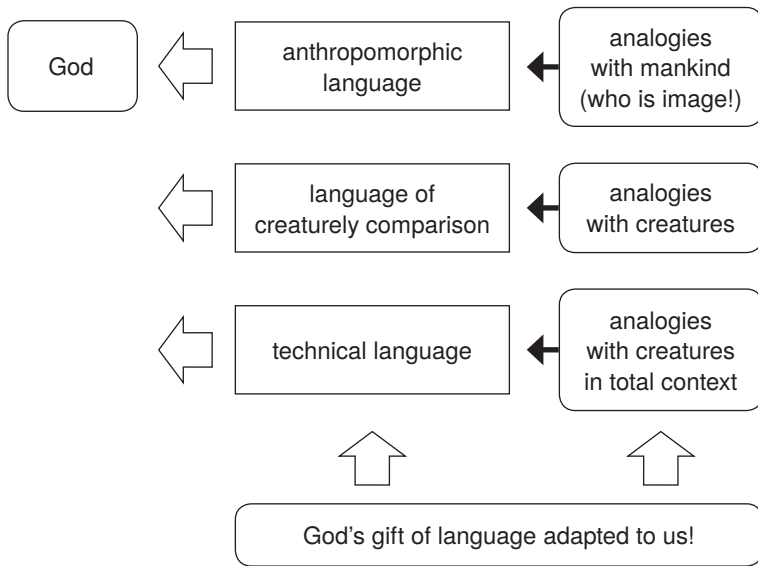


Fig. 17.2. Using Analogies

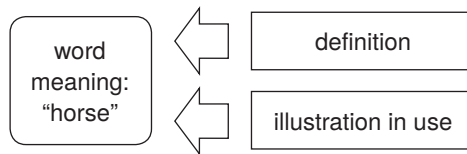


Fig. 17.3. Learning the Meaning of a Word

Equus, species *ferus*. But that does not help young children learn the meaning of the word *horse*, because typically they do not yet know the meanings of the technical Latin terms *Equus* and *ferus*. For ordinary, nonscientific purposes, we almost have to reverse the order, and define *Equus* (whose meaning is not widely known) using the word *horse* (whose meaning is widely known). We say, “*Equus* is the biological genus to which horses belong.” That helps, if we already know the meaning of the word *horse* and (at least roughly) the concept of a biological genus.

So our attempt to define *horse* already illustrates part of the challenge, namely, that a definition has to use some *other* words whose meanings are already known, at least approximately. If we are trying to

help a native speaker of French to learn English, we can have recourse to French terms that he already knows. We tell him that *horse* is the equivalent of the French word *cheval*. This information helps him, but only if he already knows the meaning of *cheval* in French. If we use definitions, there is no escaping using *other* words.

So one way to understand the word *infinity* would be to use other words to define it. *Infinity* is the property of being *infinite*. And what is the meaning of the adjective *infinite*? *Infinite* is an adjective describing anything that has the property of *infinity*. But this kind of definition does not help much, because we are moving in too small a circle, with only two main words. We can try again: *infinite* describes anything that is *not finite*. And of course, *finite* means *not infinite*. But the circle is still too small.

Merriam-Webster online offers several definitions for the word *infinite*:

1. extending indefinitely
2. immeasurably or inconceivably great or extensive
3. subject to no limitation or external determination³

Note how these definitions rely on a negation prefix *in-* or the word *no*, and other words, such as *limitation* and *measurable*, whose meanings we have to know. These other words could be defined in turn using still other words. But eventually we have to make contact with the world. We have things in the world that we can measure, or that have limits in time and/or space. So the meaning of *infinite* is still anchored by complicated ties to the world around us.

The second way of understanding the meaning of a word is by seeing it used. This route is the main one used by children, partly because when they first enter the world they do not yet know any words that could be used in definitions. So if a parent or teacher is teaching the child about horses, there will be pictures of horses, or perhaps even an environment where the child can see horses. One picture of a horse might be enough to get a rough idea. But the

3. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/infinite>, accessed January 16, 2018. The webpage also has a fourth definition pertinent to mathematics.

boundaries of what does and does not count as a horse might still be somewhat fluid. It helps to have several examples.

And of course, we can get greater precision for technical scientific purposes by introducing technical vocabulary, such as the Latin word for the genus *Equus*. But this vocabulary has to be carefully introduced, using sentences and paragraphs or examples of horses or both. To achieve precision, in fact, there have to be a lot of words, or a lot of examples, or some kind of complex mixture. The words that we use will typically be not just words describing *Equus* in greater detail, but words that indicate how the larger scientific context operates, and for what purposes, and with what limitations. What is a genus, and how do taxonomists decide to split or unite biological groups in particular cases? Entrance into the technical thinking of science involves a process of some complexity. We might be prone to forget the process when we have completed it. But it only takes trying to teach someone *else*, who is at the beginning, to remind us that it is complicated.

Knowing God

What can we learn from the example of *horse* when we consider how we know God? We know God because he shows us who he is, both in the world that he has made (Rom. 1:18–23) and in the words and discourses that he gives us in the Bible, telling us about himself. We might also say that a passage such as Exodus 34:6–7 offers something like a definition:

The LORD passed before him [Moses] and proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation.”

In Exodus 33, Moses asks God that he might know him more intimately. God gives him words that help to tell Moses more specifically

just who he is and what he is like. But these words function in the larger context of Moses' life, in which he has experienced the Lord's words and power before. For us who read the text of Exodus 34:6–7, the words come in the context of the rest of the book of Exodus. And Exodus builds on Genesis, and is supplemented by the rest of the Pentateuch.

Exodus 34:6–7 offers a pointed and moving summary of who God is. But by its literary context, it invites us to read it in the light of the ways in which the rest of the Pentateuch fills out the knowledge of God. God is the same God who shows his holiness in the specifics of the Ten Commandments, and he shows his absolute authority in the very fact that he commands the Israelites to keep his commandments. The words and clauses in Exodus 34:6–7 interpret the Pentateuchal expositions about God. But conversely, the entire Pentateuch fills out and interprets the meaning and implications of Exodus 34:6–7.

So God's instructions in the Pentateuch are, we might say, more like a parent's teaching a child about horses than they are like a teacher's telling a French speaker that *horse* means the same as *cheval* in French. God offers not merely a simple equivalent meaning, but a large explanation, with accompanying illustrations. (See fig. 17.4.)

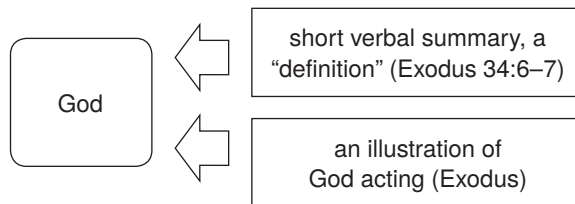


Fig. 17.4. Coming to Know God

Prior Knowledge of God

We should also note two special features with respect to knowing God. One is that there is only one of him. We talked earlier about a parent who would show a child pictures of horses. Maybe he would show several pictures of horses of different breeds and sizes and ages, and maybe have the child watch several horses grazing in the fields and resting in stalls and pulling carts and so on. There are plenty of

examples of horses, in the plural. But there is only one God. No creature is like him. So how can a parent or teacher proceed?

We can still do the obvious. We *say* that there is only one of him. And we also use analogies, in anthropomorphic style or the style of creaturely comparison, as we have already observed. We can give illustrations of how he acts. And fortunately, these illustrations are all around us, because God is present in providence all the time (Ps. 104).

With respect to God, we also have working in our favor a second special feature, namely, that everyone already knows God, as Romans 1:18–23 insists. The passage does not merely say that it is *possible* for human beings to know God, or that they have a capacity to know God as they encounter the testimony to him in the created world. It says, quite directly, that they actually know him: “For although they *knew God*” (v. 21). And the scope of the discussion, in the context of Romans 1, extends to all humanity, as we see from the fact that one verse appeals to what is manifested through “the things that have been made” (v. 20).

Horses may be completely new to a child. He may never have seen one, and he may never have heard the word *horse*. But the same is *not* true concerning God. Everyone already knows God. People know God, not just things about him. They also know his attributes, at least to some degree: “For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse” (Rom. 1:20).

It might seem, then, that knowledge of God is not a problem at all. We might reason that, unlike with horses, no one has to be told anything at all because everyone already knows him. But it is not that simple. It is not that simple even for Adam and Eve before the fall. They knew God. But as finite, growing creatures, they could still *grow* in knowing him, and knowing him more deeply. Much of the Bible is devoted at least partly to the central issue of growing in the knowledge of God. There is plenty to learn. The whole Bible is to be read and reread. But this growth never starts from zero, as it were. It does not start with a complete blank. Rather, when we grow, we fill in more depth in our knowledge concerning the one true God that Adam and Eve, and everyone after them, already know.

Corruption in Knowledge

In addition, there is the problem of sin. And it is far from easy. Ever since Adam, we are sinners. We rebel against our good Creator. And this rebellion affects our minds. We suppress the knowledge of God, as Romans 1:18 indicates. We become idolaters (vv. 21–23). We continue to know God, as verse 21 says. But having suppressed the knowledge, we also corrupt it with substitute gods. The idols of the pagans are substitute gods, counterfeit gods. So also are modern *ideas* of a god, to the extent that these ideas do not conform to the true knowledge of God offered in Scripture.

The corruption is deep in those who continue in rebellion against God. Christ, the Son of God, came to reconcile us to God and to bring us forgiveness of sins through his atonement. When we trust in God through Christ, our minds are renewed. But they are not yet perfect. We need to continue to be renewed: “be transformed by the renewal of your mind” (Rom. 12:2). Sin is still there to corrupt our knowledge of God. We need the continual instruction of Scripture, and we can expect that, sometimes subtly, sometimes violently, we may still here and there continue to resist God’s instruction. So for Christians, knowledge of God is renewed and purified through the work of Christ in his Spirit (Eph. 5:26). But our knowledge is still tainted with subtle forms of waywardness. We still have in us hidden desires to make God after our image. That is, we substitute for God our idea of what we would like him to be, rather than make our thoughts thoroughly conform to who he actually is.

That means that we cannot trust the reasonings of philosophers about God. Many philosophers—even many philosophers who are believing Christians—have attempted to think about God just using their reason, and not using Scripture. Their reasoning is based on the knowledge that they do have about God, as indicated in Romans 1:18–23. But what they know is also *corrupted* by the corruption in their knowledge.

The same is true in an even more pronounced way concerning philosophers who are not Christians at all, such as Plato and Aristotle and Plotinus. These philosophers *still* know God in the sense that Romans 1:18–23 explains it. So some of the things that they say

will sound very true and good. But we are not going to detect the distortions and suppressions unless we have recourse to Scripture and carefully sift human ideas from all other sources. Unfortunately, Plato and Aristotle, as two of the most influential philosophers in the Western world, stand near to the historical fountainheads of Western philosophy. Their influence, including the corruptions in their ideas for a god substitute, remains in the history of philosophy to this day. John Frame wisely advises:

Combining the Christian perspective with the Greek [Greek philosophy] is not advisable. We can learn today from the questions the Greeks asked, from their failures, from the insights they express in matters of detail. But we should rigorously avoid the notion of rational autonomy and the form-matter scheme as a comprehensive worldview. Unfortunately, during the medieval period and beyond, Christian theologians relied extensively on Neoplatonism and (beginning with Aquinas) Aristotelianism. Aquinas, for example, distinguished between natural reason (which operates apart from revelation) and faith (which supplements our reason with revelation). Then he referred over and over again to Aristotle as “the Philosopher” who guides us in matters of natural reason.⁴

Reasoning about Attributes of God

It follows that we have to return to Scripture and the fullness of its teaching. We must *not* just reason about what we *think* we mean by attributes of God, such as his absoluteness, his infinity, his immensity, and so on. Chapters 3–9 have shown that these attributes do belong to God because the Bible talks about them. We know God’s attributes, as Romans 1:20 says. But we will get in trouble if we just go off with our own reasoning and leave Scripture behind. Why? Because we do not know with infinite depth the meanings of the very terms that we use.

The terms, as we have observed, have ties with creaturely reality and with analogies between Creator and creature. We use ordinary

4. John M. Frame, *A History of Western Philosophy and Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2015), 81.

words of many kinds to try to define and refine what we mean by our key terms. We never really leave behind our creaturely status. We know God in the midst of mystery, and the mystery extends to the terms.

The Trinitarian Basis for Knowing God in Technical Terms

In the case of anthropomorphic style, and in the case of the style of creaturely comparison, we have seen that God's Trinitarian nature supplies the ultimate foundation for communicating to us and giving us knowledge. The same holds for our knowledge given in technical terms.

First, the eternal Son of God is also the eternal Word. God the Father is the eternal speaker, and the Word is his eternal speech. This pattern is the archetype for God's speech to us. And it is then also the archetype for God's giving us language in which we ourselves communicate and conceptualize. This language includes technical terms.

Now, technical terms are sometimes *invented* terms. Even when they are not, their technical meaning is distinct from meanings in ordinary use in English or in Latin. We as human beings tell ourselves, perhaps, that now we are going to use the term *infinity* in a technical sense, as an attribute of God rather than as a designation of a feature of the natural number system.

In making this move, we exercise *creativity*. Yet this creativity is derivative creativity. As creatures made in the image of God, we have a creativity for inventing new meanings, but this creativity is itself derivative—it is a reflection of the archetypal creativity of God. We have ectypal creativity. And we cannot exercise this ectypal creativity without the continuing presence of the power and authority of God, who gives us derivative authority over meanings. Every thought we have, every new meaning that we create, is not a surprise to God. Rather, he always knew it. We are imitating his infinite knowledge and wisdom.

In short, the gift of language includes the gift of creativity with language. But both of these imitate the archetypal speech, God's eternal Word (as indicated in chapter 13). The Father's relation to the Son, who is the Word, is a relation also involving the Holy Spirit, who is like the breath of God. So the Trinity forms the foundation for our technical terms within our language. (See fig. 17.5.)

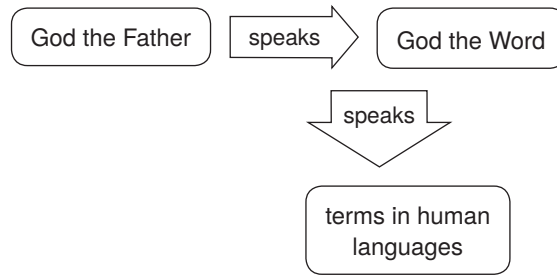


Fig. 17.5. Terms Deriving from God

Next, let us consider that the eternal Son is also the eternal Image of God the Father. This relation of imaging is the archetypal relation of imaging. Then there are ectypes. Man is made in the image of God. And subordinate to that, man's thoughts reflect on a creaturely level God's thoughts. This principle extends to technical terms. We depend on our conceptualizations, as summarized in technical terms, and these conceptualizations must fittingly reflect God's own understanding of his absoluteness and his infinity. Or, in cases of failure or rebellion, they fail to reflect. They distort the truth about God.

Finally, we may consider the fact that unity and diversity in terms reflect the unity and diversity and contextual relationships in the persons of the Trinity. The words *absolute* and *infinite*, like all other words in natural languages, have unity of meaning, and diversity (variation) expressed in a range of meaning. With technical terms, we try to refine the unity and decrease the variation. For example, we may say that we are going to use the word *absolute* as a technical term in theology. This technical term will designate *only* the absoluteness of God, not the "absoluteness" of ordinary use, in which it functions broadly as a superlative, or absolute value in mathematics or absolute temperature in thermodynamics. So now the word *absoluteness* becomes a technical term with one use only.

But this refinement takes place through a context, in which we explain what we are doing and try to eliminate ambiguities (variations) in the ordinary use of terms. If our newly refined word meanings were to lose contact with the context that refines them, the newer, exact meanings would no longer be there. So it is as though the variation and distribution (through context) were just moved back, out of our

immediate focus, by the process of refinement. But the words function effectively only if they retain a connection with previous ordinary use, and with the extended context in which we explain the new use.

In addition, variation in fact remains. Aristotle's conception of the absoluteness of his "unmoved mover"⁵ is not the same as an Islamic conception of the absoluteness of Allah, and neither is it the same as a Christian conception of God's absoluteness. We will find subtle variations even among Christian theologians, because each puts the term in the larger context of everything else that he says about God. And how do we distinguish absoluteness from other attributes that belong uniquely to God? We still have to do our work with the full riches of language to explain how the term is going to remain distinct.

So even technical terms do not actually offer us a thoroughgoing exception to how language works. Word meanings (and sentences as well) communicate themselves with three aspects: unity of meaning, diversity in meaning, and context of meaning. In linguistic terms, they have contrast, variation, and distribution. And these three, as we have observed earlier, reflect the archetype for unity and diversity and context in the Trinity. We always involve ourselves in mystery. (See fig. 17.6.)

Inventing a New Term to Apply *Only* to God

Could we escape our dependence on the Trinity, and on Trinitarian reflections built into normal language, by inventing a completely new term? Could we specify from the beginning that this term will apply only to God, and not to any creature, not even in an analogical way? To see the challenge, let us try to do it. We could say, "God is *kemlat*." But once we do it, we realize that this is no help. Unless the newly coined word *kemlat* has some kind of connection with the rest of language, and therefore also with the rest of the world we live in, we really have no meaning at all. A word with no connection, either to language meanings or to word meanings, is meaningless. It is a complete blank.

5. Frame, *History*, 73–75; Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann, 1962), 1071b3–1075a25, XII.vi.1–x.4. See also chapter 25 below.

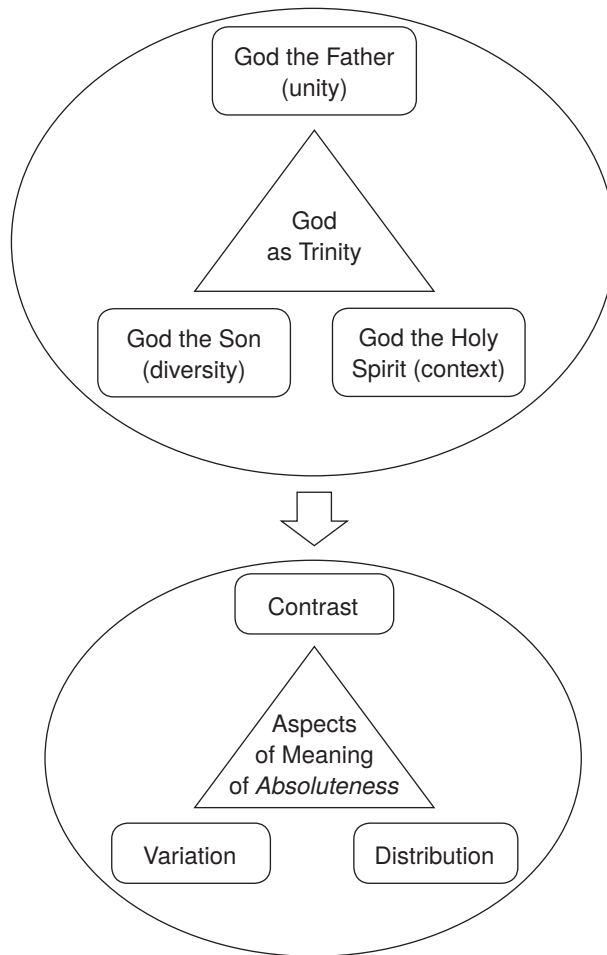


Fig. 17.6. Trinitarian Structure of the Word *Absoluteness*

Depending on Past Usage

As still another route, we could propose that we just continue to use technical terms of theology in the same way that they have already been used for centuries. For example, we might say, “We use the word *absolute* as a technical term, in agreement with how it has been used in theology for centuries.” To some extent, that is what theologians actually do. They may or may not choose to produce new *definitions* of terms when they first introduce them. They may choose just to

introduce them with the understanding that readers are expected to recognize what is being done. Readers should already be familiar with the history of theology.

This familiarity is indeed desirable. But there are still challenges. One is that this approach to the meanings of terms simply pushes into the past the secrets of technical terms. Somewhere, in the dim past, someone began to use a word in a refined, more technical way. Perhaps it was a gradual process. Perhaps it was a sudden, creative introduction of a new meaning, using an explicit definition. But at the end of the process, readers were expected to understand the special technical term.

Today, any reader can get on board by reading through the whole history of theology, preferably in chronological order. He can learn the technical meanings more or less in the way children learn the meanings of most terms that are new to them, namely, by observing how they are repeatedly used.

But then the original historical process *still* has to interact with ordinary language, and illustrations in the world, and perhaps passages in the Bible that use creaturely comparison in describing God. We never really get around the complexity of how God reveals himself in natural revelation and special revelation. We may just conveniently forget the complexity at the end of the long process through which we go when we read a lot in the history of theology.

Moreover, an additional difficulty appears. Each theologian has his own conception of absoluteness, or infinity, or another attribute. Human nature is common to us all—we have unity with other human beings in our thinking and our language. But we are also a diverse group. Each of us is distinct from every other human being. In other words, there is variation. A sensitive reading of the history of theology turns up subtle and sometimes pronounced differences in nuance, when historians read terms in the context of a whole work and its historical and cultural setting. So we do not actually get free from the interplay of unity and diversity in meaning. We indeed have the unity of a single term, such as *absoluteness*. But we also have some kinds of variation in meaning, when we consider how that term is used by different theologians in different writings.

Is this an artificial problem? We may see that it is not if we consider

an extreme case, namely, deism. Deists think, within their own context, that God is “absolute.” They may not use the term *absolute*, but they have an idea about what God should be to match their idea of perfection and independence. They think that true absoluteness would best take the form of being uninvolved once the universe is created. According to this view, God has nothing to do with maintaining the world. Rather, the world simply maintains itself, as a self-sufficient mechanism. So the deist conception of absoluteness is not the same as the conception in Christian theism.

Do we then understand the meaning of *absoluteness* by appealing to the history of theology? Do we know what it means, if we say or perhaps merely imply that we are using it in the way it has customarily been used?

It may *seem* that we are free from difficulties, because the word seems to be identifiably the *same* word: *absoluteness*. But the ideal of a *pure* unity of meaning, with no diversity, no variation, is an ideal only. We do not actually get it, though we may seem to have it. Rather, we are temporarily putting into the background the interlocking of one word with a diversity of users, a diversity of theologians, a diversity of writings, and a diversity of *contexts* that color how we understand the contribution of the word to a larger exposition about God. And in the end, the larger history includes Aristotle and the deists and a lot of complexities.

There is still another problem, namely, that heavy reliance on the history of theology to supply meaning makes things difficult for the next generation. Professors can always tell budding theological students to read forty books and seven thousand pages of selected material on the attributes of God, extending all the way through the history of the church. The professors may say that such reading, rather than a quick definition, is the right way to understand the technical use of a theological term such as *absoluteness*. And indeed, this advice makes sense. We can learn a lot from theologians of the past. They are brothers in Christ.

But it is not always going to happen. Not every student reads the seven thousand pages. And to do full justice to the reading, he would ideally read in the original languages of the works in question, so as not to miss nuances that help to establish the technical meanings.

Meanwhile, how will these students fare in their knowledge of God during the limited time when they are preparing for pastoral ministry? Each century that passes makes it harder, because there is always more material to read, never less, in a continually accumulating tradition. At some point the procedure of reading through the past history of theology is no longer effective for practical purposes of ministry. In fact, at some point it is no longer effective even for the professors. They have only one lifetime, and they can no longer read everything relevant before they begin to teach or write.

I do not have any quick solution to these challenges. We are really talking about the implications of human finiteness, and the limited span of human energy and human life. We are not going to master the history of theology. We are not going to master thoroughly the history of the use of *absoluteness* and the expressions in Latin and Greek analogous to it. We are not going to master meaning. Even with ten thousand lifetimes and perfect memories, we would still be finite.

God is Master. We are servants. My advice to budding theological students is that you at least read the Bible in your native tongue. You need to get reconciled to God through Christ and pray for the illumination of the Holy Spirit. Learn as much as you responsibly can from the wisdom of past generations. But also realize that you will never know the history of the meaning of *absoluteness* comprehensively.

Differentiation in Technical Terms

God's differentiated action (from chapter 12) also gets displayed in technical terms. We have earlier considered how God's infinity is there in the activity in which the Father loves the Son. His infinity is also there when Christ acts on earth to accomplish the plan of the Father. Christ's miracles, for example, display his infinite power. This infinity is a differentiated infinity. God the Father has infinite wisdom in his plan. He is the initiator in the Son's work:

So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise."
(John 5:19)

For I have not spoken on my own authority, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment—what to say and what to speak. And I know that his commandment is eternal life. What I say, therefore, I say as the Father has told me. (John 12:49–50)

God the Son has infinite power when he heals and when he stills the storm. The Holy Spirit has infinite presence in bringing the Son's power to bear on the sick and on the storm.

Technical Terms in the Resurrection of Christ

What bearing does the resurrection of Christ have on our understanding of technical terms? The resurrection of Christ is linked to one main term that might be considered technical, namely, the term *resurrection*. But this term has abundant ties with ordinary language. In typical uses, it is meant to sum up what we find in many verses in the Bible that use verbal forms, “raise” or “rise,” often with the added expression “from the dead.”

Our topic in this chapter has been technical terms arising to describe attributes of God. So we might ask whether the resurrection of Christ throws light on these technical terms, such as *absoluteness*, *infinity*, and *immensity*. The answer is that it does. As we have already said, the resurrection of Christ is the key turning point in history, and also a key central point in *revealing* God and his purposes, especially in the extension of his revelation to the Gentiles. In some of the previous chapters, we have seen how the resurrection of Christ does in fact display God's absoluteness and infinity and so on.

God is always the same. So his absoluteness and infinity were always the same, before and after the resurrection of Christ. But it is still an enriching exercise to use the resurrection of Christ as a perspective on absoluteness or infinity. We may see depths that we did not notice before. We could say, in fact, that God's absoluteness is the absoluteness of his sufficiency displayed climactically in the resurrection of Christ. It is also the absoluteness of his sufficiency *yet* to be displayed in the new heaven and the new earth (Rev. 21:3, 22–23; 22:1–5).

An error sometimes crops up in some forms of Barthianism,

whereby some people think that the attributes of God are made known *only* in the incarnate Christ. But a proper understanding of Christ's resurrection acknowledges that the one raised from the dead is also the one who existed as the Word "in the beginning," before his incarnation (John 1:1, 14). So the resurrection of Christ offers a perspective on who God always is in his Trinitarian character, rather than a reduction to a momentary revelation at a single point in time, a moment that would collapse history into that point.

Key Terms

absolute, absoluteness⁶

analogy

anthropomorphic style

attributes

counterfeit gods

creativity

creaturely comparison

history of theology

immanence

infinite

learning

meaning

philosophers

technical language

transcendence

Study Questions

1. What takes place when people describe God with technical language?
2. How does technical language differ from anthropomorphic language and the language of creaturely comparison?
3. What relation do technical terms have to the history of theology?

6. Key terms in bold are defined in the glossary at the end of this volume.

4. How does the history of theology make technical terms both valuable and difficult?

For Further Reading

Berkhof, Louis. *Systematic Theology*. 4th rev. ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939. Pt. 1, chap. 5.

Prayer

Our God, help us to value the past, and to see your glory in the way our theological language functions to help us grow in knowing you.

The Value of Technical Terms

SOME PEOPLE MIGHT think that we are proposing to demote or eliminate the use of technical terms for describing God. But that is not true. They are valuable. Let us have as many of them as we can reasonably use. We need to value them but not idolize them. We need to realize that they are useful, but that they do not magically give us sanctification.

Some limitations have come to light from our discussion in the previous chapter. But the limitations go together with the fact that the technical terms summarize positive revelation reflecting the Trinitarian character of God. They summarize the climactic revelation of God in the resurrection of Christ. This positive revelation, and the positive reflections of God in language and thought, is to be celebrated. In addition, we can see three interlocking benefits from technical terms in theology.

Summarizing

First, technical terms summarize a larger body of knowledge. In this case, it is knowledge of God. We can read whole pages about God's immutability, such as we find in Francis Turretin's theology.¹

1. Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison Jr., trans. George Musgrave Giger (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1992), 1.204–6, III.xi.

When we have finished reading and digesting and meditating on relevant biblical texts, we come away with a term, a single word, *immortality*, that summarizes everything about which we have read and thought. The term is a convenient mental hook on which to hang the memory of it all.

It helps our memory to have a summarizing term. It solidifies our thinking to have a term around which to continue to collect what we learn. It also helps our communication with other Christians who already know the same technical term. In such communication, the term is like shorthand for a large body of knowledge and verbal description. It is all very convenient. We just have to remember in addition that technical terms have to be learned. They have to be taught to the next generation if they are to continue to be effective. That is not so convenient. Beyond a certain point, it may not be so important for any one Christian to learn a technical term. It depends.

Linking to the Past

Second, technical terms link us to the history of theological thinking. In the previous chapter, we saw how this could become a burden. But properly understood, it is also an open door, an invitation to explore the riches of theological thinking in the past. Since the Enlightenment, liberal theology has deeply corrupted large quantities of theological discourse. It can be a relief to go back before the Enlightenment and meet writers who trust what the Bible says.

The brothers in previous generations who knew God had the gift of the Holy Spirit. They were not infallible; they were not on the same level as the Bible. But they are useful to us, just as the wisest of our fellow Christians alive today are useful to us. And the passing of generations has additional usefulness, because if we go back far enough in time, or we go to another culture existing even in our own time, we find that the other people we meet are not preoccupied merely with the pressures of modernity and contemporary life. We get perspective. It helps us to overcome the modern prejudice that the newer is always better.

We find, for example, that people hundreds of years ago were ready to talk about the wrath of God and about hell (and so was

Jesus!). In contrast, the secular culture around us is deeply opposed to any idea of God's wrath, and this opposition tempts us to downplay wrath in our own thinking. We are tempted to distort our conception of God. In that case, reading from others helps remind us to go back to the Bible and notice things that we find uncomfortable. The technical terms link us to the meanings of past generations. In this way, they are an invitation to read.

Opposing Heresies

Third, technical terms alert us to the need to oppose heresies.

Now, what is a heresy? Let us first consider the broader issue of conflicts and disputes in theology. Some feisty people always want to create fights over minute points of theology. But contemporary American culture wants to have "tolerance" and peace at any price. The pressure is on everyone to get along by not criticizing anyone else's lifestyle. In a culture such as this one, the greater danger for most people is that they would not care about the truth, rather than that they would always be getting into fights about minor points. We who are Christians need to remind ourselves that the truth matters—especially the truth about God. Understanding God rightly and deeply promotes godly living and fellowship with God. Misunderstanding God interferes with people's knowing and embracing the way of salvation. Even after they are saved, it interferes with growing in fellowship with God. Theology matters. Good theology matters.

It is also important to see that not all mistakes in theology are heresies. Heresies are *serious* deviations from and distortions of the truth. They corrupt people's knowledge of God and of the way of salvation in a major way, so that they are soul-destroying in their tendency. The more people listen to a heresy, the more they are wrongheaded or confused about who God is and about his way of salvation in Christ. For example, to deny the deity of Christ is heresy. It is so because understanding that Christ is God is essential to a true understanding both of Christ and of the Christian God. Christians worship Christ. And if he were not God, that would be a corruption of the principle that only God deserves to be worshiped.

The Contribution of Technical Terms

Now, many of the technical terms in theology have been crafted in the process of resisting and refuting heresies. The terms are like signposts, permanently erected to warn Christians to stop in their tracks. Ahead of them, in the path of thought that they are exploring, is the edge of the cliff of orthodoxy. Such a term is like a signpost, telling them not to fall into the abyss of heresy on the other side of the sign.

The expression “the deity of Christ” is one such sign. It says, “Christian, keep back from anyone who tells you that Christ is not God or is only a lesser kind of ‘god’” (1 John 5:20–21; 2 John 9–10).

The term *Trinity* is another signpost. It is a summary term. It summarizes positively a complex system of teaching, that God is one God in three persons. At the same time, negatively, it warns against all kinds of corruptions. One heresy says that God is one God but only *appears* to be three persons, which are only three diverse historical manifestations of his pure unity (this is the heresy of modalism). Another heresy says that the Father only is God and that the Son and the Spirit are not, but are inferior to the Father (this is the heresy of Arianism). Another says that there are three gods, or many (polytheism).

What about the statement that God is infinite? Does not everyone believe this? Unfortunately not. So the term *infinite* serves to warn us against heresies. One heresy says that god, along with us, is in the process of growing and learning in interaction with the world. It is really depicting a finite god. Another heresy says that though god was unlimited and in a sense infinite before he created the world, he limited himself by creating a world that had an integrity of its own. He either could not or would not control it after it was created.

The fallen human mind is adept at producing mental versions of idols—corruptions of or substitutes for the true God. So we may suppose that hardly any attribute of God does not function to protect us from a corresponding heresy that denies that attribute.

Interaction of Three Functions of Technical Terms

So in sum, technical terms serve at least three main functions: (1) Positively, they summarize a body of theological truth.

(2) Positively, they connect us with the history of previous discussions on the topic. (3) Negatively, they warn against heresies. (See fig. 18.1.)

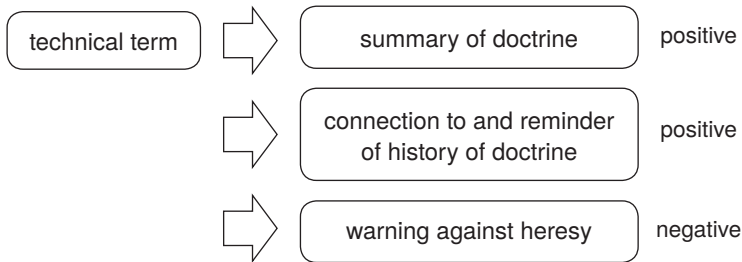


Fig. 18.1. Functions of Technical Terms

These three functions interlock. The positive summary is the first function. But it contributes to the second. As a summary, a technical term in fact summarizes not only what the Bible teaches, but also the best of what Christians have understood in past generations. Also, by strengthening Christian understanding, it serves to buttress such understanding against the attacks of heretics. So function 1 includes function 3.

Or let us start with function 2, the connection with the history of theology. Theology at its best summarizes what the Bible teaches. We read the past in order to gain further insight about the contents of the Bible. So function 2, reading the past, leads to and includes function 1, an understanding of biblical teaching. Moreover, when we read the past, we frequently find that technical terms arose in the midst of conflict with heresies. Even if they did not, the people who used them did so partly for the purpose of contrasting orthodoxy with heresies. So function 2 leads to function 3.

Finally, let us start with function 3. Orthodoxy can be distinguished from heresy only if we say something positive about what orthodoxy is. So function 3 leads to 1. In combating heresy, theologians look primarily to the Bible, of course, But secondarily they look to see whether past generations had wisdom in combating similar heresies in their own time. And if they are wise, they look also to the future. Written refutations of heresies intend that future generations, as well as their own generation, would be warned. So function 3, the

combating of heresies, leads to function 2, the embedding of technical terms in a historical record of theological discussion.

These three functions of technical terms are therefore three aspects of the same thing. All three functions belong together within the overall aim of increasing our knowledge of God and of the Bible. (See fig. 18.2.)

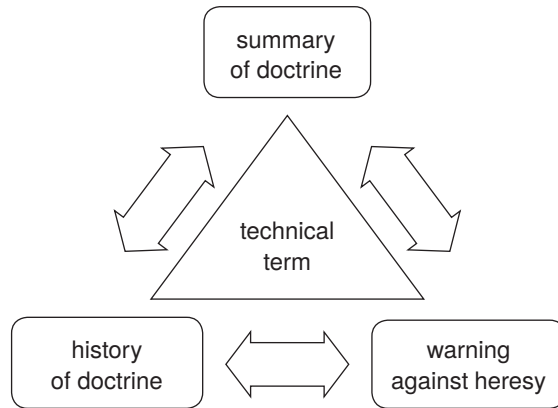


Fig. 18.2. Interlocking Functions of Technical Terms

Language, including technical language, can function to edify because God opened the way for us to edify ourselves and others when he gave us the gift of language. And he continues to enable edification through language by continuing to be present with us. In particular, he reflects his character in the meanings and structure of language.

The Need for Technical Terms

So do we need technical terms? Not as an absolute necessity. The Bible uses predominantly ordinary language. The Bible is sufficient so that “the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:17). Technical terms are not there to *add* in a fundamental way to the knowledge of God given to us through Christ, as we read his Word in Scripture. According to function 1, technical terms are there to summarize what is already there in the Bible. They draw our attention to it. When properly crafted, the technical terms

are supposed to return us to the Bible with better understanding and keener observation of what is there all along.

Not every truth that God gives us through the Bible is found *explicitly* all in one place in a single verse of the Bible. The doctrine of the Trinity comes from a synthesis of a larger number of verses, and even whole paragraphs and books of the Bible. But this synthesis is not adding to what is in the Bible. Rather, it is making explicit the implications that the Bible as a whole has already made available in principle to every reader. When we consider all the verses together, we see that, *together*, they tell us that God is one God in three persons.

So also with other technical terms. They are useful, and we should value them. But they do not replace the Bible or give us something innately superior to or deeper than the Bible.

Technical Terms versus Heresies

We might wonder whether dealing with heresies leads to an exception to our confidence in the sufficiency of Scripture. We do have to continue to believe that Scripture is sufficient, in the way that 2 Timothy 3:17 says. But heresies can shake our confidence. It can be difficult to root out heretics. Almost any heretic you choose will at times appeal to Scripture. He may treat some verses in a way that conflicts with other verses, but there will be some verses at least to which he will appeal. It will sound plausible. Otherwise, the heresy would not tempt ordinary Christians to go astray.

The most powerful and dangerous heresies have not usually arisen in the minds of simple Bible readers. Heretics are often well educated. They are clever. That is part of their problem. They carry themselves away through pride, or fascination with their own cleverness, or overconfidence in their own insights, or unwillingness to listen to others. There are many reasons, most of which have pride at their root. Heretics propound some view that pretends to give superior insight and that sounds attractive. They are clever enough so that they put together in apparent harmony a lot of partial truths. And behind their cleverness stand demonic spirits who are even more clever than human spirits (1 Tim. 4:1). These spirits are eager to entice human spirits into deeper and more clever heresies whenever they can.

In the face of this kind of subtle attack, what is a defender to do? Carefully crafting a new technical term, or reactivating an old one, can help, for the reasons that we have already surveyed. But a technical term cannot do the job by itself. People—ordinary people—have to be instructed and taught and warned in terms that they can understand. They have to be shown from the Bible that the heresy does not match the Bible. It is not sufficient (though still useful) for a teacher to appeal to the history of theology, because that history is fallible. The heretic can always reply that he has the Bible or reason or spiritual insight on his side, and that his special ability supersedes the whole previous history of theology. That is a suspicious and prideful claim, to be sure. But it can still be very attractive. The technical term may help us to pinpoint the problem with a “new” heresy and to rally the troops around the truth, but it has to serve its function within a larger context of teaching and understanding and working with weak and sinful human nature.

Moreover, a technical term has a built-in weakness, which is the underside of its strength. By being technical and being refined in its meaning, it does not perfectly match the meaning of any one ordinary word appearing in the Bible. So the heretic can reject the technical term. He can claim that it represents an inadequate or flawed summary of the Bible. Anti-Trinitarian heretics, for example, such as the Socinians, complained that the word *Trinity* was not in the Bible, so they refused to use it or endorse it. Conversely, and even more dangerously, the heretic may *appropriate* a technical term but change its meaning. He may, for example, say that he is Trinitarian when he is not, because he imports into the meaning of the term *Trinity* his own distinct meaning. He covers himself with the sheep’s clothing of orthodoxy by using an orthodox term. But underneath he is a wolf, and in his own mind the term he uses has his wolf’s meaning (Matt. 7:15).

For this reason, the use of a technical term is not an unerring means for detecting heresy. On the one hand, it may not catch the true heretic because he conceals his own meaning under the cloak of an apparently orthodox term. On the other hand, it may lead to a too-hasty decision to brand a fellow believer as a heretic merely because he does not use the same key words in the way that someone else does. It is always useful to ask, “What does he mean?” not merely

“What does he say?” Perhaps he says that “God is not simple.” He may be denying the classical theological understanding of simplicity, which would be a form of false doctrine. Or instead, he may be trying to affirm that God is rich in comparison with human understanding. We need to ask, and to keep listening. We listen with love, expecting the best. But we also listen with caution, with concern, and with vigilance, because we know that heresies can crop up:

I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears. (Acts 20:29–31)

The Value of Technical Terms from the Perspective of the Resurrection of Christ

What does the resurrection of Christ show us about technical terms? The resurrection of Christ exhibits “what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead” (Eph. 1:19–20). Christ is now enthroned (v. 21) and works on our behalf “as head over all things *to the church*” (v. 22). The most fundamental protection against heresies is the protection of Christ himself, because he rules on our behalf. All the wise uses of technical terms through the course of history reflect the working of Christ in his wisdom on our behalf. Through the Holy Spirit (v. 17) he gives wisdom to human leaders in the church (4:11–16) who fight against doctrinal attacks. Technical terms reflect the reality of the resurrection of Christ.

Key Terms

heresy²

history of theology

2. Key terms in bold are defined in the glossary at the end of this volume.

orthodoxy
summarizing
technical terms

Study Questions

1. In what ways may technical terms be valuable?
2. In what ways do some of the uses of technical terms reinforce each other?
3. What is heresy, and what is our responsibility toward it?
4. How can technical terms help in combating heresy, and what are their limitations?

For Further Reading

Berkhof, Louis. *Principles of Biblical Interpretation (Sacred Hermeneutics)*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1950. Chap. 3.

Prayer

Dear God, the all-wise God, thank you for giving us a Bible that is sufficient to equip us. And thank you for raising up teachers by the power of the Holy Spirit who have through the centuries given us technical terms and in other ways helped us to better read the Bible for what it is. Protect us and all your people from the attacks and deceptions of Satan, and from heretics who would destroy your flock.

We honor you and thank you for the mystery of who you are and the mystery of your acts.

PART 5

PHILOSOPHICAL CONUNDRUMS

We sort through how to deal with philosophical challenges to classical Christian theism.

Abstract Terms from Philosophy

IN CHAPTERS 14–17, WE considered three styles to describe God: an anthropomorphic style, a style with creaturely comparisons, and a style with technical terms, particularly terms for attributes of God. In addition, we can consider a fourth style, which we may label the *philosophical style*. (See fig. 19.1.)

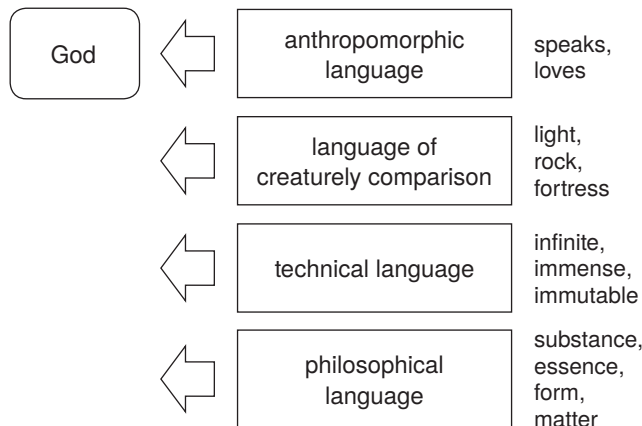


Fig. 19.1. Four Styles to Describe God

What Is the Philosophical Style?

What is the philosophical style? Perhaps that is not a good name for it. But by whatever name one calls it, it does exist. What we have

in mind is a style that uses categories or terms that are extremely general. In this style of exposition, we meet terms such as *substance*, *essence*, *qualities*, *accidents*, *necessity*, *contingency*, *potential*, *formal*, *material*. Or, more precisely, English terms such as these are used to translate corresponding terms that occur in Latin and/or Greek. Such categories tend to crop up in premodern Western philosophy. Most of the key terms, in their specialized philosophical use, can be traced back to Aristotle. In medieval times, the translation of Aristotle's works into Latin opened the door for widespread scholarly analyses and appropriations of Aristotle, particularly in the sphere of theology.

In some ways, this fourth philosophical style can be considered merely as a special case of the third style. The key philosophical terms are technical terms in philosophy. Their meanings within the context of philosophy do not perfectly match the meanings of the same words in ordinary discourse. In fact, in ordinary discourse, we find that words have a *range* of usage and a *range* of meanings (variation in meaning). The philosophical use diverges from this range in ordinary language, and from the flexibility that goes with it. Whereas ordinary language can be used in an analogical or metaphorical way, philosophical usage is supposed to be consistently the same.

Characteristics of Philosophical Style as a Subdivision of Using Technical Terms

Concerning the philosophical style, we can say many of the same things that we said in chapters 17–18 about the use of technical terms. Philosophical terms never really escape the connection with ordinary language and meanings, nor do they escape the connection with particular cases in the world that illustrate what people mean. Philosophical use may aspire to be consistently the same. But in fact, there are always subtle variations. Plato is not the same as Aristotle, who is not the same as Plotinus, who is not the same as Thomas Aquinas. Meanings of key terms, even standard philosophical terms, can be colored by context, and by the overall cast of the larger theological and philosophical system in which they are deployed. Shifts from one language to a translation into another language present difficulties

because between two languages words sometimes do not match in meaning in a one-to-one fashion.

Philosophical terms are a part of language. They are, as always, dependent on the Trinity. From the Trinity come language, reflections, and the interlocking of contrast, variation, and distribution in meaning. From the Trinity comes the interlocking of contrast, variation, and distribution that reflects coinherence.

As with other technical terms (chap. 18), philosophical terms can be useful for purposes of summary, for purposes of historical connection, and for purposes of fending off rival philosophies.

Distinct Challenges with Philosophical Style

So what is different? Why should we consider this philosophical style a fourth style? It overlaps with the third, to be sure. But some challenges become deeper when we deal with some of the principal terms coming from philosophy.

One obvious difficulty for theology is that most of the technical terms stemming from philosophy have a contaminated origin. The philosophers who first developed the terms in a technical way were not consciously intending to develop a specifically Christian worldview, but were usually using reason in a way that they conceived of as independent of God or independent of instruction from special revelation.¹ We have already talked about that as one of the perennial difficulties with most of the history of Western philosophy. The trouble is that this global difficulty infects the details of how key terms are understood. They are developed and understood in a context, and the context is not spiritually healthy.

Next, the key terms do not connect in obvious ways to the Bible's discourses. Now, this fact in itself is not an insuperable difficulty. The word *Trinity* does not occur in the Bible. But we can explain how we are using the word *Trinity* to summarize what *is* in the Bible when we put together the teaching in a large number of passages. Similarly, the word *absolute* does not occur in the ESV Bible translation, nor

1. John M. Frame, *A History of Western Philosophy and Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2015), 50–51, 81.

does the word *infinite*. But if we consider what the Bible says more deeply, we do find passages that address in their own way the majesty of God and his unlimited knowledge and power. We cited a few passages in chapters 3 and 4 when we discussed absoluteness and infinity as attributes of God. We could have added more. After considering these passages, we can see that the word *absolute* or *absoluteness* in its technical use summarizes what the Bible as a whole teaches about God's majesty and his independence, in comparison with creaturely dependence.

When we come to consider technical terms in philosophy, the challenge is bigger. The terms often do not show much direct connection with the thinking in the Bible. It becomes more difficult to show that the technical concepts are compatible with the Bible's teaching.

Philosophy in the Context of the Resurrection of Christ

How does the resurrection of Christ throw light on philosophy?

The Bible's information about the resurrection of Christ includes places that confirm the mental and spiritual distance between Greek philosophy and the Christian faith, including especially the crucifixion and the resurrection of Christ. In 1 Corinthians 1:18–31, Paul indicates that the crucifixion of Christ is “folly” to Greeks. In Acts 17:22–33, the sophisticated Greek audience reacts negatively to his proclamation of the resurrection: “Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, ‘We will hear you again about this’” (v. 32). God may open the hearts of resistant people. But the resistance in this case is evident.

In Colossians 1–2, we see another aspect of the contrast. Paul has set forth in chapter 1 the preeminence of Christ in creation and redemption (vv. 15–20). In chapter 2, he warns against other ideas that would displace the centrality of Christ:

See to it that no one takes you captive by *philosophy* and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ. For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority. (Col. 2:8–10)

The resurrection of Christ is a center point for growing in knowing God. We must beware of any attempt to use philosophical categories to explain God in a way that bypasses this centrality.

Key Terms

Aristotle²

philosophical style (of communication)

technical terms

Study Questions

1. What is the philosophical style in theology?
2. What, if anything, distinguishes it from the style using technical terms?

For Further Reading

Frame, John M. *A History of Western Philosophy and Theology*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2015. Chaps. 1–3.

Prayer

Our Father, thank you for guiding us into the truth in Christ. Keep us from falling prey to vain deceit in the philosophies that seek only human wisdom.

2. Key terms in bold are defined in the glossary at the end of this volume.

Substance in Philosophy

LET US NOW consider some particular technical terms that come into theology with a historical background in philosophy.

Consider first the term *substance*. Historically, its main uses as a technical term derive from philosophy. We will spend some time with this term, not only because it is a significant term for theology, but because it can illustrate in some detail how to treat *other* terms from philosophy.

Substance in the Bible

Where in the Bible do we get a discussion of the idea of *substance*, with or without the term? In the ESV, we find four occurrences of the English word *substance* (Deut. 33:11; Josh. 14:4; Ps. 139:16; Col. 2:17).¹ In Deuteronomy 33:11 and Joshua 14:4, the word is close in meaning to “the property that a person owns.” In Colossians 2:17, it designates the reality of Christ, in contrast to the shadows pointing forward to him. The contrast is a conceptual contrast between a shadow and the substance of which it is a shadow.

These are ordinary-language uses. They do not give us any particular insight into the word *substance* in a philosophical sense.

In Psalm 139:16, the psalmist talks about “my unformed substance”

1. In the NASB 1977, the word *substance* occurs in four verses (Deut. 33:11; Ps. 139:16; Prov. 6:31; Col. 2:17). The KJV has many occurrences, a great many of which are similar to the meaning “property.” The NIV has one occurrence, in Daniel 7:1, where its meaning is similar to “contents.”

while he was in the womb. The underlying Hebrew has *gāłmi* (גִּלְמִי), “my embryo.” The psalmist is referring in an ordinary way to the time when he was still a relatively undeveloped baby. He does not intend to provide us with philosophical information about how the world is composed at its most basic level. The usage in English is still that of ordinary language, though we can see some vague analogies between the use here and the technical use in philosophy.

A Survey of Substance in Philosophy

So what *is* this technical use of the word *substance* in philosophy? It is instructive to read the article entitled “Substance” by Howard Robinson in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.² It is complicated. After an introductory section, it moves historically from pre-Socratic Greek philosophers to Aristotle, medieval philosophy, Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, and beyond into more modern figures. We see a plurality of concepts, a diversity in concepts. Of course, there are also unifying features. Later thinkers are building on or tinkering with or undermining or reconstructing earlier conceptions. But all this makes the term *substance* fraught with difficulty for theology. Which meaning and which context in philosophy are we really talking about here?

Robinson’s introductory section³ helps to orient us. He observes: “It seems, in summary, that there are at least six overlapping ideas that contribute to the philosophical concept of substance.” He then lists the six ideas. But the list is still a challenging one. We have six overlapping ideas, not one. And Robinson does not imply that all of these overlapping ideas are always present in every use in the context of philosophy.

Being Ontologically Basic

To show something of the challenge, let us consider briefly three out of Robinson’s six overlapping ideas. The first is the idea of “being

2. Howard Robinson, “Substance,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Spring 2014), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2014/entries/substance/>.

3. Robinson, “Substance,” § 1.

ontologically basic—substances are the things from which everything else is made or by which it is metaphysically sustained.”⁴ Does the Bible address what is “ontologically basic”? Well, it does not use precisely this vocabulary, which is that of modern philosophy. But it says, for example, that God “formed the man of dust from the ground” (Gen. 2:7). So here is one instance of something, namely, “dust,” from which something else (“man”) was made. But this verse does not generalize to consider what animals or plants or rocks or the sun is made of. Nor does it indicate where the dust came from.

Were the sun and the moon and the waters of Genesis 1 made of dust? And was the dust in turn made from something else? If Genesis 1:1 describes the initial act of creation,⁵ then God created the earth. Genesis 1 does not mention “dust” anywhere. But since God created all things, we can infer that any later “dust” came from the unformed earth or heaven or from things created later than verse 1, but still before the making of dust. Dust may or may not have had created things that preceded it in time. Preceding the initial act of creation, in Genesis 1:1, there was only God, as John 1:1–3, 1 Corinthians 8:6, and Colossians 1:15–17 confirm. So God is ontologically basic. Everything else is derivative, sometimes through multiple stages. All the stages are controlled by God, in accord with his plan.

Or consider Hebrews 11:3: “By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible.” This verse suggests, by implication, that what is “ontologically basic” is not “what is seen.” What is it, then? God created the world through his word: “By the *word* of the LORD the heavens were made, and by the *breath* of his mouth all their host” (Ps. 33:6). So the word of the Lord, through the Son as Mediator (John 1:1), is more “basic” than anything seen. There is only one who is “ontologically basic,” namely, God. And this God is one God in three persons. The Father speaks the eternal Word. We are thinking very differently from virtually the whole philosophical tradition with regard to *substance*. (See fig. 20.1.)

4. Robinson, “Substance,” § 1.

5. Vern S. Poythress, *Interpreting Eden: A Guide to Faithfully Reading and Understanding Genesis 1–3* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), app. A.

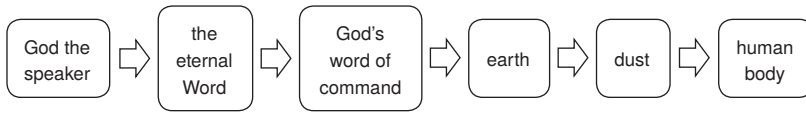


Fig. 20.1. What Is Ontologically Basic

We could approach the same question by using another path provided by the Bible, namely, the path of reflections. Adam is made in the image of God, and he reflects the original, namely, God. God is ontologically more basic than Adam, not only because of the fact that he created Adam, but because Adam is copied after God as the original. The original is conceptually more basic than the copy.

In a sense, God is the ontological original. But in addition, within the distinctions between persons of the Trinity, God the Father is the original in relation to God the Son, who is the eternal Image. But this order of “origination” is an eternal order, not something happening early in the history of the world.⁶ So the idea of substance, as ontologically basic, finds its root both in the unity of God, who is the original, and in the differentiation of persons within God, according to which God the Father is original in relation to God the Son, in the harmony of fellowship in the Holy Spirit. This approach differs from the usual conception of substance in philosophy. (See fig. 20.2.)

Durability

So let us try again, using the second of the six overlapping ideas. The second idea that Robinson’s article lists is the idea of “being, at

6. We must be careful *not* to understand this idea of the Father as “original” in an Arian sense. The order that goes from Father to Image (the Son) always exists. It is an eternal order, not an order that falsely implies (as in Arianism) that the Son was created. We can see this order in John 1:1. The affirmation “In the beginning was the Word” asserts the eternal existence of the Word (the divine Son of God). He has no origin in time because he always exists. The same verse unfolds a differentiation between the Word and God. On the one hand, “the Word was God.” There is a unity in the one God. On the other hand, there is also a diversity: “the Word was with God.” In human speech, the speech proceeds from the speaker. Likewise, in a mysterious manner that is analogous, the Word comes from God the Father, who is the divine speaker. This order from God the Father to the Word is eternal.

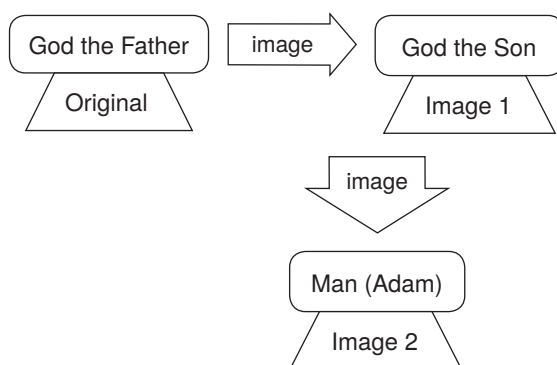


Fig. 20.2. Images and the Original

least compared to other things, relatively independent and durable, and, perhaps, absolutely so.”⁷ Yes, some things last longer than others. Some things are “relatively independent.” But this kind of description sounds like a matter of more or less. By itself, this description would not give a philosopher a rigorous idea of substance. It is pretty vague, and therefore not really so useful.

When we look at the description from a Christian viewpoint, we have our own obvious answer. Only God endures forever unchanged (Ps. 102:25–27). Everything else is dependent, not independent. So this idea applies only to God. Only God is forever unchanged. So in one sense, only God is *substance*. But mysteriously, God is also eternally differentiated, in three persons. Everything that God created is dependent and not eternally enduring. (See fig. 20.3.)

Being an Object

Let us try again, using Robinson’s fifth idea: “being typified by those things we normally classify as objects, or kinds of objects.”⁸ This description is useful. What it is getting at is that we can make a distinction between (1) things, or “objects,” such as rocks, plants, animals, and human beings, and (2) passing events that *happen* to

7. Robinson, “Substance,” § 1.

8. Robinson, “Substance,” § 1.

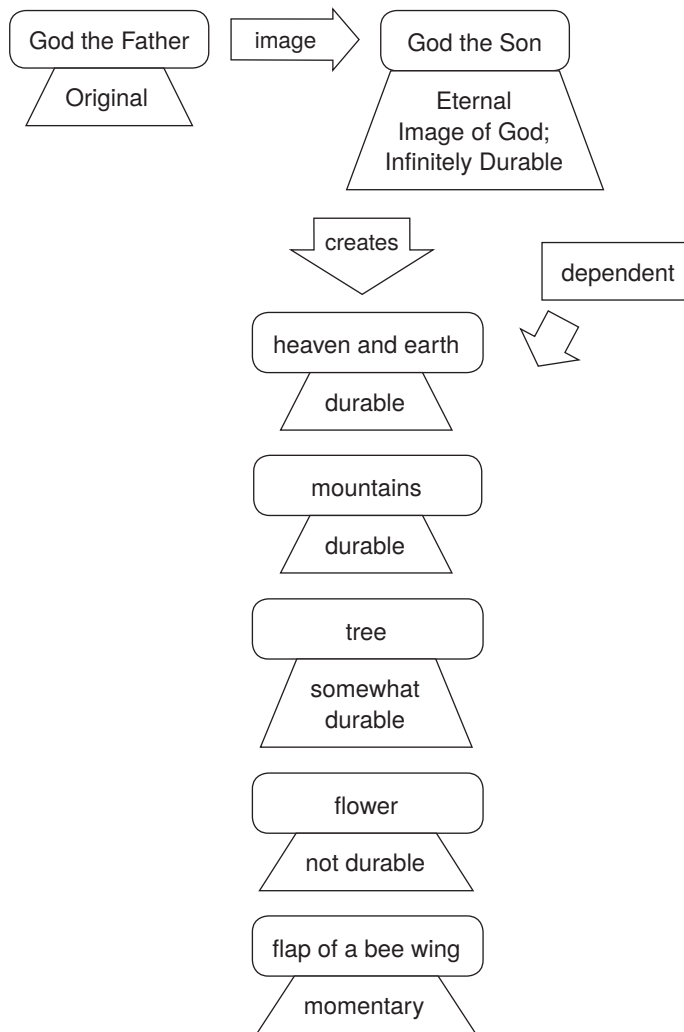


Fig. 20.3. Durability

those rocks and plants and so forth. The rocks and the plants do endure longer than the short-range events that happen to them. We can also distinguish things such as rocks from qualities that describe the things, such as colors and shapes.

This fifth idea about “objects” has some remaining flexibility. It contains the word “typified” and the expression “we normally classify.” The expression “we normally classify” is a little worrisome,

because conceivably different people, or different cultures, might do their classification differently. But it is clear that the Bible teaches, at least by implication, that God made things that endure over some period of time, though the things may undergo subtle changes over time. Animals and people mature and grow old, and take on weight, and move around in space. But over short periods of time, they are also relatively stable. (See fig. 20.4.)

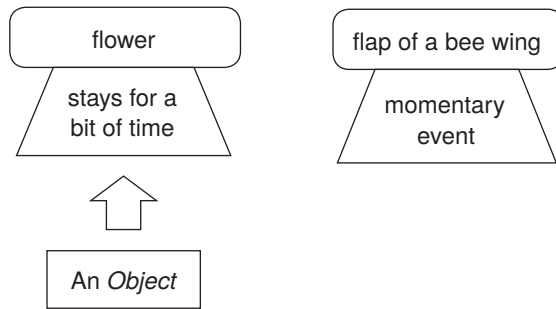


Fig. 20.4. Objects

So should we say that *substances* are things such as rocks and plants that endure for a while? That is a possibility. But the purpose, eventually, is to use the word *substance* in a broader way. Eventually, it will be used in discussions about God. A definition that says that rocks and plants are substances does not help us in deciding how to describe God as a substance, because God is not a rock or a plant or any other created thing. The danger here is that, without noticing it, we would carry over to God some feature belonging to created things, a feature inappropriate to God because he is *not* a created thing. The word *substance*, used this way, has its problems. (See fig. 20.5.)

Well, then, could we return to the first idea, of something that is “ontologically basic”? That does apply to God—but not to anything else. We are saying little more than that God is God. Or that God is absolute. Or that everything besides God has been created by God. All these things are true enough, but they do not move us beyond what we already know from the Bible.

There are some other reasons why the word *substance* might not

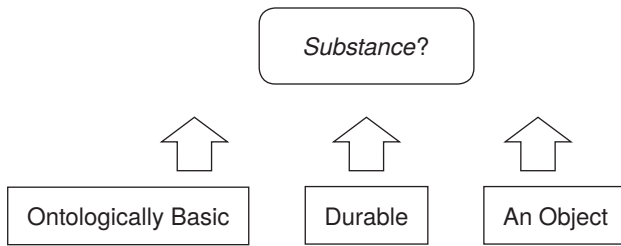


Fig. 20.5. Alternative Views of Substance

be an ideal word to use in describing God. Most of philosophy has used the word in connection with false conceptions. Philosophers have speculated that an ontologically basic character belongs either to matter or to some other postulated substance underneath appearances, but still *within* the world, that is, within the created world. But this is not correct.

As we have said, only God is ontologically basic. And the way in which he is ontologically basic is not by being pantheistically identical with the world, but by being God. He created the world. And the way in which he is ontologically basic is by being the Trinitarian God, which does not come into the discussion when philosophers are talking about *substance*. The word *substance* links us up with the age-long discussions of philosophers. But it is a frustrating link because the Bible gives a different *kind* of answer from what the philosophers have been looking for.

Still another liability of the word *substance* is that it tends to call up associations with a world order that, in its ultimate constituents, is thought to be impersonal. Matter is conceived of as impersonal. Whether it be matter or energy or some kind of deep structure, whatever is down there, below the surface of daily life, is impersonal. But God is personal. Our personal God made the world, and he made us as human persons. One of the most basic issues for life is whether the world is ultimately personal or impersonal. And the word *substance* does not help to get us on the right side in giving an answer.

Aristotle's View of Substance

Can we do any better if we just focus on Aristotle's view of substance, rather than the whole history of Western philosophy?⁹ We still have the difficulty that Aristotle's philosophy as a whole thinks of the ultimate nature of the world as impersonal. Aristotle does postulate a first cause, which he calls the "unmoved mover."¹⁰ But this first cause is not the same as the *personal* God of the Bible. And it is definitely not the same as the Trinitarian God, of whom we know that the Father loves the Son and through whom we can be loved as sons. If *substance* becomes an ultimate category, it suggests that the world is ultimately impersonal. And then that impersonalistic atmosphere continues with everything else that is to be built up on top of the idea of substance. The danger of impersonalism is real and pressing.

Nevertheless, let us consider Aristotle's view of substance. Robinson's article on "Substance" has within it a subsection (§ 2.2) on "Aristotle's account of substance." Within it are two smaller subsections, on "Categories" (§ 2.2.1) and "Metaphysics" (§ 2.2.2), based, respectively, on the two major works of Aristotle that address these questions. Robinson observes that the two works may or may not contain disparate, incompatible accounts. He prefers to see them as mainly complementary (§ 2.2.2).

9. The discussion is complicated because it involves not only Aristotle's writings but a history of subsequent interaction with Aristotle, right up to the present. We rely primarily on two works of Aristotle, *Aristotelis categoriae et liber de interpretatione*, ed. Lorenzo Minio-Paluello (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), and *Aristotelis metaphysica*, ed. Werner Jaeger (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960). These are available in side-by-side Greek and English pages in the Loeb Classical Library: Aristotle, *The Categories*, trans. Harold P. Cook, in *Aristotle: The Categories: On Interpretation: Prior Analytics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann, 1962); Aristotle, *Metaphysics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann, 1962). For a summary of modern interpretation of Aristotle, we rely primarily on a number of articles and books, a good number of which come from *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

10. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, XII.vii, 1072a19–1072b34. See chapter 25 below.

Substance in Aristotle's Work *Categories*

Robinson begins his subsection on Aristotle's work *Categories* with a simplified summary:

The *primary substances* are individual objects, and they can be contrasted with everything else—secondary substances and all other predicables—because they are not predicable of or attributable to anything else. Thus, Fido is a primary substance, and *dog*—the secondary substance—can be predicated of him.¹¹

This approach is heavily dependent on a presupposed prior understanding of *predication* and the use of language.¹²

It helps if we clarify what is happening. *Fido* is a noun, and we can construct a simple sentence that says something about him: “Fido is a dog.” The expression *is a dog* is the predicate. And it is predicated of *Fido*. The fact that *dog* appears in the predicate, and not the subject, implies that *dog* is not a primary substance in Aristotle's sense. But it is a secondary substance, because we can take *dog* as the main constituent of the subject of a clause, and then we can predicate something of it: “Dogs are carnivores,” or “Dogs are mammals.” (See fig. 20.6.)

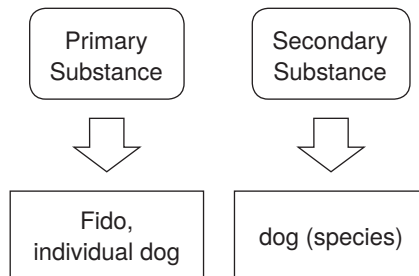


Fig. 20.6. Substances in Aristotle

Do we learn something? Yes. Human language imitates divine language. And divine speech, as we have seen, creates and structures

11. Robinson, “Substance,” § 2.2.1. See Aristotle, *Categories*, V, 2a11–19.

12. See the later chapter 32 on predication.

the whole world and everything in it. So there is some value in appealing to language and what can be “predicated.”

But there are three difficulties. One is that human language is really complicated. It involves more than nouns and predicates. It involves paragraphs and discourses and interactive communication. It involves stories such as we find in the Bible, stories that involve complex sequences of events. It involves people, with all their complexities and all their differences and commonalities. It involves people’s communicating for a host of purposes. It involves God’s giving us language, speaking to us, and acting in the world in ways that can be described in language.

Moreover, when God specifies things and creates them, he does so by his word (Ps. 33:6). His specification is complete. He rules the world comprehensively by his word: “he [the Son] upholds the universe by the *word* of his power” (Heb. 1:3). If so, he specifies every aspect and every detail of every creature and every event in each creature, not just some minimal aspect that we might regard as “basic.”

It is a simplification just to pick out simple predications, such as “Fido is a dog.” Simplification at the beginning may help a beginner. But on the part of a philosopher, it easily becomes a recipe for simplification at the end. Everything is viewed as reducible to instances of simple predication. The world as a whole, and even God himself, may already be carefully pushed into the bounds of a single simple linguistic structure: “Fido is a dog.” Is the world ultimately personal or not? Is the world going to boil down to a single main structure, “X is Y” (“The dog is brown”)?

We may note that a discussion organized in terms of the *attributes* of God can potentially involve this very tendency to reduce everything to a single linguistic structure. The underlying linguistic structure consists in *God* plus an adjective in the predicate (“X is Y”). God is absolute; God is infinite; God is immense; God is eternal; God is omniscient; and so on. There is nothing the matter with those affirmations. But it is a reduction in the richness of divine communication to us in the Bible to think that they describe God more effectively and more ultimately than the rich paragraphs and discourses found in the Bible.

Moreover, part of the complexity in human language is that there are many distinct languages. They all have nouns and verbs. But the

vocabulary does not match *between* languages in a one-to-one fashion. So no one language in its unique vocabulary or unique grammar gives us a single, privileged, direct vision into the mind of God. Some languages represent by verbs things that are similar to what other languages represent by nouns.

Second, language is ultimately mysterious because it is continually dependent on divine speech. It is imitative of divine speech, which is rooted in the eternal Word. Would Aristotle acknowledge as much? No, he cannot. He is suppressing the knowledge of God in the process of appealing to intuitions about language.

Third, language is two-layered. In the first layer, there is God and his knowledge and use of language. And then in the second layer there are human beings, who use language in dependence on God's knowledge of language, which they reflect in their finite knowledge.¹³

"Fido is a dog." Yes, he is. He is because God specified that truth, and many other truths about Fido, in divine speech (Ps. 33:6; Heb. 1:3). He also specified that Fido would exist, and that some human being would name him *Fido*. Or we could put it in terms of divine knowledge. God knows that Fido is a dog in the context of his comprehensive knowledge of Fido and of the whole world and the whole plan for the world, in which Fido has a part, and to which Fido is related, in minute and comprehensive detail in the knowledge of God. Human beings reflect God's knowledge in a derivative fashion, which is mysterious to us. It is mysterious because, among other things, it is mediated by the Son and the Spirit from the Father. Is all this richness built into the usual Aristotelian concept of *substance*?

Robinson comments, as he begins to sum up:

Perhaps it is better, therefore, to see Aristotle in *Categories* not as defining "substance," so that someone wholly lacking the concept might come to understand it, but as exhibiting the marks and characteristics of a primitive concept on which we have an intuitive grasp.¹⁴

13. We could also consider angelic use of language. But we have only the small samples in the Bible where angels communicate to human beings. The most basic distinction is between God and creaturely use of language.

14. Robinson, "Substance," § 2.2.1.

But what is this “primitive concept” and this “intuitive grasp”? Is it exactly the same for a Christian as for Aristotle? No, because a Christian has a different view of the process of predication on which Aristotle is intuitively relying.¹⁵ God is the origin for predications.

Key Terms

Aristotle¹⁶

image of God

independent

matter

(an) object

ontologically basic

original

pantheism

predicable, predicate, predication

primary **substance**

secondary **substance**

substance

unmoved mover

Study Questions

1. What is meant by *substance* in the history of Western philosophy? What are some of the variations among philosophers and philosophical schools?
2. What are some of the overlapping ideas that contribute to the philosophical ideas of substance?
3. What difficulties present themselves for Christians who want to use the idea of substance?
4. What would be a Christian approach to the question of what is “ontologically basic”?

15. See also chapter 32 of the present book; Vern S. Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language—A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), chap. 30; Vern S. Poythress, *Knowing and the Trinity: How Perspectives in Human Knowledge Imitate the Trinity* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2018), chap. 35.

16. Key terms in bold are defined in the glossary at the end of this volume.

For Further Reading

Frame, John M. *A History of Western Philosophy and Theology*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2015. Chap. 2.

Robinson, Howard. "Substance." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Edited by Edward N. Zalta. Spring 2014. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2014/entries/substance/>.

Prayer

Our God and Father and Creator, thank you that you yourself are the ultimate foundation for the creation that we enjoy. May we live in the light of the truth, that you are Creator and that we are creatures.

Aristotle's Categories

LET US CONTINUE in our quest to understand the concept of *substance*, as it is used in philosophy, and then also in theology. As we have seen, this quest leads us back to Aristotle. To understand more deeply what Aristotle is doing with the idea of substance, we have to stand back a bit. The idea of substance fits into a larger system of thought, represented by Aristotle's "categories," discussed in his work with the title *The Categories*.¹ To understand *substance*, we have to understand something about what Aristotle does with his categories. Then we can return to discuss *substance*, which is the first of ten distinct categories.

Purposes in Aristotle's Categories

One of the broader purposes in Aristotle's work *The Categories* is to provide us with the most general "categories," or conceptual boxes, into which all the more particular things in the world will fit.² According to Aristotle, there are ten distinct categories:

1. Aristotle, *The Categories*, trans. Harold P. Cook, in *Aristotle: The Categories: On Interpretation: Prior Analytics*, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann, 1962); based on the Greek, Aristotle, *Aristotelis categoriae et liber de interpretatione*, ed. Lorenzo Minio-Paluello (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956).

2. Christopher Shields, "Aristotle," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Winter 2016), § 6, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/aristotle/>; Amie Thomasson, "Categories," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Winter 2016), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/categories/>. We should be cautious. Aristotle is

Of things said without combination, each signifies either: (i) a substance (*ousia*); (ii) a quantity; (iii) a quality; (iv) a relative; (v) where; (vi) when; (vii) being in a position; (viii) having; (ix) acting upon; or (x) a being affected. (Cat. 1b25–27)³

What do these ten categories mean? It helps to note that we can see vague connections between these categories and different kinds of words in language.⁴ Roughly, the first category, “(i) a substance,” corresponds to nouns (*dog*, *Fido*, etc.). The second category, “(ii) a quantity,” corresponds to number words (*one*, *two*, etc.). (But Aristotle has in mind not simply numbers, but numbers used to measure size: “two cubits long.”)⁵ “(iii) a quality” corresponds to adjectives (*brown*). “(iv) a relative” corresponds to relation words such as prepositions (*near*; though we should include ideas such as *double*, which relate one quantity to another, and *son*, which relate one person to another). “(v) where” corresponds to spatial expressions, such as *here*. “(vi) when” corresponds to time words, such as *now*. “(vii) being in a position” corresponds to orientation words, such as *upright*. “(viii) having” corresponds to the word *have* in its meaning describing something attaching (“having red hair”) or, more broadly, a state (“is armed”).⁶ “(ix) acting upon” corresponds to verbs expressing an action toward an object. “(x) a being affected” corresponds to verbs that are passive.

Aristotle, however, is intending not mainly to classify *words* as words, but rather to classify what is in the world.⁷ He recognizes that

no longer alive, and we do not know for certain what all his personal purposes may have been. So let us say that the work *Categories* appears to later readers to offer the broadest system of classification. See also Paul Studtmann, “Aristotle’s *Categories*,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Fall 2017), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/aristotle-categories/>. Note especially the introductory paragraphs in Studtmann’s article, which express the complexity in understanding this aspect of Aristotle.

3. Shields, “Aristotle,” § 6.

4. Aristotle, *Categories*, 2a4–10, explains the categories by references to “terms” combining into “positive statements,” thus indicating a vigorous attention to language. The preceding discussion in Aristotle, *Categories*, 1a–1b24, also contains discussion that focuses on meanings in language, and repeatedly refers to predication.

5. Aristotle, *Categories*, 1b28–29.

6. Aristotle, *Categories*, 2a3.

7. Studtmann, “Aristotle’s *Categories*,” § 2.1; Aristotle, *Categories*, 1a1–20. Note

in our language we could talk about something in the world by using a variety of linguistic expressions. He wants to offer a classification of the “something,” that is, what is in the world, not a classification of the verbal expressions as expressions.

The Analogy from Biology

What might explain how Aristotle came up with his list? Aristotle himself does not tell us the details about how his thinking may have evolved. But we can explore some reasons why his approach has attractions.

Aristotle was interested in biology. Biology offers us a complex hierarchy of categories: at the bottom of the hierarchy we have individual animals or plants. These individuals group themselves together into progressively larger groups: species, genus, family, order, class, phylum, kingdom. Aristotle did not have all the detail that we find in modern technical biological classification, but he understood that there were smaller and larger natural classes. A species such as the dog species is a natural class. It was natural to wonder what was at the top of this system—what were the most general classes of all?

This kind of approach is appealing not only to Aristotle, but to many other people who want to analyze the world, particularly philosophers. Why not produce a general classification that classifies everything whatsoever, not just plants and animals? We might start with plants and animals as a clear case, and then reason our way from there to broader vistas. Aristotle’s categories offer us a way, and why should we not believe that this is how the world is organized?

Will It Work?

The whole thing is attractive because it contains a measure of truth. As we observed, God’s language defines the world. The world that God made *does* contain natural biological groups. Adam named

also Studtmann, “Aristotle’s Categories,” § 3. It indicates that one of the modern approaches to explaining the source for categories is “the grammatical approach,” deriving the categories from the structure of language.

the animals (Gen. 2:19–20). This naming imitates God's speech. This ability of Adam is suggestive for how he might deal with the world as a whole, not just animals. Perhaps the world as a whole is organized neatly into narrower and broader natural classes.

And some of this reasoning makes sense even if a person is not in fellowship with God in the way that Adam was. If philosophers do not recognize the true God of Scripture, could they not still embark on a system of classification? And why should they not get it right, particularly if they are as brilliant and thoughtful as Aristotle?

Might not our own reason tell us how the world is organized? Adam could see some commonalities, on the basis of which he assigned names, which are classifying terms in language. Reason has a close relation to the language we use. So why should we not hope that both our reason and our language indicate the way in which the world is organized into classes?

In fact, it *does* appear to work, at least to many people who have read Aristotle. People think that the world *does* have things (*substances*), quantities, qualities, and so on. Aristotle got it right, did he not? If we just read Aristotle, and admire his insights, and see how his later use of the categories seems to illumine things, it can be very persuasive.

Other Possibilities

But when we are instructed by the Bible, we know that it is not so simple. There are two levels of knowledge, not one. God knows everything, and we know in part. Adam knew in part. And he understood, at least tacitly, that he knew in part, and that his thinking had to reflect God's thinking. So Adam could not guarantee that he knew everything that could be known, or everything useful to be known.

Let us consider a particular case, namely, horses. Adam could know enough to see that one horse is like another. He could begin to classify horses into the class *horse*. But he might be in for a surprise that would later lead him to adjust details about what he expected. He would have to learn about baby horses, and small horses such as Shetland ponies.⁸

8. We do not know, of course, whether Shetland ponies as a breed, or something like them, existed at the time of Adam. Nor do we know what human language

If, on the contrary, a philosopher acts as though there were only one level of knowledge, his own, he may be tempted to think that his reason, properly operating, could in principle discern exactly and intuitively just what a horse is. He is not allowing for surprises and complexities due to the difference between God's mind and his.

In addition, when we read the Bible, we gradually come to appreciate more deeply that God is one God, but that he is also a God who has made many human beings. He has made them in their diversity. God understands this diversity completely. Eventually, as we come to the New Testament, we learn more deeply about the Trinity, and we understand that the diversity among human beings is derivative from the archetypal diversity in God himself, in that God is three persons.

Different human beings can have differences in knowledge and in interests. So we discover that there are different ways of looking at the world. Aristotle *chose*, from his perspective, to look at how the world might be organized into classes. Other philosophers have focused in other directions.

For instance, one group of philosophers, the *atomists*, have thought that the world is organized out of atoms, the smallest bits of matter. (Some of these philosophers, such as Democritus, preceded Aristotle in time.) They might appeal to the case of sand. A mound of sand, which looks from a distance like a single thing, proves on closer analysis to be a spatially compact cluster of sand grains, each of which is a distinct thing, separable from all the other grains. A piece of granite has in it small embedded bits of mineral. So is the piece of granite a single "thing" or, like the grains of sand, a composite out of other smaller things, namely, the individual mineral grains? Or look at mud. It is composed of bits of dirt or clay, mixed with water. When it solidifies, it becomes a slab, and it seems superficially to be a single "thing." But it is composed of much smaller bits, which happen to have congealed together. And are the smaller things themselves in turn bits that may prove to be a kind of gluing together of even smaller things, namely, the atoms? The atoms would be the most ontologically basic substances. Everything else might be more or less random collections of atoms, some of which temporarily stick to one

Adam spoke. We are using an illustration to make a general point.

another, the way that grains of clay stick to one another when mud congeals.

Another group of philosophers, the *empiricists*, have thought that the world is organized out of sense perceptions, which are ontologically the most basic. They could try to justify their view by focusing not on things such as horses, but first of all on sense perceptions. As we repeatedly have perceptions, we come eventually to see similarities that link one perception with others. Moved by these similarities, we group horse perceptions together under a common term, *horse*.

The *idealists* have thought that the world is composed of ideas in minds. They would argue that we never actually take hold of “things” directly, but have only ideas and mental stimuli with which they are associated. Once we focus on ideas, and use our idea of a horse as a clear clue to reality, this answer has plausibility. If we do not treat this view as providing a final and complete answer about the deepest structure of the world, we might still say that it offers us one perspective on how to think about the world.

More radically, some philosophers, the architects of *process philosophy*, have suggested that the world is composed of *events*. “Things” are temporarily knittings together of clusters of events.

In addition, we have the Christian view, according to which the ultimate constituents are none of the above, but God specifying everything according to his word. (See table 21.1.)

Table 21.1. Philosophical Views of Ultimate Constituents

Philosophical View	Ultimate Constituents
Aristotle	objects
atomists	atoms
empiricists	sense experience
idealists	ideas
process philosophies	events
Christian view	God, and then his utterances (which are distinct from the world that he governs)

The history of philosophy, and the history of different philosophers' views about substance, contains serious variation. Philosophers differ about what is ontologically basic. They each have perspectives. Aristotle's view is one among many.

Aristotle had a certain mindset when he began. He made certain choices about what to focus on. He never thoroughly analyzed what he assumed, nor did he thoroughly inspect all possible alternatives before he proceeded. If we read Aristotle before we read any other philosopher, it may seem very attractive. From a Christian point of view, it has fragments of truth. But if we read another philosopher first, let us say Democritus with his atomism, we might find his work highly attractive. It too would have grains of truth, moments of insight. It would seem to make sense of things. But it would not make sense in nearly the same way as Aristotle's approach did.

Aristotle worked against a background in which he thought that *reason* was the same for everyone. And there could be only one view of the world that organized it according to its innate structure—its natural classes, if you will. But this assumes that the ultimate structure of the world is *impersonal*. It is just there, to be had, if possible, through a common and uniform reason that allegedly grasps just what this structure is.

But suppose that the world is personal, in the sense of being created by a person or persons with personal design and personal purposes. Suppose, more specifically, that the world is created by three persons, not one, three persons who are one God. Then it is possible that the world itself has multiple structures, multiple interlocking perspectives that belong to it. And such, indeed, it seems to have, as we have seen by looking at the reflections of the Trinity in the work of creation and in the work of redemption as well. Contrast, variation, and distribution structure the world. Patterns and images, and analogies between the patterns, structure the world. The speech of God, with multiple patterns, structures everything about the world, including every possible human perspective.

God knew all about all the possible perspectives in the history of Western philosophy before he created the world. It was he who planned and ordained the possibility of Aristotelianism and atomism and empiricism and idealism and process philosophy and deism.

He ordained their attractions, and the grains of truth in them. He ordained the ways in which they would show their inadequacies when we consider them to be “ontologically basic.” (See fig. 21.1.)

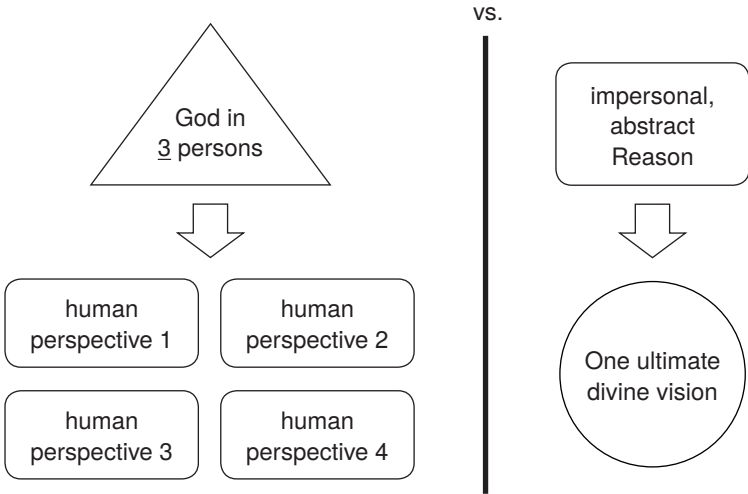


Fig. 21.1. God's Ordaining Multiple Personal Perspectives

So does Aristotle's list of categories give us the ultimate structure of the world? It is one structure. It helps us at some points to notice things that are similar and things that are distinct. It notices unity (similarity) and diversity (distinction). All dogs are similar to one another and belong in a single class. Dogs are distinct from horses, which belong to another class. So Aristotle's system offers a kind of perspective. It is not a complete divine vision of the nature of divine knowledge. It offers a perspective, the personal perspective of Aristotle, a brilliant but flawed man.⁹

Aristotle's view is dependent on the Trinity because it acknowledges both unity and diversity in things. This unity and diversity in the created world reflect the archetype of unity and diversity in the Trinity.

9. On personal perspectives, see Vern S. Poythress, *Knowing and the Trinity: How Perspectives in Human Knowledge Imitate the Trinity* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2018), chap. 3.

Combining and Splitting

So let us consider Aristotle's list of ten basic categories as a personal perspective, a gift from Aristotle, brilliant but flawed, and also a gift from God, who gifted Aristotle.¹⁰ This list raises many questions. Why just *this* list, and not another? Even granted that we could produce some list based on major kinds of words in language (parts of speech), why *this* list?¹¹

Could we combine several categories into one—say, combine “acting upon” and “a being affected” into a larger category, “actions”? Or combine “quantity” and “quality” into one larger category, “modifying features”? Or combine several of the relational categories, such as iv–viii? Or could we split apart some categories? Could “when” be split into past and future because the future does not exist and is different from the past? Could “substance” be split into differentiated and undifferentiated substances, based on whether they easily combine into larger quantities of the “same” substance? Two dogs do not easily combine into a single larger dog. But water in two puddles can combine into a single larger puddle.

The introductory expression in the quotation from Aristotle above excludes anything that is a “combination.”¹² And this exclusion raises another difficulty: how do we know what a “combination” of two or more wholes (two or more “substances”) is and what a single whole (one “substance”) is? Likewise, how do we know when to combine and when to split when we are dealing with the ten categories?

Even with biological categories, we sometimes find problems. The taxonomists, who spend their lives working on the problems of classifying plants and animals, talk about academic colleagues who are “lumpers” or “splitters.” Some taxonomists think they see important differences and quickly split a group of individuals into two distinct

10. Though God gifted Aristotle, according to his providential control of the whole world, we should not infer that God morally approves of everything in Aristotle's mind. God controls all the events in the crucifixion of Christ, but does not approve of the actions of some of the moral agents.

11. Studtmann, “Aristotle's Categories,” § 2.2: “Some of the categories are natural, but others seem much less so.” So also Studtmann, “Aristotle's Categories,” § 3.

12. Aristotle, *Categories*, 1b25.

species. Others look at the same evidence and lump all the individuals into one species. And the same can happen with genus and family and larger groupings. The “splitters” regularly produce lots of distinct little groupings, while the “lumpers” consistently produce a smaller number of groupings, with more individuals in each group.

What do we do with mules, the hybrid offspring of male donkeys and female horses? Mules are infertile, so they do not count as a distinct species. What are they, then? If we sit in our chairs, and just think about how neatly standard animals are organized into standard species, we would never guess that there could be a mule. We would have guessed wrong. Our mind simply is not the divine mind, and never will be. Our power to reason and classify is not the divine power. God can surprise us, and frequently does. We have to humble ourselves and admit it.

The trouble is, when it comes to philosophy, that a philosophical system seems to empower us to organize reality and to enable us to see the whole of it with godlike superiority and comprehension. Such power can mesmerize people. Then they make excuses for the limitations and flaws in the system. Mules, they say, are exceptions. Or they are monsters. Or they are imperfect horses. Or they are a symptom of irrationalities that pop up here and there from the crevasses of reality. Thus, adherents to a system may manage to ignore problems.

A farmer who was an acquaintance of mine tells the story of killing a coydog and freezing its head in his freezer. I had never heard of a coydog. A coydog is a hybrid offspring of a coyote and a dog. The local authorities had assured the farmer that there were no coydogs in the entire region. He froze the head to give them proof.

The Simplicity of Living Things

We can ask still more questions. Do living things offer us a model for classifying the world as a whole? It may have *seemed* to Aristotle or his followers that the classification of Fido as a dog is a simple and clear case. We can study such clear cases in great detail through reason. We can try to be very careful. Later, we think, such simple and clear cases can guide us when we consider complex and problematic

cases. We take our clue and find our way based on what we already know from the clear cases.

But the clear cases are not so clear. In fact, they are deeply mysterious. Actually, living things are very, very special things within God's creation. More than two millennia after Aristotle, molecular biologists have uncovered enormous complexity not simply within a single organism, such as a dog, but within every *cell* of every multicellular organism. The DNA in a single human cell has as much raw information as the entire thirty-two-volume set of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (2010). Living organisms are unfathomably complicated. God has given us something very special; each organism has a unity of a very carefully crafted kind. The unity in our ordinary perception depends on enormous complexity at a subcellular level.

Adam would have known the mystery of living things intuitively, because he knew that there were two levels of knowledge. God knows comprehensively; he experiences no mystery. We know imitatively. We *always* have mystery in our knowledge because it is imitative of infinite knowledge, and our knowledge always exists in fellowship with the infinite God through the Spirit of the Son. The same holds in an analogous way even for rebels against God, because through common grace they receive knowledge that they do not deserve (Job 32:8).

Instead of looking at an animal, suppose that we look at something simpler—simpler, that is, from a physical point of view. Consider a rock. Aristotle would have said that a rock was an instance of one of the four elements—earth, air, fire, and water. But is it a distinct thing? One possible answer would be to say no. Rather, it is a combination based on an element, namely, earth. But why? What are our criteria? And could we not envision the possibility of different criteria? In some ways, any one rock is like every other rock, but a geologist distinguishes many different kinds of rocks and different kinds of minerals in a single rock. We can break fragments off a piece of granite. The breaking off of fragments might suggest that a rock of this kind is in one sense a combination rather than a single substance. Yet intuitively it is also a single whole, with a certain integrity.

Or let us take a whole mountain. The island of Maui in Hawaii consists mostly of a single mountain of volcanic origin, named Red Hill. Because Red Hill sits out alone, it is easy to think of it as a

distinct “thing.” (Note, however, the qualification, “it is easy to think of it.” We still have to deal with personal perspectives. For some ordinary purposes, we treat a mountain as one thing. But if we are digging a mine in the mountain, or analyzing it geologically, we will focus on some of its parts.) Mount Whitney, by contrast to Red Hill, is part of the Sierra Nevada range of mountains. The *peak* of Mount Whitney stands out and is identifiable: it is the highest peak in the range. But the lower shoulders of the mountain eventually merge with the surrounding range. It is a matter of choice—personal perspective and personal decision—as to where we might say is the exact point where the one mountain ends and the rest of the range begins.

Things That Come into Being

And what about processes in time? When does one thing end its existence and another thing (or only fragments of a thing?) begin? For example, if we are making a chair, when does it become a chair rather than just pieces of a chair? At some point, near the end, we can see by ordinary intuition that it is a chair. But if we look carefully, it is a chair with some screws still not fully tightened. Or is one piece still missing? Is a chair with a piece missing (perhaps taken out of it for repair) still a chair? Or is it only a fragment of the chair, even though it is close to being a chair?

When we have God in the picture, it becomes possible to affirm multiple human perspectives. We might say, “God knows everything and gives human beings the diversity and creative power to have multiple points of view. The answer depends on how we want to look at it. From one point of view, a chair is anything that looks like a chair. We might not even notice a missing piece. From another point of view, a chair is anything that can *function* as a chair. Depending on what pieces are missing, a chair might or might not be able to be sat on safely. From another point of view, a chair has to have all its pieces, but one piece might still be gouged out and be missing a chip out of it.”

When does a manufactured spoon become a spoon? When the metal is shaped by its mold? When the metal is fully solidified? When it receives a final polish? When it is packaged, so that its purpose of

being sold as a spoon becomes clearly defined? It depends on your perspective. What if we pick up a wooden stick that happens to be shaped like a spoon? Does it first become a spoon when we begin to use it as a spoon, or when we decide that we are in the future going to use it as a spoon? It depends.

If, however, we want a final comprehensive answer, an ultimate answer, we are likely to reject the multiplicity of perspectives, and insist on the idea that there is a single, ultimate definition of a chair, and a single definition of a spoon. We want a single perspective to rule them all. There must be a single, final answer for what a chair is. From a Christian point of view, there is such an answer. God knows all things about everything in his plan. And within his plan he knows all things with respect to every chair that ever existed, and all the processes involved in the construction and aging and decomposition of every chair, and all things concerning how each chair serves in relation to every aspect of his plan, and all things concerning what all human languages might aptly say about each chair or chair piece at any time.¹³

But philosophers are typically seeking for something else. We might suggest that they should be humble and praise God for the little things that they enjoy, such as chairs.

Qualities

We find some other difficulties when we consider not things, such as dogs and chairs and water, but qualities, such as brown.

Any single instance of brown belongs to the class *brown* (all instances of brown). The class *brown* belongs to the class of colors,

13. One possible route would be to distinguish manufactured objects, such as chairs, from natural kinds, such as dogs. Since chairs are manufactured, they have no “intrinsic” nature; they have a shape and structure and function imposed from outside by a craftsman. So the label *chair* would be conventional, according to the ideas of various craftsmen. Dogs, by contrast, as instances of a natural kind, have an intrinsic nature. So it might be argued that they have a clear boundary for the species. Yet by analogy, God has “manufactured” dogs, so it is not so clear that we can confidently tell what is a natural kind, or whether the complexities that we find with chairs might not also occur with dogs. We have to respect the limitations on our knowledge. We do not dictate to God the nature of a natural kind.

and colors belong to the broader category of qualities. We seem to have a hierarchy. (See fig. 21.2.)

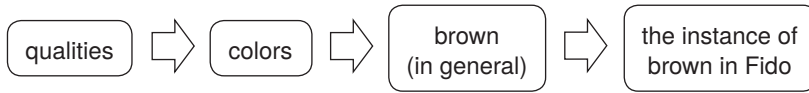


Fig. 21.2. A Hierarchy in Colors

But we do not have quite the same texture in this hierarchy as we had with the taxonomic hierarchy containing kinds of animals. As we observed, animals fall into natural kinds, such as the dog species and the canine family. Likewise, each instance of brown, a brown color belonging to an individual thing, belongs to a kind of “species” or class, namely, the general idea of the color *brown*. But the boundaries are fuzzy. By a continuum we can go from brown to off-brown and reddish brown and yellowish brown and tan and brownish. (See fig. 21.3.)

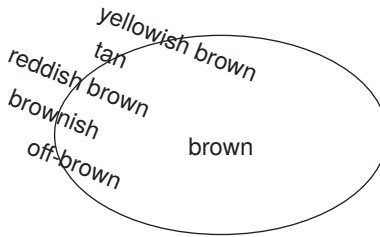


Fig. 21.3. Fuzzy Boundary to Brown

Languages other than English may organize the color spectrum using different words that may be broader or narrower or only overlapping with the way in which we use the word *brown* in English. Is *brown* a well-crafted, perfectly defined quality?

By now, readers should not be surprised that when we deal with brown, one of the issues concerns personal perspectives. *Who* is going to say when brown ceases to be brown and becomes yellow or tan? It might depend not only on the person but on the purposes. Is a person talking in an ordinary and unguarded way to a child? Or is the person an employee in a home-design service organization or a paint store who must deal attentively with small changes in hue?

Aristotle's approach seems effective when we use paradigm cases taken from the classification of standard living things. These, as we observed, can seem to be "clear," "simple" cases of how classification works. So it is easy to assume that it will work, or at least we can try to make it work, when we come to deal with qualities. So, for example, we might try to say that brown is a perfectly exact quality, with perfectly exact boundaries, but that it takes extra discernment to know well where these boundaries are. Or we might say that the word *brown* is somewhat imperfect, in that it is not precisely defined in hue, and it takes discernment to come up with a concept that is a perfect example of a quality. Or we might postulate that each individual hue is itself a quality, distinct from every other hue, however close it might be to another hue. But then we have postulated a billion or more distinct qualities, one for each distinct hue, as finely determined as we can make it. And how, then, do we appreciate that some hues are closer to one another?

The multitude of possible ways of proceeding is itself unsettling. It might suggest that personal choices and perspectives have a role. It might also suggest that we must be circumspect in assuming that a strategy that *seems* to work well in classifying living things will work *at all* when we go to another field to explore, such as qualities of color.

Underneath all these issues is a basic one: what role does *variation* play? Variation is at work when we shift through a series of personal perspectives on brown. Variation of another kind is at work when we deal with various *shades* of brown. It is easy to suppress an attention to variation when we are dealing with dogs, because it seems unproblematic to observe that dogs are dogs. But there are a variety of dog breeds, and within each breed a variety of individual dogs. The variation is there all the same. Each dog differs from each other dog. When we start focusing on brown, the variation is harder to ignore. The boundaries for what is brown are fuzzy. Slightly different shades can still be identifiably brown. (See fig. 21.4.)

It is easy in philosophy, for the sake of "clean" analysis, to want unity in a category, but *no* variation. That is to say, a philosopher wants contrast (the unity) but not variation. And no distribution either, because this too interferes with a desire for purity in the unity of a concept. If a philosopher wants contrast without variation and

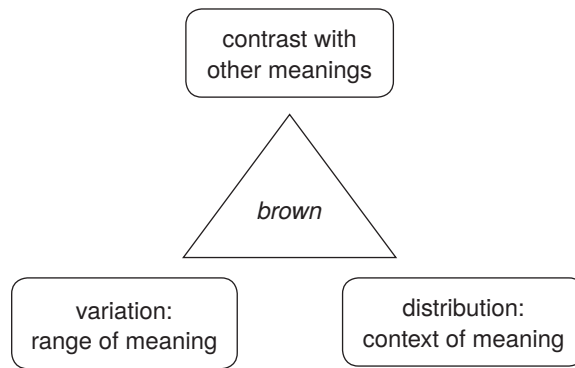


Fig. 21.4. Brown with Variation

distribution, then underneath, it is as though he wanted God the Father without the Son and the Spirit. Or rather, he wants a unitarian God, with no mysterious variation left.¹⁴ (See fig. 21.5.) Or, more ominously, he wants to be god. He wants his reason, and his concept of brown, to match the world, and he thinks it will, because he *knows*—or he thinks he does. It can happen to any of us. Our pride, not our reason, and not the carefulness of our observations about the world, has its role.

It is better, like unfallen Adam, to admire God's knowledge and to admit that we know very little in comparison.

But Are Not the Basic Categories Clear?

We might still try to persuade ourselves that the top of Aristotle's hierarchy, the list consisting in the broadest classes of all, namely, the list of ten categories, is workable. We might admit uncertainties and difficulties in some of the classifications lower down in the hierarchy of classification. But we tell ourselves that they are confined to the details. We may admit, for example, that there is uncertainty about whether to treat a body of water as a single substance or collection

14. Vern S. Poythress, "Reforming Ontology and Logic in the Light of the Trinity: An Application of Van Til's Idea of Analogy," *Westminster Theological Journal* 57, 1 (1995): 187–219; Vern S. Poythress, *Redeeming Philosophy: A God-Centered Approach to the Big Questions* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 61.

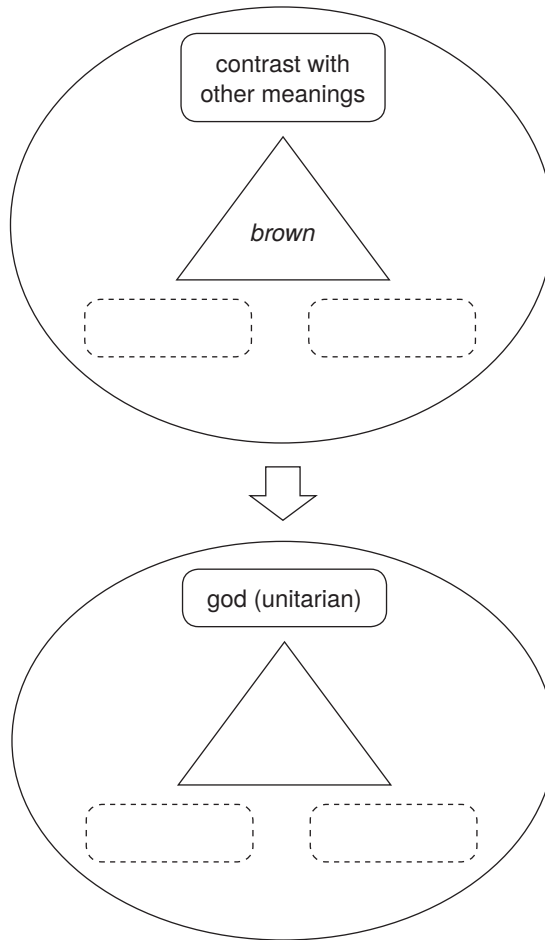


Fig. 21.5. Contrast (Unity) Alone

(a “combination”). We may admit some difficulty in deciding when a chair becomes a chair. But surely, we might think, surely there is a clear distinction between a substance and a quality, and between other categories in the list of ten.

But difficulties exist even with the top of the hierarchy. Things *seem* to be clear when we choose to start with the “simple,” “clear” cases such as dogs. But that does not guarantee that our reason or our mind can serve as an ultimate standard. God is the standard. There are two levels of knowledge, not one. So God may bring surprises.

We cannot confidently predict beforehand whether there will be cases that are not so clear.

For example, is *big* a quality? Or is it a quantity, because, at least loosely, it indicates a quantity of size or length? Or it is a relation, because it is relative to things not as big?

Is fire a substance? Aristotle and many others in the ancient world thought that, at some basic level, there were four kinds of elements: earth, air, fire, and water. All four of these would be candidates to be considered as substances, or else the matter out of which substances are formed. But in modern scientific analysis, fire turns out to be a process, unlike the other three. At a molecular level, there is a continuous process in which carbon or some flammable substrate is being converted into molecules with added oxygen. Fire corresponds most aptly to Aristotle's category ix, acting upon. But this result seems counter to the widespread ancient intuition that fire is one of four basic elements.

We have a lesser problem of a similar kind when we consider the other three ancient "elements." According to a modern chemical analysis, water is not an irreducible "element," but a collection of molecules of H₂O, which are composed of two distinct "elements," hydrogen (H) and oxygen (O). Air is a mixture of nitrogen gas, oxygen gas, and various other minor components, including water vapor and carbon dioxide. Earth is composed of many minerals. Each of the four ancient "elements" is much more complicated than what the ancient people knew.

Once again, we need two layers of knowledge. God can surprise us. Our intuitions and Aristotle's intuitions rely on obvious similarities. They do not provide infallible guidelines for understanding comprehensively the nature of what we are seeing. Only God knows everything. But if we have only one layer of knowledge, the shift due to modern science is terribly disconcerting. How could so many people have been wrong for so long about fire? How could Aristotle have been wrong? If we have only one layer, a mistake of this magnitude tends to destroy confidence in human analysis generally, because we cannot appeal to God, whose love and care can guarantee that we have some real though partial understanding.

It also helps if we allow more than one perspective. A person

looking at fire as an ordinary observer sees perceptual and experiential similarities between earth, air, fire, and water. That is all right when a person uses his experience as a temporary perspective. We do not need to treat his perspective as a kind of ultimate metaphysical analysis. Such an ordinary viewpoint differs from the perspective in which we seek to do a technical, detailed causal analysis, such as what takes place in the science of chemistry. Both perspectives are legitimate; neither perspective gives us exhaustive knowledge.

Or consider one more example, the case of brown again. Aristotle thought colors were clear examples of qualities. But a nineteenth-century analysis by James Clerk Maxwell shows that the perception of brown arises through a process, namely, traveling waves of electromagnetic energy and force. That is like Aristotle's category of acting upon. The twentieth century analyzed light of all colors as not only waves but photons, which are substance-like in some ways, but can never be stopped. They seem to be intermediate between category i, substance, and category ix, acting upon (and maybe some other categories as well). (See fig. 21.6.)

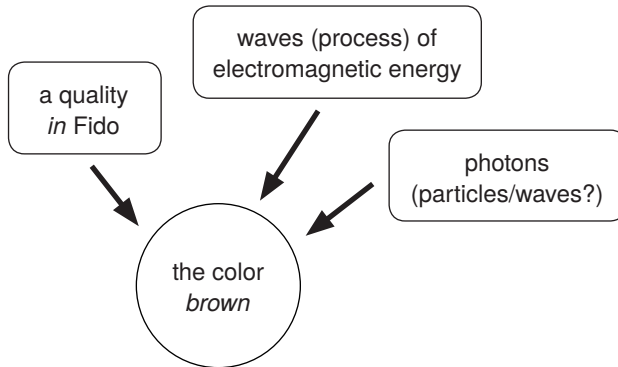


Fig. 21.6. Perspectives on Color

Once again, to deal adequately with brown, we need two layers of understanding, for God and man, and also human ability to use multiple perspectives.

In contrast to a situation in which we have partial understanding in dependence on God, a scheme of ultimate categories, as Aristotle's

seems to be, promises too much. It promises divine insight. And then when it fails, our confidence collapses, and we worry whether we have any insight at all. The answer is that we are made in the image of God, but we are not God.

A Choice of Starting Point

Sometimes conclusions depend a lot on where we start. One option that people over the centuries have chosen is to start with Aristotle's account of things, and listen to his observations and reasoning. They may consider as principal examples instances of biological classification. Fido is a dog. It can all seem persuasive, and many people have been persuaded. Or if Aristotelian categories are being used by everyone around them, people do not even need to be persuaded. They may assume that what everyone is doing is the natural way to do it.

But suppose that we start somewhere else. Suppose that we start with oysters. Some oysters have pearls inside. Other oysters do not. We cannot tell which oysters will have pearls until we open them up. Now, generalize from this example. The example suggests that things can look the same on the outside and yet not be the same on the inside. (See fig. 21.7.)

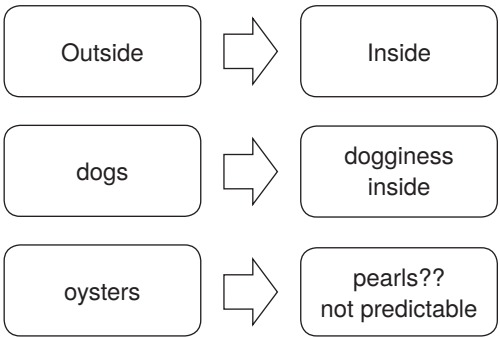


Fig. 21.7. Outside and Inside of Objects

Aristotle's system of categories is basically a system looking on the outside of things, so to speak. It divides up the world on the basis

of what our intuitions tell us from ordinary observation. Ordinary observation is the “outside.”

So if oysters are our starting point, it may seem easy to conclude that Aristotle’s whole system gives us no guarantees about the inside. Maybe mussels are all the same on the inside, maybe not. We have to look and see. Maybe geodes are all the same on the inside, maybe not. In fact, they are not: “*Geodes* are like the Tootsie Roll Pop of the geology world because underneath the hard exterior lies a surprise center!”¹⁵

This lesson about the inside may be extended by analogy. It suggests that we cannot predict beforehand not only what is *spatially* in the interior of an object, but also what technically focused *analysis* finds out about an object. And the lesson applies not only to “objects” that look like substances, but also to things of other kinds—a “quality” or a “relative” or anything else that we have a label for. Aristotle’s system of categories provides a categorization of the “surface” of the world, not its depth.

The irony is that to a philosophical mindset it feels as though the system is getting into the depth of the world, to what is “ontologically basic.”

Which System of Categories?

Now, in his search for knowledge, a philosopher might seek to have a single perspective to rule them all, in his knowledge of a chair, and in his knowledge of brown. Not only so—he would like a single perspective on everything. The single perspective is the perspective offered by the organization of Aristotle’s categories. Aristotle’s categories fit in with a larger system, Aristotle’s metaphysics. So we can also talk about the organization of Aristotle’s metaphysics. But there are alternative perspectives. What about an atomist’s categories? Or an empiricist’s categories? Or Kant’s categories? Or one of Kant’s disciples, for there are variations? Or Hegel or Husserl? Which?

15. “Crystal Blue Persuasion: Geodes, a Very Cool Rock Formation,” <http://www.rocksandminerals4u.com/geodes.html>, accessed January 22, 2018, emphasis original.

It would make things easy, would it not, if God just told us, “Use Aristotle’s categories because they are the categories of my mind too.” But God has not told us that. We believe that Scripture is sufficient to equip the man of God “for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:17). God does not bind us to Aristotle’s categories exclusively, or even preeminently. We are free. We are free to listen to Aristotle—critically, using what we know about God and the world from Scripture. We are free to consider in temporary ways certain perspectives, Aristotle’s and others’. But we are also free not to do so.

Unless we really know what we are doing, we are better off in most cases just staying away from Aristotle, for reasons that John Frame has provided: “Combining the Christian perspective with the Greek is not advisable.”¹⁶

Aristotle’s system is seductively attractive. It seems to work. It seems to give us a superior point of view. It seems to provide insights. It offers something close to the truth concerning the fact that the structure of the world connects to the structure of language. The feeling of attraction is all the more reason to stay away. The system is a one-level system, which does not recognize the distinction between comprehensive divine knowledge and derivative, partial human knowledge imitating divine knowledge.

The same goes for other non-Christian approaches to philosophy.

The Trinity as Basic

As we stand back to survey where we have traveled, we may include in addition to all these observations one further one. We may tell ourselves again that God himself is “ontologically basic.” And who is this most majestic and glorious God of ours? He is one God in three persons. Does that provide us with something to chew on, to meditate on? It does. Why not use God himself as our key to understanding the world, God himself as our ultimate category system? (See fig. 21.8.)

16. John M. Frame, *A History of Western Philosophy and Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2015), 81.

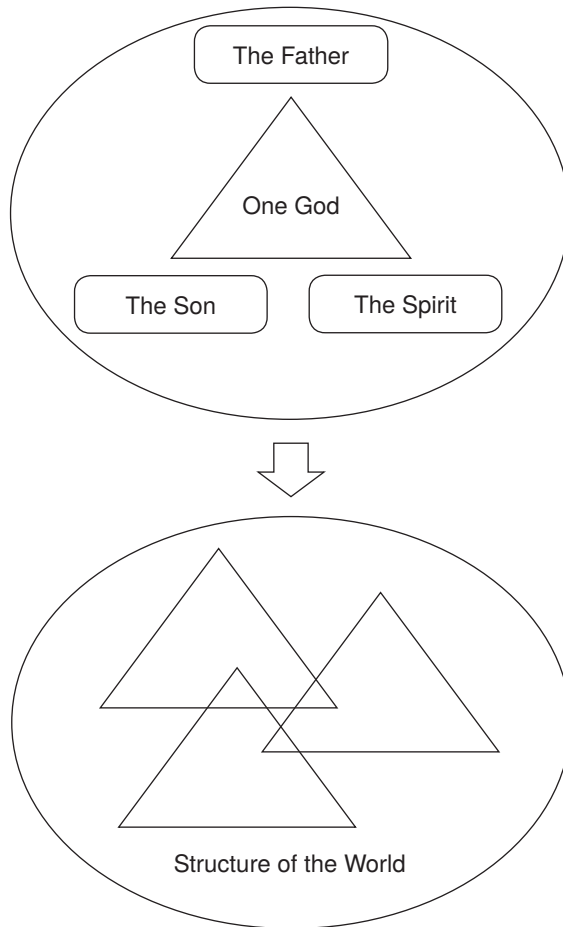


Fig. 21.8. God as Ontologically Basic

Ah, but God is mysterious. He is incomprehensible. The Trinity is mysterious. Precisely. We have mystery when we think about God. And so there will be mystery in all the other thoughts when we focus on the world. There will be mystery because God structures the world, by the eternal Word, who is the eternal Image, in the context of eternal love in the Spirit. And God structures our minds as reflections of him.

Multiple Perspectives on God?

The awareness of perspectives may make us wonder about perspectives on God. Each of us can grow in knowing God. In a sense, each of us has a personal perspective on God. But we can also share in publicly available aids to our growth. Awareness of perspectives naturally raises the question whether there might be not only one really good aid for our growth, but more than one.

Classical Christian theism offers us an aid. In particular, it offers its technical vocabulary for attributes of God. It offers us ways for talking about God, thinking about God, growing in knowledge of God, and praising God. They are serviceable. They encourage us to think again about Scripture. They have proved valuable to many Christians in many generations. Praise the Lord for their value.

Are they the only way to do it? What if we are teaching about God in the Chinese language, in the context of Chinese culture? Valuable as our tradition has been, it can be enriched. Perhaps there are other possibilities for enrichment. Perhaps starting with God's Trinitarian character can be explored.

Substance in the Light of the Resurrection of Christ

Consider what light the resurrection of Christ throws on the question of substance. The resurrection of Christ displays God in his majesty. And as we said, God is ontologically basic. But we may also make an observation about created things. First Corinthians 15:23 tells us that Christ is "the firstfruits" of the resurrection of the dead. He establishes the pattern for the resurrection of the body, as verses 44–49 indicate. We long for a new heaven and a new earth, as promised in Revelation 21:1. That new heaven and new earth already have their first installment, so to speak, in Christ himself. His resurrection body belongs to the new order, not the old. "Death no longer has dominion over him" (Rom. 6:9).

He is therefore the pattern for a whole new world where there is no more death (Rev. 21:4). Indeed, Romans 8:21 indicates that "the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God." The pattern

for the transformation of the creation is found in the “glory of the children of God,” that is, their future glory. That future glory in turn is patterned after Christ (1 Cor. 15:44–49; Phil. 3:20–21).

If so, we may say that in some ways Christ in his resurrection is “ontologically basic” for the whole new world order, the new heaven and the new earth, including its human inhabitants.

Now consider the first heaven and the first earth (Rev. 21:1). The pattern of work and rest in Genesis 1:1–2:3 hints at the fact that the world has a destiny. Adam and his descendants embark on a task of filling and subduing. At the end, if all goes well, they will complete this task and enter into rest—in union with God’s rest. The heaven and earth at this point will be transformed, according to the pattern set out in 1 Corinthians 15:44–49. So in terms of the ultimate, long-range purposes of God, the first heaven and earth do not contain their full meaning in themselves. They are destined for transfiguration. That transfiguration shows openly and climactically what they were meant for all along. So in terms of purpose, the goal is more “ontologically basic” than the incomplete starting point. So there is a sense in which the resurrection of Christ is “ontologically basic” for the whole of history, both the first heaven and earth and the new heaven and earth.¹⁷

The Christian understanding of the purpose of things is thus God-centered and Christ-centered, not centered on the things themselves.

Key Terms

atomists¹⁸
biological groups
categories
chair
classes
classification

17. Both the incarnation and the resurrection of Christ took place as a remedy for sin. Neither would have been necessary apart from sin. But given the entrance of sin, the resurrection of Christ becomes the definitive window through which we understand the destiny even of the unfallen original world.

18. Key terms in bold are defined in the glossary at the end of this volume.

empiricists

fire

genus

idealists

metaphysics

natural classes

perspective

process philosophy

qualities

species

taxonomists

time

variation

Study Questions

1. What are the ten “categories” in Aristotle’s classification of the world?
2. What are the categories intended to do?
3. How well do they do the job?
4. Why have some people overlooked deficiencies?
5. What are some alternative philosophical perspectives that do not start with things as the most basic?
6. What are some advantages and disadvantages of Aristotle’s categories, from a Christian point of view?
7. How does variation enter into the discussion when we consider classes of things?

For Further Reading

- Frame, John M. *A History of Western Philosophy and Theology*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2015. Chap. 2.
- Poythress, Vern S. *Redeeming Philosophy: A God-Centered Approach to the Big Questions*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014. Chaps. 5, 9.
- . “Reforming Ontology and Logic in the Light of the Trinity: An Application of Van Til’s Idea of Analogy.” *Westminster Theological Journal* 57, 1 (1995): 187–219. <https://frame-poythress>

.org/reforming-ontology-and-logic-in-the-light-of-the-trinity
-an-application-of-van-tils-idea-of-analogy/. Accessed February
26, 2020.

Prayer

Our Lord, thank you for being Creator and Re-creator, through
the mediation of the Son, in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Form and Matter

LET US NOW briefly consider two other important terms from philosophy that traditional Christian theistic thinking has appropriated: *form* and *matter*.¹ Both are technical terms, not matching current ordinary uses in English. Both are used in theology not only in their noun forms (*form* and *matter*) but also in their adjectival forms (*formal* and *material*).

Form and Matter in Aristotle's Work *Metaphysics*

Howard Robinson's article on "Substance," which we used before, provides us with a useful starting point. It has a subsection (§ 2.2.2) on Aristotle's *Metaphysics*.² It is a long section, but for our purposes it may suffice to quote a smaller portion, as follows:

Aristotle analyses substance in terms of form and matter. The form is *what kind of thing* the object is, and the matter is *what it is made of*. The term "matter" as used by Aristotle is not the name for a particular kind of stuff, nor for some ultimate constituents of bod-

1. John M. Frame, *A History of Western Philosophy and Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2015), 70–72.

2. Howard Robinson, "Substance," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Spring 2014), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2014/entries/substance/>. See also Frame, *History*, 71.

ies, such as atoms (Aristotle rejects atomism).³ “Matter” is rather the name for whatever, for a given kind of object, meets a certain role or function, namely that of being that from which the object is constituted. Relative to the human body, matter is flesh and blood. The matter of an axehead is the iron from which it is made. Relative to the elements, earth, fire, air and water, matter is an intrinsically characterless “prime matter” which underlies the qualities of them all. (*Italics original*)

Robinson’s discussion at this point ties back to our earlier focus on what is “ontologically basic.” In Aristotle’s system, form and matter are the two basic aspects of substances.

Let us begin with the summary near the beginning of Robinson’s paragraph: “The form is *what kind of thing* the object is, and the matter is *what it is made of*.” (See fig. 22.1.)

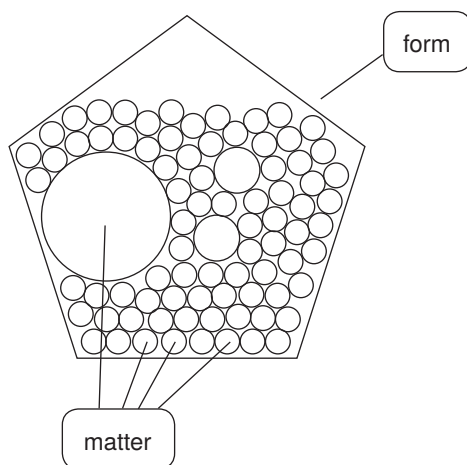


Fig. 22.1. Form and Matter

One illustration for this kind of organization would be an artisan making a statue. The *matter* of the statue is the material out of which it is made, marble or wood or bronze. The *form* of the statue is its

3. It is complicated. Aristotle does talk about “prime matter,” matter before it is differentiated by form.

shape as it appears to the eye. Let us suppose that it is a statue representing Socrates. It has a human form.

The artisan can do only so much with the material. In a typical case, the marble or the wood exists beforehand. As matter, it remains more or less the same—though some pieces are chiseled off. What it acquires from the hand of the artisan is a new form.

Now, in some ways God is like an artisan who made the whole world. Genesis 1 suggests as much, because it describes God in anthropomorphic language. Genesis 2:7 appears to compare God to a potter. God makes man from dust, in analogy with a potter, who makes a pot from clay (compare Rom. 9:21). But the comparison is a partial one. Unlike the human artisan, God makes everything. God's initial act of creation did not have preexisting material. Thus, God did not reshape material that already existed in a way that was independent of him.

Within a Christian worldview, “what kind of thing” an object is is what God has specified the object to be. This specification by God is comprehensive. For Fido the dog, God's specification includes not only his making Fido a dog, but his making Fido an individual dog, with all the individual peculiarities that distinguish Fido from every other dog. The specification also includes all the changes that occur through the entire life of Fido.

What about the *matter*? Fido is made of various kinds of “stuff”—at one level, of atoms, at another level, of molecules, at another level, of cells. But as Psalm 33:6 and Hebrews 11:3 indicate, the more ultimate basis for Fido is the word of God, which is rooted in the eternal Word. The eternal Word exists in Trinitarian fellowship. Thus, both the form and the matter are aspects deriving from the meaning of the word of God specifying Fido.

The Christian has a distinct answer to the question of form and matter, for every single thing that exists under the sun. His answer is widely different from the answers in the history of philosophy. He answers that God specifies everything. We as human beings do not know it all. Within God's comprehensive specification, we might sometimes be able to tentatively distinguish to some degree between (1) “stuff” (*matter*) and (2) the organization of stuff (*form*). Both aspects belong to God's plan for Fido as a whole.

But the division into stuff and organization would be only one way of looking at what God does (one perspective). God's plan is comprehensive and unified. The terms *form* and *matter* may, unfortunately, tempt us to separate what actually goes together, the one whole of Fido, and the one whole of God's plan for the whole of history, into which Fido fits. Or they may tempt us to think that an analysis that focuses on how smaller pieces (*matter*) fit into larger ones (*form*) is the most definitive analysis, with the implication that we can ignore other kinds of focus.

Layers

We confront still more complexity. It turns out that there is some vagueness in Aristotle, because the term *matter* is actually employed *relative* to a particular context and a particular kind of question. According to Aristotle's approach, the human body has as its "matter" flesh and blood. If we proceeded further, we might say that the blood has as its "matter" the blood cells and liquid medium in which they are immersed. The blood cells have as their "matter" the constituent organelles, and at a finer level the constituent proteins. (Do the organelles belong to a distinct level, since they do not make up the whole cell without remainder?) The proteins have as their "matter" the atoms of which they are made, and since the twentieth century, physics has analyzed atoms into their finer constituents. (See fig. 22.2.)

Aristotle did not know all these details, but his system allows for multiple layers of this kind. At each level, the label *matter* would focus on the constituents at the next lower level. The label *form*, by contrast, would focus on how the constituents at a lower, underlying level are *organized* into a functional *whole* at the higher level.⁴

Now, all this has some use. In fact, it has an analogue in language. Written discourses are composed of paragraphs, which are composed of sentences, which are composed of clauses, which are composed of

4. It should be noted, however, that when Thomas Aquinas builds on Aristotle's categories of *form* and *matter*, he makes a change. Each substance, such as a single human being, has only *one* form, rather than a whole hierarchy of embedded forms; and the matter on which the form is impressed is prime matter (Robinson, "Substance," § 2.3).

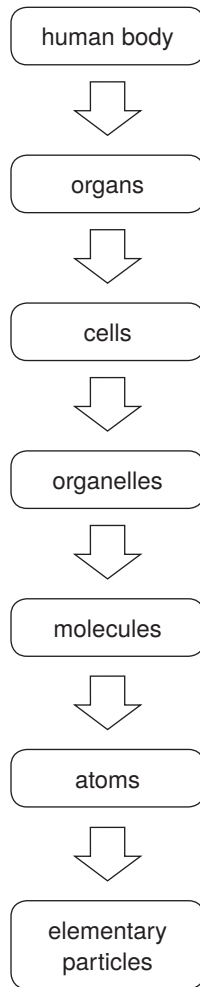


Fig. 22.2. Matter underneath Matter

words, which are composed of letters. (See fig. 22.3.) In fact, language is even more complicated, because in language there are normally not one but three interlocking hierarchies of structure—a hierarchy of sound (or its graphical analogue in writing), a hierarchy of grammar, and a hierarchy of reference (closely related to meaning).⁵

5. Kenneth L. Pike, *Linguistic Concepts: An Introduction to Tagmemics* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), pts. 2–4; Vern S. Poythress, *In*

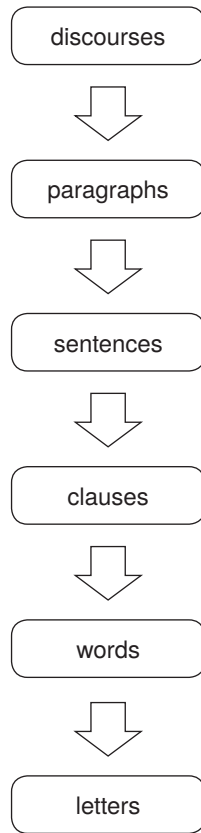


Fig. 22.3. Constituents in Language

We also find complexities in cells. Cells have a hierarchy of physical constituents, as we have indicated. But they also have a hierarchy of cellular *functions*, which contribute to the functions of organs, which contribute to the functions of the whole body. Cells also have a hierarchy of control. The body as a whole regulates the organs, which regulate the cells in them, which regulate various functions of metabolism, external movement, internal transport, garbage collection, manufacture of proteins, secretion, and reproduction. Merely talking about form and matter is impoverished in comparison. (See fig. 22.4.)

the Beginning Was the Word: Language—A God-Centered Approach (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), chap. 32.

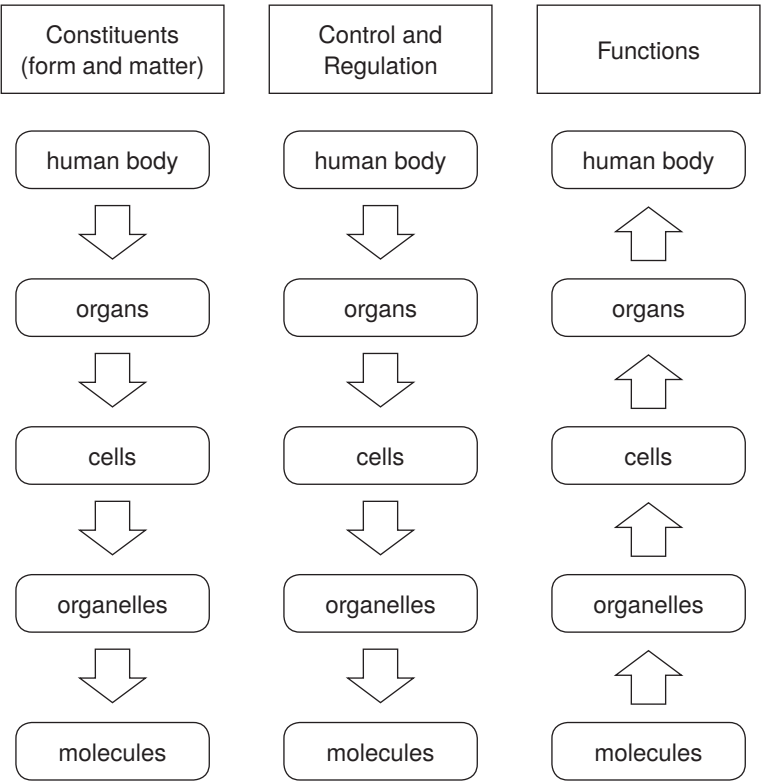


Fig. 22.4. Multiple Structures in Organisms

Now, if we carry a form-matter duality over into theology, we are going to be using the terms *form* and *matter* in an analogical way, based on certain rough analogies that we see or think we see. Our starting point, our main example, will involve the spatial and structural organizations of small pieces into larger pieces in the visible world, such as in a statue of Socrates. This kind of organization of smaller pieces into larger ones can then be compared by analogy to organization in another field, such as the organization of language or of facts about God or of facts about God's redemption. Any such analogy is limited. We need to recognize that it is limited, and not think that the categories of *form* and *matter* offer us some secret key to what is "basic."

Some people have tried to say that God is pure form, and not

matter.⁶ How do we evaluate that idea? God is simple, so he cannot be decomposed into parts, in the way that we might decompose proteins into atoms. He has no “matter” underneath him of which he would be composed.

Now consider the word *form*. The word *form* has its specialized meaning when it is used in connection with the word *matter*. So in the typical use, there is no form without matter that it is forming or at least hypothetically *could* form. Philosophers may, of course, postulate an “extreme” case of pure form without matter, or pure matter without form. But these cases are indeed extreme. They are extrapolated from the typical cases in which form goes together with matter and each is understood in terms of the other. To put it in other words, a thing that has structure, such as a cell, has its structure put together out of the things that it structures, such as organelles or proteins. Form and matter go together, and their meanings are mutually dependent. In this respect, the terms *form* and *matter* do not seem to be useful with respect to God.

So perhaps they are also of limited use and limited insightfulness when we try to use them with respect to a world that God created by his speech. As we saw with cells and organs, there is more than one *kind* of organization of smaller bits into larger bits. There is no such thing as *the* form of a cell, or *the* matter of a cell, until we choose *which* kind of organization we want to have in focus.

Roots in God

But we might also try another perspective on form and matter. Form and matter are supposed to be distinct. In fact, according to Aristotle’s approach, the distinction is one of the more ontologically basic distinctions in reality. In a Christian view, on the other hand, God is ontologically basic. Not only so, but he is ontologically basic

6. Frame, *History*, 73, indicates that Aristotle’s unmoved mover is pure form (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Loeb Classical Library [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann, 1962], 1071b20–22, XII.vi.4). Thomas Aquinas affirms that God is pure form (*The “Summa theologia” of St. Thomas Aquinas*, 2nd rev. ed. [London: Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1920], 1.32, [1a] Q. 3, art. 2, “I answer”).

with respect to *distinctions*—all distinctions whatsoever. God would also be ontologically basic with respect to the distinction, if we can sometimes make it, between form and matter. This distinction also has its origin in him. God specifies the distinctions. And the archetype for diversity or distinction is in God himself, in the persons of the Trinity. So we may ask whether the distinction between form and matter has an archetype in God.

Of course, a lot depends on how we construe the meanings of *form* and *matter*. That is what we have struggled with. Suppose that the word *matter* implies material composition using created stuff. It is clearly inappropriate to describe God as having “matter” in this sense, because God is the Creator and not a creature. What about *form*? Since the most obvious “forms” are physical shapes, within the world, it is clearly also inappropriate to describe God as having “form” in this sense.

We can also focus on the distinction between matter and form as something akin to a distinction between smaller pieces and the larger pieces into which they fit by being structured or organized. Let us take that theme as a point from which to start. Can we see an archetype in God?

As we observed, God is not decomposable, so that he does not have form or matter in this sense either. But might we construe form and matter in a different way?

Consider a structured whole such as a wristwatch. It has an integrity and unity of its own, which we recognize when we call it a *wristwatch*. This unity is a humanly designed unity. But human design expresses and reflects divine design. God in his plan knew about wristwatches before any human beings designed or made them. The unity in the wristwatch, as a created thing, reflects the unity of God. The unity of God is also the unity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Each of the three persons is the one true God.

Next, the wristwatch has pieces. It has a wristband, a case, a transparent face, and internal machinery. These pieces are diverse from one another. So as we did earlier, we could consider how this diversity reflects an archetypal diversity in God. The diversity in God is seen in the diversity of persons. Each person is the one true God, and at the same time each person is distinct from the other two persons.

As we saw earlier in discussing language (chap. 13), in the mystery of the three persons it is possible to associate God the Father preeminently with instances of *unity* in language. Unity is closely related to *contrast*. Each unit contrasts with other units. So the Father is associated with *contrast*. Now, in addition, we know that the Son is begotten by the Father. This begottenness is closely related to his being *distinct* from the Father, and is related to *variation*. There is a basis in God for the distinction between unity and diversity.

Now let us consider the *structure* of the wristwatch. We may focus not merely on each piece, but on the relation between pieces within the structure. The relational aspect of the structure reflects the relational role of the Holy Spirit as the archetype for relationality. Of course, the Holy Spirit is not *equal* to the relations within the world between two created things. But he is the archetype for these relations.

Finally, each piece functions *within* the larger structure, the wristwatch itself. This functional relation is near the heart of structurality, we might say. A structure is not just a miscellaneous collection, but a whole in which the pieces *contribute* somehow to the whole. In thinking about a wristwatch, we can move downward from the whole to the functions of the pieces, or upward from the functions to the whole. In God, this movement has an archetype in the eternal generation of the Son. Eternal generation is like a “function” within God. Of course, all these analogies are only partial analogies.

Perhaps a more illuminating analogy can be found if we consider the role of the eternal Son as the Word of God. The Son as the Word is the archetype for God’s speech that creates things in the world (“Let there be light,” Gen. 1:3). God the Father has a plan that encompasses everything about the wristwatch. But preeminently he may be associated with the form, which expresses the unity of the whole. The Father’s plan is expressed in active speech, which articulates both whole and parts. But it is particularly evident that speech in its structure determines the structure of the watch. So this route also associates the Son with structure and function. Once again, we have an analogy, not an identity. God in his Trinitarian character is distinct from the world, but through the Word and the Spirit he is also the origin for the distinctions and structure in the world.

We do not really have a wristwatch as a structural whole without

all three simultaneous aspects: the whole, the pieces in relation to one another, and the pieces functioning within the whole. Our focus on one of these offers a *perspective* on the whole. Each of the three perspectives presupposes the others. The three are coinherent perspectives on the whole. The archetype for structure is in the Trinity. More specifically, it is in Trinitarian speech. As with the dry bones in Ezekiel 37, the Father initiates the creation of the whole; the Son as the Word articulates structure in the bones; and the Holy Spirit in exercising the power of God is the immediate agent who brings the bones together, in relation to one another, and gives them the breath of life. (See fig. 22.5.)

As usual, we must appreciate the limited, partial character of analogies. God is unique. He is the Creator. Any manifestations in created things are creaturely. They do not provide a template or model that we can transfer to the Trinity and thereby dissolve the mystery. Rather, the reverse is true. God is the “template” or archetype for creational structures. In addition, we have to remember that all the persons of the Trinity are involved in every act of God in the world. So all three persons are involved in the creation of the whole new persons in Ezekiel 37; all three persons are involved in articulating the structure of the bones; all three are involved in bringing new life to the bones. All three are involved in the creation of a wristwatch.

Now, the point here is that the structure of form and matter has its roots in the Trinity in a particular way. The wholeness of a structure reflects the unity of God, represented preeminently in the Father. (As we have said, it is also true that each person of the Trinity expresses the unity of God.) The relation between pieces reflects the relational role of the Holy Spirit. We would not say that “matter” is in God, because that would be miscommunicating, given the ordinary associations of the word *matter*. But structure in the world reflects the archetypal structure represented in the persons of the Trinity.

Form and Potentiality

We should also note another difficulty associated with Aristotle’s view of form. In his view, the form includes not only the structure and shape of the individual thing, but also its purpose. “The form directs

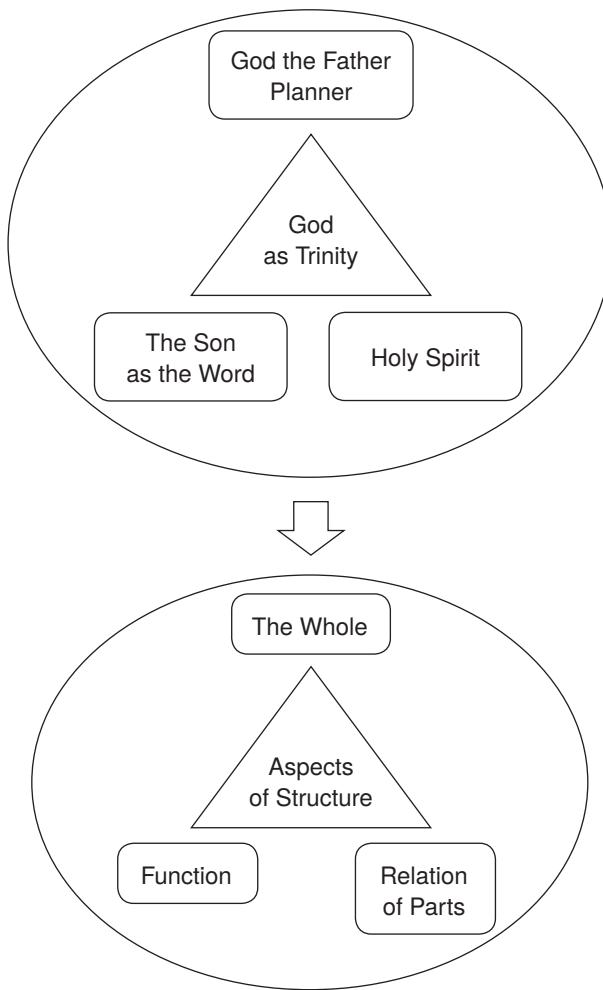


Fig. 22.5. God as Archetype for Structure

the matter to realize its potential. As potentiality becomes actuality, the object becomes fully formed: it becomes what it inherently is.”⁷ Each kind of thing has potential built into it. It has a kind of purpose, but the purpose is basically impersonal (according to Aristotle). In a Christian worldview, by contrast, purpose comes ultimately from God. God assigns each thing its purpose. And the purpose of any

7. Frame, *History*, 72.

two dogs or any two human beings includes differences. The purpose is the personal purpose of God, in the context of God's plan for the entire course of history. (See fig. 22.6.)

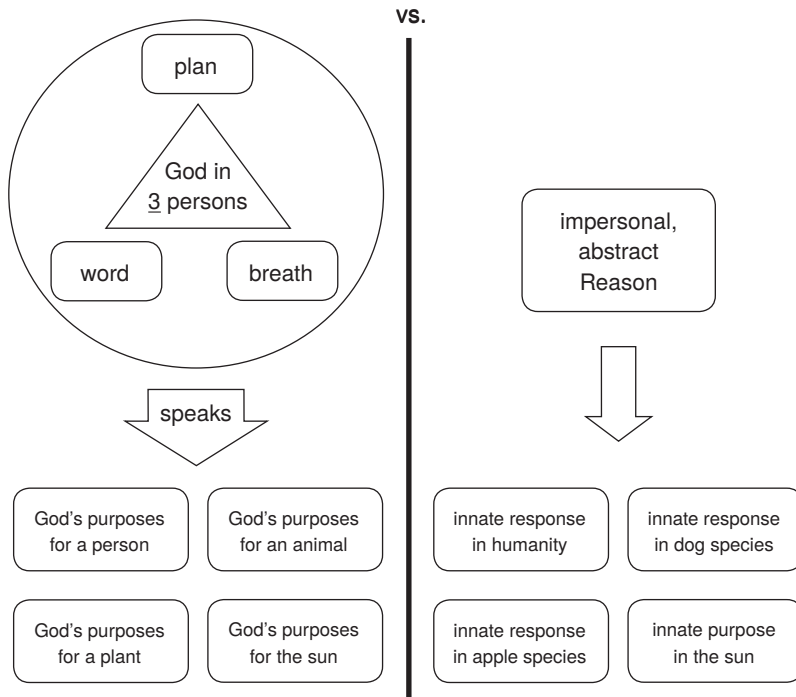


Fig. 22.6. Purpose in the Christian View and in Aristotle

The personal purposes of God contrast with the impersonal purposes that Aristotle pictures as built into the kind of thing that each thing is. The contrast between Aristotle's view and a Christian view shows that Aristotle's idea of form has built into it an opposition to the Christian God.

Form and Matter in the Resurrection of Christ

What does the resurrection of Christ show us about form and matter? The question is ambiguous because of the innate ambiguity in the terms *form* and *matter*. But we can begin by considering the resurrection body of Christ. In Luke 24:39, Jesus notes that "a spirit

does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.” His body has flesh and bones. So with one understanding of form and matter, we can say that his body is the form, while flesh and bones are the matter. But this analysis clearly leaves out a lot. It focuses on Christ’s body. But he is more than a body—he is a person. Moreover, the analysis into flesh and bones does not tell us even whether he is alive, which is one of the more important points that he makes in his resurrection appearances. Also, such an analysis does not even begin to explain the distinction between the preresurrection, Adamic body, the “natural body” of 1 Corinthians 15:44, 46, and the “spiritual body,” the body that is the pattern for the consummation.

We must also repudiate Aristotle’s view that the potential is inherent in the form. Consider an example. God planned from the beginning that human beings would eventually have consummation bodies not able to die (1 Cor. 15:44–49). But the potential was not inherent in the body, in the sense that in and of itself the body would naturally transform itself into a consummation body. Rather, the transformation would take place by the power of God. Christ did not rise from the dead because of some inherent causal potential in his dead body, but because of the work of God, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Key Terms

actuality

form⁸

matter

organization

potentiality

Study Questions

1. What is meant by *form* and *matter* in Aristotle’s system?
2. In what way might there be aspects of organization that are alternative to form and matter?

8. Key terms in bold are defined in the glossary at the end of this volume.

3. What would it mean to say that God is “pure form”?
4. How might a Christian approach differ from Aristotle’s?

For Further Reading

Frame, John M. *A History of Western Philosophy and Theology*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2015. Chap. 2.

Prayer

Our God and Father and Creator, we thank you that you have personal plans for us, and that your purposes will prevail. We thank you that you have crafted the details in each person’s body and each animal’s body so that your purposes can be carried out. May your glory fill the world as the waters cover the sea.

Essence

NOW CONSIDER THE term *essence*. It is another word that has a history in philosophy. Do we get any help from the Bible? The word *essence* does not appear in the ESV translation. Might there nevertheless be some relevant verses, if we looked at other words or at whole verses? But first we have to know at least something about what we are searching for.

Essence in Aristotle

The online *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, as of 2019, does not contain a whole article entitled “Essence.” But it does contain some discussion of essence in the context of Aristotelian metaphysics.¹ That discussion can serve as our beginning point. But as is often the case, when we look at the details we find complexities. It is rough going to try to take in the complexity of the article as a whole, and the section in it devoted to “substance and essence.”

Now, the complexities in these articles in philosophy are part of the problem, are they not? We might naively hope that a simple definition could settle our minds and enable us to proceed directly into theological issues. But we do not get a simple definition. Instead,

1. S. Marc Cohen, “Aristotle’s Metaphysics,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Winter 2016), § 7, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/aristotle-metaphysics/>. See also Alasdair MacIntyre, “Essence and Existence,” in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan Company & Free Press; London: Collier-Macmillan, 1967), 3:59–60.

we wade into deep waters. Or, to change the metaphor, we entangle ourselves in a thicket of many meanings, including disputes between historians of philosophy about the meanings of earlier philosophical uses of key words such as *essence*.²

Now, in the case of the term *essence*, the key section in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* is entitled “Substance and Essence.” That title does not seem promising. It seems to hint that we cannot understand what is meant by *essence* unless we consider it in relation to a previous concept, namely, the concept of *substance*. And we have already considered the idea of substance and found complexities.

But, laying aside these concerns, let us see what is contained in this section on Aristotle’s treatment of essence. Near the beginning is a parenthetical explanation about the challenge of translation:

(“Essence” is the standard English translation of Aristotle’s curious phrase *to ti ên einai*, literally “the what it was to be” for a thing. This phrase so boggled his Roman translators that they coined the word *essentia* to render the entire phrase, and it is from this Latin word that ours [the English word *essence*] derives. Aristotle also sometimes uses the shorter phrase *to ti esti*, literally “the what it is,” for approximately the same idea.)³

This explanation is not reassuring. The English expressions “the what it was to be” and “the what it is” are not transparent in meaning. It seems in addition that the Roman translators did not think that the underlying Greek was transparent. Neither, therefore, is it immediately clear how to interpret the Latin translation word *essentia*, which was newly “coined” in order to represent Aristotle’s underlying Greek.

But we may still hope for illumination. Later on the article says, “Aristotle’s preliminary answer (Z.4 [of his work *Metaphysics*]) to the question ‘What is substance?’ is that substance is essence, but there are important qualifications.”⁴ We have already struggled over the word *substance*, so this explanation does not solve our problems.

2. E.g., Cohen, “Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*,” § 10.

3. Cohen, “Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*,” § 7, italics original.

4. Cohen, “Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*,” § 7.

Essence and Definition

In between the opening explanation of translation and the identification of substance with essence, we have material that observes a close linkage in Aristotle's thought between essence and definition:

Aristotle links the notion of essence to that of definition (*horismos*)—"a definition is an account (*logos*) that signifies an essence" (Topics 102a3).

"There is an essence of just those things whose *logos* is a definition" ([*Metaphysics* Z.4] 1030a6), "the essence of a thing is what it is said to be in respect of itself" ([*Metaphysics* Z.4] 1029b14).⁵

One difficulty here is that there are many possible definitions for a particular thing or a particular class of things. A definition may be sufficient in some contexts if it merely singles out unambiguously the thing about which we want to talk. So, for example, "Fido" or "my dog" or "the animal in this room" might serve as the definition of *Fido*, given an appropriate context. All these are *minimal* definitions. Or if we wish to define the *class* of dogs, we can say that "a dog is a domestic canine animal," or "a dog is man's best friend."

Aristotle wants something more. But what more? At the other extreme, we might imagine trying to compile *all* the information about Fido. For the class of dogs, we would compile all the information about every dog that ever existed or might exist. But only God knows everything. In between, we might search for a definition that not only singles out Fido unambiguously, but tells us what it is that makes him Fido, rather than anything else.

To this the Christian answer is that what makes him Fido is the creative word and power and presence of God, specifying everything in the whole plan of history relevant to him. This kind of answer moves us toward the reality of maximal knowledge. God's knowledge is the ultimate reference point here, and functions to anchor our limited human knowledge.

5. Cohen, "Aristotle's *Metaphysics*," § 7, italics original.

Presumably, Aristotle is not talking about maximal knowledge either. What does he want? Something intermediate. It should be in between the minimum and the maximum. It should be more than the minimum of information that would allow us to single out Fido. Similarly, for the class of dogs, it would be something intermediate. It should also be less than a maximal amount of information that would be possible only for God. But there are many possible intermediates. Aristotle wants to know enough crucial information about Fido or about dogs. Which crucial information? He wants to know what is essential, perhaps. But the word *essential* is an adjective closely related to the noun *essence*. How do we determine what is “essential,” except by knowing the essence?

What Is Essential to Know

We might just want to use the word *essential* as a normal English word, with a range of usages and a range of nuances. If that is what we want, then “what is essential” to know depends on the context and the purposes and the needs. Essential for what?

Does a youngster want to learn to drive a car? He should know some things about cars, their capabilities, their dangers, and their controls. He should know what to watch for in traffic, how to change lanes safely, how to drive at night, how to drive in rainy, snowy, and icy conditions. The teacher begins with what is most “essential” for the beginning driver to know.

But what if a youngster wants to know how to *maintain* a car? Then he should know something about what a battery does, how it can fail, what the red lights on the dashboard mean, how to check the air pressure and the oil, how to have a regular schedule of maintenance with a garage. So the teacher spells out the “essentials” of car maintenance.

Does the youngster want to know how to repair a car? Then he needs to know a lot more, and the sphere of “essentials” expands accordingly.

So what does Aristotle want to know about Fido? More broadly, what do philosophers want to know? Do they want to know how to train Fido to sit and to fetch? Do they want to know how to feed him

and take care of his health? Do they want to know how to perform a surgical operation on him if he develops a tumor? Do they want to know how his muscles work? Or how his heart works? All these things are valuable to know, and all are quite relevant for understanding Fido. But these by themselves are not what philosophers are after.

In some way, they want to know *in general* about Fido.⁶ So if we ourselves know a lot about Fido, we might try plunging in at random and just feeding them a stream of information. But a philosopher friend would soon bring us to a halt. “No, no,” he says, “that is not what I want.” “What *do* you want?” Maybe the answer is, “I want to know what makes Fido Fido, in all his individuality.”⁷ Or, “I want to know what makes dogs dogs.” For Fido, the answer is, “God made him in all his individuality. God’s plan specifies everything about him and all his relations to the entire plan of God. To know Fido at that level, you would have to be God.” For the class of dogs, the answer is, “God made all dogs both with commonalities and with individuality. He made both the one (the class) and the many (the individual dogs). The one and the many reflect the unity and plurality in God himself. Moreover, both the individual (Fido) and the class (dogs) can be characterized by contrast, variation, and distribution, reflecting God’s Trinitarian character.”

Do philosophers want to know *everything*? Deep down, they know that they are not God. So let us try again. Let us suppose that the philosopher wants to know what is essential to dogs. And what is essential is what belongs to the essence of being a dog. If this is

6. Cohen, “Aristotle’s Metaphysics,” § 1: “Rather, it [first philosophy] concerns issues that are in some sense the most fundamental or at the highest level of generality.”

7. Sometimes the focus of philosophers is not on the individual, a particular such as Fido, but on natural classes, such as the class of dogs. Such is the case with Aristotle’s concern for definitions (Cohen, “Aristotle’s Metaphysics,” § 7). Note also that for Aristotle, things that are particulars are not definable (Cohen, “Aristotle’s Metaphysics,” § 10). But the difficulties with particulars (Fido) and universals (the class of dogs) are similar. In addition, classes raise the question whether the boundary at the edge of a class is sharp (the question of variation) and whether membership in classes is affected by distribution. The relation between the class and the individuals brings us into the problem of the one and the many, which has its roots in the Trinity.

what a philosopher wants, he wants a definition that would spell out the essence. The kind of definition that he wants is shaped by and prescribed by essence. And then Aristotle tells us that the essence of a dog is just what such a definition provides. The whole thing is circular. Essence is being described by means of a certain kind of definition, and this particular kind of definition is supposed to be singled out by looking for a definition that spells out the essence.⁸ (See fig. 23.1.)

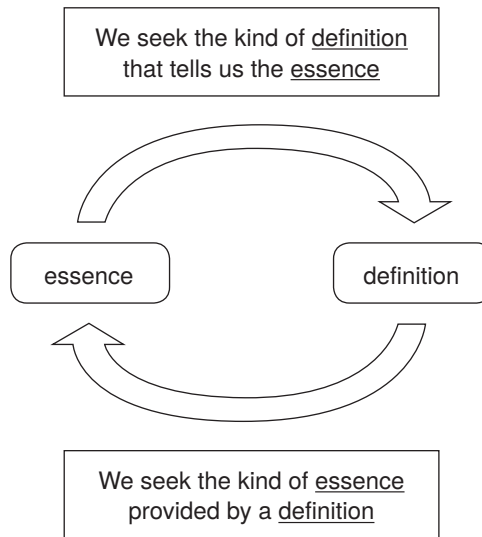


Fig. 23.1. Essence and Definition

8. In a modern context, *essence* can also be defined using modal logic and models of possible worlds. The *essence* of Fido consists in those features that necessarily belong to Fido, that is, that belong to Fido in all possible worlds. But not all possible features of Fido have to be of this kind. Some features, “accidental” features, such as the fact that he is brown, may belong to Fido in some worlds but not all possible worlds.

With this context, one key question is how we know whether it really is Fido in some possible world where we find a dog somewhat like Fido, but with a somewhat different list of features. And the answer can only be that we identify the dog as Fido when he shares all the essential features with the dog Fido who is in *this* world. The identification of Fido involves circularity. Fido is identified in various possible worlds using essential features. And the essential features are identified by comparing the versions of Fido in all possible worlds. The same difficulty occurs

The Desire for Autonomous Reason

Maybe this is not what Aristotle means. But what does he mean?

It is tempting for philosophers with an autonomous concept of reason and an autonomous concept of human knowledge to want to have knowledge without the presence of God. They want to have the key aspects (the *essentials*) of the knowledge about Fido wrapped up in Fido, perhaps in something that is the inner Fido, the *essence* of Fido, independent of anything else.

Aristotle's expression "in respect of itself" (*kath' hauto* in Greek), given in the earlier quotation above (*Metaphysics* Z.4, 1029b14),⁹ is somewhat obscure, but perhaps it is a telltale sign of a way of thinking. It easily suggests that the essence of Fido has to be wrapped up *in Fido*, in respect to Fido, not in respect to anything else. But Fido has no independent existence. We cannot make sense of the idea of there being some feature "in respect to Fido" *alone*, because Fido lives and moves and has his being in God (Acts 17:28). (See fig. 23.2.)

Now, we may not be sure what Aristotle really means, and we may not be sure what all his inward motivations were when he wrote what he wrote. But his writings are now public. They have been read and are being read by many students of philosophy. They have influenced many generations of philosophy—and, we may add, theology. Given the texture of what Aristotle says, his writings are going to tempt people to understand philosophy in certain ways. The writings give the impression of encouraging philosophers and general readers to want something that no one can have, namely, an *essence* that would be independent of or positioned outside the scope of the

if we deal not with a particular thing, Fido, but with a class, such as the class of dogs. The new treatment with possible worlds just transposes into the environment of possible worlds the same circularity that we already saw with the concept of *essence*. Knowing essence requires insight. A model with possible worlds cannot possibly solve the difficulty. The possible-worlds environment also has the deficiency of being a one-level reasoning system: the picture of all possible worlds requires exhaustive knowledge, the knowledge that only God has, and yet is workable only if we human beings have a kind of access to it. For still other difficulties, see Vern S. Poythress, *Logic: A God-Centered Approach to the Foundation of Western Thought* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), chaps. 65–67.

9. Cohen, "Aristotle's *Metaphysics*," § 7.

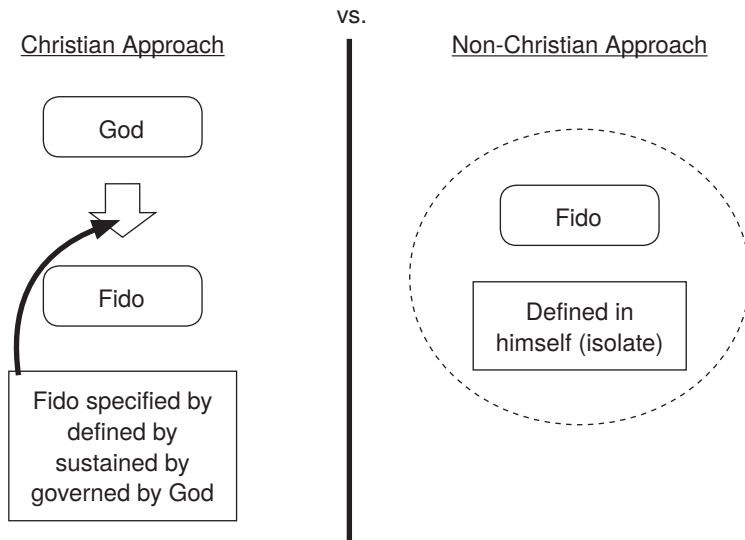


Fig. 23.2. Fido by Himself or in God

presence of God, the plan of God, and the comprehensive knowledge of God. And they also postulate that such essences belong to the most basic character of the world. If so, Aristotle's writings encourage desires directly contrary to the desire to submit to and learn from the true God, who is Trinitarian. It is not a good start.

Of course, we might wish that Aristotle in fact means something else. Maybe his meaning has nothing to do with any kind of heart-corrupted distortion in relation to the obligation to serve God with all of one's heart. But in that case, what Aristotle means is not clearly expressed. And then it is not clear how we in subsequent generations are supposed to operate with a concept of essence built on his writings. We cannot use it in practice. So whether or not essence is supposed to be independent of God, we are not in a position to use Aristotle's idea of essence as the very foundation for centuries of theological discussion.

Essence and Accidents

Maybe we could find some help by considering a contrast in Aristotle's thinking. *Essence* contrasts with *accidents*. As usual, the

terms *accident* and *accidents* have a special technical meaning. The Merriam-Webster online dictionary gives three meanings for the word *accident*. The third is the most relevant:

a nonessential property or quality of an entity or circumstance • the accident of nationality¹⁰

An *accident* in the technical sense is something “nonessential.” That is, it is not of the *essence*. We have a contrast, and that is a little help. But understanding one pole of the contrast involves understanding the other. So far, we understand neither very well. (See fig. 23.3.)

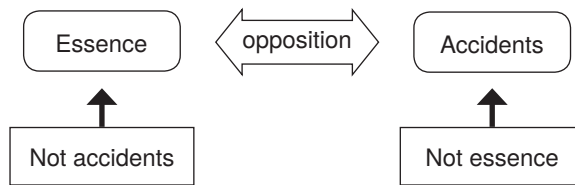


Fig. 23.3. Essence and Accidents

We have seen that the idea of essence easily gets bound up with a non-Christian view of knowledge, according to which there is only one level of knowledge. Then it becomes problematic to decide how much knowledge is enough—how much belongs to the *essence* of a thing. If this is true concerning essence, the same holds for the opposite idea of accidents.

Let us try to illustrate how the difference might function in an ordinary way. We can distinguish features that belong to only *some* dogs from features that belong to nearly all dogs. Some dogs are brown, but not all. So *brown* is an accident for the dog species. All dogs are carnivores. So it seems that being carnivorous flows from the *essence* of being a dog.¹¹ But could a dog survive on a vegetarian diet,

10. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/accident>, accessed January 22, 2018.

11. The situation is complicated in scholastic metaphysics because this metaphysics not only distinguishes essence from accidents, but distinguishes two kinds of accidents—*proper accidents* and *contingent accidents*. The former, but not the

as long as it had appropriate amino acids and other supplements? Yes. So the boundary for what is *carnivorous* is not necessarily completely clear. And we have the usual difficulty with variation. God knows variations comprehensively, while we do not. So there can be no exhaustive human knowledge of everything that would characterize every dog.

A Christian View of Accidents

Within a Christian view, we can see at least some answers. God knows everything, including all the properties and qualities and circumstances that are pertinent at any one moment of time for any one object such as Fido. The complete story of Fido is really the complete story of the whole world, because God has purposes for Fido that connect with the whole world. The complete story includes all the things that are true concerning Fido at any one time, as well as the things that are true about him during his entire life. Given God's comprehensive plan, within that plan there are no contingent *accidents*, either in the technical sense of the term or in the ordinary sense. What *we* as humans cannot anticipate we call an *accident*. Yet God not only "anticipates" all events whatsoever, but ordains them in his plan (Eph. 1:11). Again, we have here the two levels of knowledge.

Within a Christian view of knowledge, we can also make room for multiple human perspectives. So it is all right that we can have the *essentials* for driving a car, and that these can be different from the essentials for maintaining it and the essentials for repairing it. It is also all right that there could be variation even within one of these areas of knowledge, such as the essentials for driving a car. How extensive are these essentials? It depends on one's point of view. What is essential fades gradually into what is not quite as essential, or not essential at all (*accidental*).

latter, flow "from a thing's nature" (Edward Feser, *Scholastic Metaphysics: A Contemporary Introduction* [Heusenstamm: Editiones Scholasticae, 2014], 192). At this point, our discussion focuses on contingent accidents.

God as Archetype for Essence

Just like the distinction between form and matter, the distinction between essence and accidents is a distinction that people do use. It may be fuzzy or vague at times, but people use it. All distinctions are ordained by God. All distinctions have their archetype in the diversity of the persons of the Trinity. But we can also ask more specifically whether we can find a more specific way in which it might be suggested that the distinction between *essence* and *accident* is a reflection of some archetype within the Trinity.

The answer is yes. One way of proceeding is to see the distinction as closely related to the idea of *prominence* in the context of language. *Prominence* is a relative term. What is *prominent* is prominent in relation to what is less prominent, what is peripheral.¹² For example, in the noun phrase “the big boy,” the noun *boy* is the most prominent grammatically. It influences the kinds of words that we can expect to be grouped around it. We expect a noun phrase, not a verb phrase. The words *the* and *big* are peripheral in relation to the prominent center, the word *boy*.

There are three interlocking perspectives on the phenomena of prominence: (1) the *central perspective*, focusing on what is prominent; (2) the *axial perspective*, focusing on what is peripheral, in its one-sided relation to the center or prominent element; and (3) the *perspective of influence*, focusing on the way in which the prominent element influences or determines what is expected as peripheral. (See fig. 23.4.) We claim that these three reflect the ultimate archetype, found in the Father (1), the Son (3), and the Spirit (2).

We can see a little bit of how the Trinity might function as an archetype in this context because the Father often functions as the central focus in designations of God. He is called “God the Father.” In fact, the Father is often called “God” without any additional title (2 Cor. 13:14). The Son is sometimes called “God” (John 20:28), but more often “the Son” or “the Lord.” He is the Word and is the one *sent* by the Father. As the one “sent,” he exerts the “influence” of the Father

12. Vern S. Poythress, *Knowing and the Trinity: How Perspectives in Human Knowledge Imitate the Trinity* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2018), app. F.

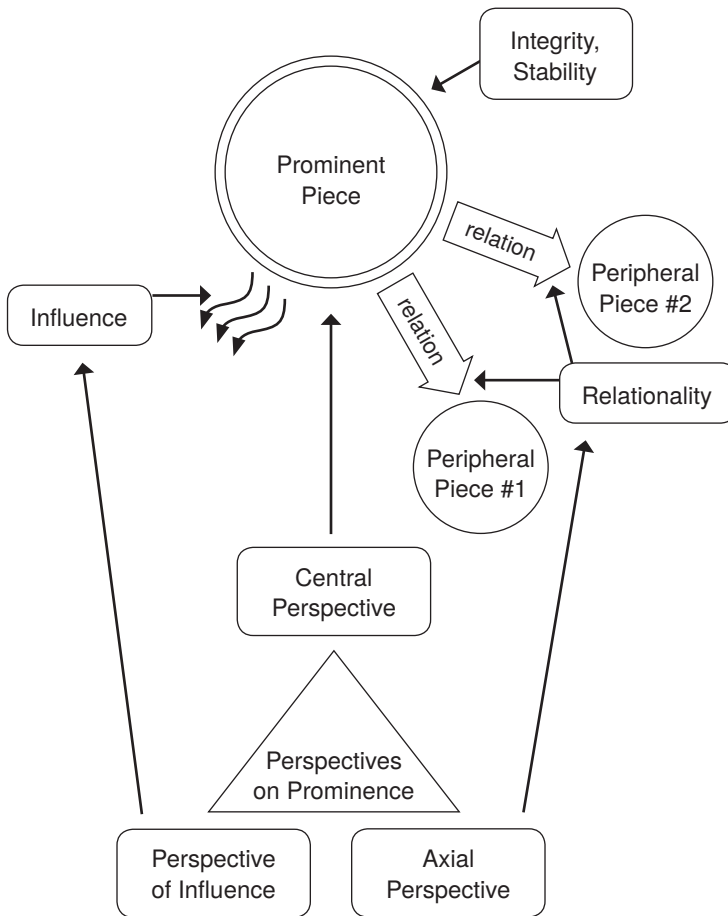


Fig. 23.4. Center and Periphery

on the creation. And the Holy Spirit most immediately represents the presence of God in the world, the world being seen as the periphery in relation to God, who is the origin.¹³

We can conclude, then, that there is analogy (not an identity) between the relations of persons in the Trinity and the reflection of those relations in the three perspectives just mentioned above: the central perspective, the axial perspective, and the perspective of influence. (See fig. 23.5.)

13. See also Poythress, *Knowing and the Trinity*, 391–94.

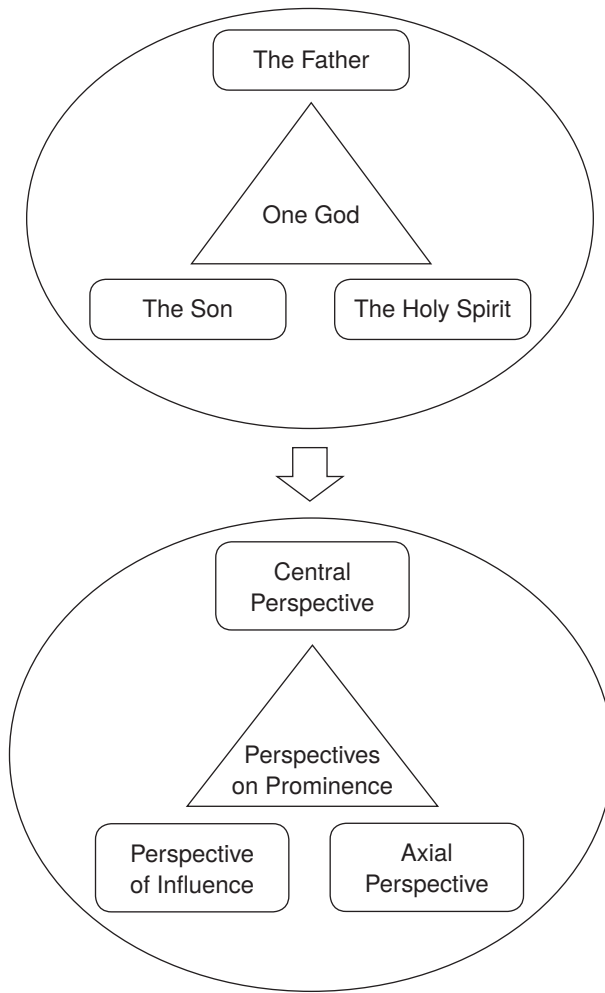


Fig. 23.5. A Reflection of the Trinity

If so, that means that we *can* have a use for terms such as *essence*. It could designate what is in focus in the central perspective. Then the term *accidents* would designate what is in focus in the axial perspective. What is in focus in the central perspective is the center, the starting point. This starting point functions as the essence.¹⁴ It structures

14. Johannes-Baptist Lotz, "Essence," in *Encyclopedia of Theology: The Concise Sacramentum Mundi*, ed. Karl Rahner (New York: Seabury, 1975), 439, says that

the periphery, which functions as accidents, the focus for the axial perspective. The movement from center to periphery is in focus in the perspective of influence. These three perspectives are coinherent in a manner that reflects the original coinherence of the persons of the Trinity. In this sense, everything in the world has essence and accidents, but—this is the point—not in the way that Aristotle would have easily accepted. Coinherence implies that there is no sharp boundary between *essence* and *accidents*, but a thorough interpenetration. Philosophers, by contrast, want to have a clear-cut distinction.

If we do not reckon with the Trinitarian character of God, it is going to be more difficult to reckon with the reflections of his Trinitarian character in the world. And these reflections are everywhere. Suppose we start, as many philosophers have done, with an analysis of essence and accidents that hopes only to have perfect unity, with no variation and no intrinsic interlocking of essence and accidents in a mystery of coinherence. We are setting ourselves up to think that God does not make a difference. His specification of the world in language with a Trinitarian origin does not matter. Worse, we are setting ourselves up to deny or undermine the Trinity when we finally come around to think about it.

If we do not have fellowship with the true God, we will not understand his power and presence in all things *at the beginning* of our reasoning and analysis. Then we will not logically have place for him at the end.

“essence means what necessarily belongs to a thing and most intimately constitutes it, determining its particular character.” The idea of what is most intimate is close to what we mean by a central focus. But the quote from Lotz also illustrates the problem of complexity and ambiguity in the meaning of key terms. The quote is part of a larger article that colors its meaning. Moreover, the quote contains two other major ideas besides intimacy. First, the idea of “what necessarily belongs to a thing” is ambiguous because there are different kinds of necessity. Nothing in the world is necessary apart from God’s decision to create the world and particular things in it. Given God’s comprehensive decree, everything is necessary, including all the variations over time that take place in a particular thing. See Poythress, *Logic*, chaps. 65–66. Second, the idea of “determining its particular character” is ambiguous because there are different kinds of determination, closely related to different kinds of necessity. At the deepest level, it is God who determines the “particular character” of each thing, not a self-existent “essence” within the thing.

Essence in the Resurrection of Christ

What does the resurrection of Christ show us about essence? The resurrection of Christ is the turning point of history. We might say that it is the essence of history. It is at least the most “essential” event in history. Might we ask what is the essence of the resurrection itself, as an event? The question has no unique answer, because there are many things that Christians need to know about the resurrection of Christ.

Among those things, they need also to know how the resurrection affects *them*. They need to know that it is the basis for their new life in the Spirit (Rom. 6, 8). They need to know that “you have been raised with Christ” (Col. 3:1). So they need to know not only about the one central event, the resurrection itself, but about the connections that God himself has established between this one event and the Christian believer, who is united with Christ. The believer shares in the benefits of the event. What is “essential” about an event, in a broad sense, does not always end with facts that are merely “within” the event. God’s purposes for history include connections. Ultimately, within the single plan of God, everything is connected to everything else. So we again see the importance of two levels of knowledge: God’s level of comprehensive knowledge and the human level of limited but true knowledge, in communion with God.

The Challenge of Dealing with Ancient Greek Philosophy

Ancient Greek philosophy influenced Christian theology in complicated ways over the centuries. We cannot consider them all in one book. Many of the influences were problematic. Though Christian theologians mostly rejected what was obviously out of accord with central teachings of the Bible, they did not manage to escape subtler influences that compromised or undermined the purity of Christianity. The results affected the treatment of the doctrine of God as well as other areas.¹⁵

15. John M. Frame, *A History of Western Philosophy and Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2015), chap. 2.

Neither Plato nor Aristotle believed in one true God who created all things and rules all things. And they did not see that God is the Trinitarian God. They searched for wisdom without seeking it in Christ, “in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col. 2:3). They tried to account for unity and diversity in the world, but they did not appeal to the unity and diversity in God’s plan and in God’s word bringing his plan to expression. They lacked the right starting point, and this foundational corruption corrupted everything else. In particular, it corrupted the ideas of *essence* and *accidents*, because they did not reckon from the beginning with the distinction between God’s knowledge and creaturely knowledge.

Key Terms

accident¹⁶

axial perspective

central perspective

essence

essential

perspective of influence

prominence

Study Questions

1. According to Aristotle, what is the essence of a thing?
2. How is essence related to definition?
3. How does a Christian two-level system differ from Aristotle in its approach to essence?
4. What is the distinction between *essence* and *accident* in Aristotle’s metaphysical system?
5. How can we relate the Trinity to ordinary ways in which people may distinguish between what is more “essential” and what is not?

16. Key terms in bold are defined in the glossary at the end of this volume.

For Further Reading

Frame, John M. *A History of Western Philosophy and Theology*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2015. Chap. 2.

Prayer

Thank you that you have granted us the path to knowledge and holiness in Christ.

Technical Terms for the Trinity

LET US NOW take up another difficulty with the terms *substance* and *essence*. Both terms are used in discussing the doctrine of the Trinity. The doctrine of the Trinity is biblical (as indicated in chapter 10). But it is often formulated by using the word *substance* or *essence* or both, using the terms as technical terms. In previous chapters, we found that the words *substance* and *essence* have technical uses in Aristotelian philosophy, and more broadly in the history of Western philosophy. That background is beset with difficulties. The terms have a multitude of uses in a multitude of philosophical systems. Those difficulties might appear to imply that the two key terms are unsuitable to use in discussing the doctrine of the Trinity. Is that true? It is not, as we hope to make clear.

Teaching the Doctrine of the Trinity in Various Ways

First, it should be observed that the doctrine of the Trinity can be taught without using either of the two key terms, *substance* or *essence*. The Bible does it. This present book does it, at least briefly, in chapter 10. John Owen does it in his discourse defending the Trinity.¹

Second, there is some variation in the history of theology as to

1. John Owen, *A Brief Declaration and Vindication of the Doctrine of the Trinity* (1669), in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold (repr., Edinburgh/Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1965), 2.365–454. See also Vern S. Poythress, *Knowing and the Trinity: How Perspectives in Human Knowledge Imitate the Trinity* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2018), chap. 6.

how people have taught the doctrine of the Trinity. The initial discussions concerning the Trinity in the first few centuries involved some struggle with how to express the doctrine of the Trinity, because the doctrine is innately mysterious. No discussion is going to make it transparently clear and eliminate all mystery. God is not completely like anything in creation. Nor does any term previously used in pagan philosophy capture God's uniqueness.

Over time, the orthodox theologians of the early church recognized these challenges. They knew that if they were going to use a few key words in a technical sense, in order to summarize the doctrine, those key words had to be *adapted* to the doctrine, rather than retain all the earlier associations of meaning that they might have had either in ordinary language or in Greek philosophy (such as Plato or Aristotle).

Creating Technical Terms

One obvious way to summarize the doctrine would be to have one key word to express the unity of God and another to express the diversity and distinction in the three persons. It would go something like this: God is one with respect to *A*, while he is three with respect to *B*. *A* and *B* would serve as the key terms. But whatever terms would be chosen, they would not dissolve the mystery. They would serve as summaries for a larger body of teaching. The teaching as a whole would be found in Scripture itself, first of all. And then it would be further explained in reasonings by the church fathers that build on Scripture to discuss and explain the unity in God and three in God.

Roughly speaking, that is what actually happened. But some theologians were thinking and writing in Greek, primarily in the eastern part of the Roman Empire. Others were thinking and writing in Latin, primarily in the western part. So it was natural to develop not two terms, but a pair of terms in each of the two languages. In Greek, theologians gradually settled on *ousia* ("being," οὐσία) to describe the unity (term *A*), and *hypostasis* ("substance," ὑπόστασις) to describe the distinction in persons (term *B*). God is then one *ousia*, one being, in three *hypostases* (an adaptation of the plural *hypostaseis* of *hypostasis*). In Latin, the theologians settled on the term *substantia* ("substance") to describe the unity, and *persona* ("person") to describe

the diversity. In addition, the term *essentia* (“essence”) was used for the unity. God is then one substance or one essence in three persons.² (See table 24.1.)

Table 24.1. Terms for Unity and Diversity in the Trinity

Language	Term for Unity	Term for Diversity
Greek	being (<i>ousia</i>)	substance (<i>hypostasis</i>)
Latin	substance (<i>substantia</i>) essence (<i>essentia</i>)	person (<i>persona</i>)
English	essence (imitating Greek and Latin) substance (imitating Latin)	subsistence (somewhat imitating Greek) person (imitating Latin)

But we can see a difficulty: the Greek term *hypostasis*, when standing alone and not connected with its special use in Trinitarian doctrine, has several meanings, one of which is “substance,” nearly the same meaning as the Latin term *substantia*. (In Hebrews 11:1, the KJV translates the key Greek word *hypostasis* as “substance”: “the substance of things hoped for.”) But the Greek term *hypostasis* was appropriated to describe the diversity of persons, while the Latin term *substantia* was appropriated to describe the unity of one God. The similarity of the two terms in ordinary contexts opens the door to making mistakes in communicating between the two languages.

The results illustrate that it is a misunderstanding merely to consider any of the key words in their ordinary meanings outside the Trinitarian mystery. The Trinitarian mystery is unique, and the words were adapted to it in order to provide a condensed summary of the mystery rather than to dissolve it.

2. Augustine, *On the Holy Trinity*, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. Philip Schaff, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 104–14, bk. 7; Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison Jr., trans. George Musgrave Giger (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1992), 1.253–60, III.xxiii; Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 2:296–301.

In English, as technical terms for discussing the Trinity, we now have *essence* to represent the Greek *ousia* and the Latin *essentia*. We have *substance* to represent the Latin *substantia*. We have *person* to represent the Latin *persona*. In order to differentiate, we also have *subsistence*, which roughly corresponds to the Greek *hypostasis*. So in English, we say that there are three persons with one essence or one substance. There are three subsistences with one essence or one substance. None of the terms merely has the same meaning as it does in ordinary life or as it does in the broader history of philosophy. Rather, the terms taken together are designed to do only one thing, namely, affirm the doctrine of the Trinity. There is one true God and there are three persons, the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, each of whom is fully God and each of whom really is distinct from the others.

As long as we stay with these specialized uses, and do not import meanings from the history of philosophy, the technical terms are useful. But as the relation between *substantia* and *hypostasis* shows, we do not know very well what we are saying. The Trinity is a mystery. Moreover, since the use of *essence* for the unity of God and the use of *essence* in Aristotle are not so far apart, a permanent danger remains that Aristotelian conceptualizations will be imported into uses of the word *essence* in theology. The same goes for the term *substance*.³ (See table 24.2.)

Table 24.2. Two Meanings for Key Terms

Term in English	Use in Trinitarian Doctrine	Use in Aristotle
being	unity of one God	being (existence) (Greek <i>ousia</i>), often translated “substance”
essence	unity of one God (Latin <i>essentia</i>)	proper definition saying what it is (given Aristotle’s metaphysical framework) (Greek <i>to ti ên einai</i> , <i>to ti esti</i> ; Latin <i>essentia</i>)

3. See the “Glossary of Aristotelian Terminology” in S. Marc Cohen, “Aristotle’s Metaphysics,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta

substance	unity of one God (Latin <i>substantia</i>)	a thing (primary substance) or a natural class of things (secondary substance) (given Aristotle's metaphysical framework) (Greek <i>ousia</i>)
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Key Terms

being
church fathers
distinction
diversity
essence⁴
hypostasis
persons
subsistence
substance
technical terms
Trinity
unity

Study Questions

1. What is the meaning of the key terms *essence*, *substance*, and *persons* in the context of the Trinity?
2. What is the danger involved in importing meanings from Aristotle when discussing the doctrine of the Trinity?
3. Are the traditional technical terms used in Trinitarian doctrine suitable for the purpose?

(Winter 2016), § 14, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/aristotle-metaphysics/>.

4. Key terms in bold are defined in the glossary at the end of this volume.

For Further Reading

Letham, Robert. *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship*. Revised and expanded. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2019.

Prayer

Our God, whom we confess to be one God in three persons, thank you for the fathers of the church, whom you raised up and guided, and who labored to set forth clearly the doctrine of the Trinity. Thank you for the technical terms that are our heritage from that struggle. May we in our day honor the mystery of the Trinity.

PART 6

CHALLENGES IN CLASSICAL CHRISTIAN THEISM

We look at some of the influence of Aristotle and his terminology on later reflections on the doctrine of God.

Aristotle's Unmoved Mover

IN THIS AND subsequent chapters, we briefly sketch some of the influence of Aristotle's thinking on the history of theology, focusing on the doctrine of God. We can deal with only a few highlights.¹ We begin with Aristotle himself, and then look at a few Christian thinkers through the centuries.

Aristotle's Description of the Unmoved Mover

Aristotle has a concept of the “unmoved mover,” which he also calls “God,” “Mind,” and “the Good.”² This concept comes up in his work *Metaphysics*, XII (Book Lambda [Λ]),³ to which we now devote some attention.

At a key point in book XII, Aristotle ascribes attributes to the unmoved mover that are similar to attributes of God:

1. For more, see John M. Frame, *A History of Western Philosophy and Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2015).

2. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann, 1962), 1072b25–30, XII.vii.9; 1074b15, 30, XII.ix.1, 3; 1072a34, XII.vii.4. The quotations in English are taken from this Loeb Classical Library edition.

3. The primary discussion is found in Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1071b3–1075a25, XII.vi.1–x.4.

We hold, then, that God is a living being, eternal, most good; and therefore life and a continuous eternal existence belong to God; for that is what God is.⁴

There is some substance [God] which is eternal and immovable and separate from sensible things; . . . is impartible and indivisible[;] . . . is impassive and unalterable.⁵

The similarities to classical Christian theism are remarkable, and it is no wonder that Christians have been drawn to this language.

Differences between Aristotle's Unmoved Mover and the Christian God

But the differences between Aristotle and the Christian God are no less remarkable.

First, Aristotle has no mention of anything resembling the Trinity. But that is only the beginning of the differences.

Second, Aristotle appeals to *other* eternal things in order to infer the existence of the unmoved mover. He believes that motion and time always existed.⁶ The circular spatial motions in the heavens are eternal.⁷ “There is something which is eternally moved with an unceasing motion, and that circular motion.”⁸ To keep this circular motion going, he infers, “Then there is also something which moves it.”⁹ The regress from moved to mover can end only with something that is not moved.¹⁰

The unmoved mover, though first in the series logically, is no more nor less eternal than the circular motions that it moves. In the end, it is on the same level. There is no Creator-creature distinction,

4. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1072b28–30, XII.vii.9.

5. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1073a3–7, 11, XII.vii.12–13. Aristotle earlier speaks of it as “necessarily existent” (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1072b10, XII.vii.6).

6. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1071b6–7, XII.vi.1.

7. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1073a30–31, XII.viii.4.

8. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1072a21–22, XII.vii.1.

9. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1072a23–24, XII.vii.1.

10. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1072a24–25, XII.vii.2.

and there is no idea of creation out of nothing, since the heavenly bodies and their motions are eternal. What is meant by *eternal* is not a separate order of existence, but only the prolongation of existence through indefinitely long times.

Third, Aristotle fatally compromises the uniqueness of God. He supposes that there are other “substances, in nature eternal, essentially immovable, and without magnitude.”¹¹ There is one of these for each of the heavenly spheres, which move the planets in an eternal motion. There are forty-seven (or forty-nine) of them in all.¹² Aristotle at this point is dependent on the results of the astronomers for the details.¹³ The prime mover is distinguished by being first, but there is also a second and third and “so on in the same order as the spatial motions of the heavenly bodies.”¹⁴ Moreover, “the number of the substances must be as we have said.”¹⁵

Fourth, the unmoved mover is not an efficient cause that actually pushes other movers around. It excites the motion of other movers by being the “*final* cause,” that is, the goal toward which they move.¹⁶ It is the supreme good, which other movers desire.¹⁷

By being the object of desire, this mover is eternally related to the eternal motions of the heavenly spheres, so it has a kind of eternal “involvement.” But this involvement is quite thin. It is the *object* of desire of other movers, but it is not active toward them.

Fifth, Aristotle describes the unmoved mover as “Mind,” but it is a “Mind” that thinks only of itself. “Therefore Mind thinks itself, if

11. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1073a38, XII.viii.5.

12. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1074a13–14, XII.viii.14. In the Loeb edition (Harvard University Press; William Heinemann), a footnote discusses the puzzle about the proper number.

13. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1073b10–17, XII.viii.8.

14. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1073b2–3, XII.viii.6.

15. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1074a21–22, XII.viii.15.

16. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1072b3–4, XII.vii.4: “it [the final cause] causes motion as being an object of love, whereas all other things [other causes] cause motion because they are themselves in motion.” This assertion disallows that the unmoved mover could be an efficient cause. Aristotle does not directly discuss at this point material causes or formal causes. But these latter two kinds of causes are not in themselves causes of *motion*. The key point is that something that is unmoved cannot function as an efficient cause.

17. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1072a27–36, XII.vii.2–4.

it is that which is best; and its thinking is a thinking of thinking.”¹⁸ Aristotle explicitly rejects the idea that it could think of anything but the best, namely, itself; it does not think about anything inferior.¹⁹ It sounds as though it cannot think about *us*.

Like the god of deism, this unmoved mover does not personally interact with individual human beings. It does not think about us; it does not speak to us; it does not send rain or snow or Noah’s flood or plagues on the Egyptians. It does not send Jesus.

Summary of Aristotle’s Result

The result at which Aristotle arrives involves a mixture of truth and error. (See table 25.1.)

Table 25.1. Summary of Aristotle’s Unmoved Mover: Similarities and Differences in Language between Aristotle and Classical Christian Theism

Similarities of Language between Aristotle and Christian Theism	Ways in Which Aristotle’s View Differs from Christianity
one (“prime” mover)	not unique; there are several unmoved movers not Trinitarian
necessarily existent	correlative with other eternal things
living	not the Creator, who created out of nothing
eternal (i.e., continuing indefinitely)	still within time

18. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1074b33–35, XII.ix.4.

19. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1074b21–35, XII.ix.2–4. Thomas Aquinas in his commentary on Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* corrects Aristotle by saying that “by understanding Himself He [God] knows all other things.” Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle’s Metaphysics*, trans. John P. Rowan (Notre Dame, IN: Dumb Ox Books, 1961), 828, § 2614. He also directly contradicts Aristotle: “And the baseness of any object of knowledge does not lessen His dignity” (Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle’s Metaphysics*, 828, § 2616). These paragraphs (§§ 2614–16) stand out because most of the time Aquinas in his *Commentary* is content simply to clarify Aristotle’s reasoning, not to correct it.

immovable	not active in making changes in the world
separate from sensible things	on the same ontological level as the world
thinks	does not think about the world
impartible and indivisible	
impassive (not subject to passions)	unresponsive
unalterable	
most good	

Aristotle is an illustration of the principle of Romans 1:18–23, which tells us that pagans *know* God and yet suppress this knowledge. They make substitutes. The substitutes may be the idols of Greek polytheism. They may also be the intellectual substitutes, such as what Aristotle's reasoning produced.

In the case of Aristotle, the fatal flaw is found in his own confidence in reason, conceived of as operating independent of revelation. It is *fallen* reason that we are seeing in action. He reasons out to a kind of logical first mover. But the reasoning assumes a one-level system. All the motions are part of the world, and all are penetrable by the same human rationality. Without recognizing it, Aristotle's version of reason has already suppressed the knowledge of the true God, who is completely distinct from the world.

We may also observe that overconfidence in reason, which is a problem in epistemology, goes together with a similar problem in metaphysics. Aristotle has confidence in his metaphysical categories, since he thinks they are rational, and since he is not aware of the effects of sin on his reasoning. His reasoning about first principles operates against the background of the system of ten categories, the dichotomy of form and matter, and the dichotomy of potential and actual. These categories are assumed to apply to all things, whether earthly or heavenly. The result is that all "substances" and all "movers" are included in the same system. "God" is assigned a place among

these movers, and must conform to the same reasoning that applies to anything else in the world. (See fig. 25.1.)

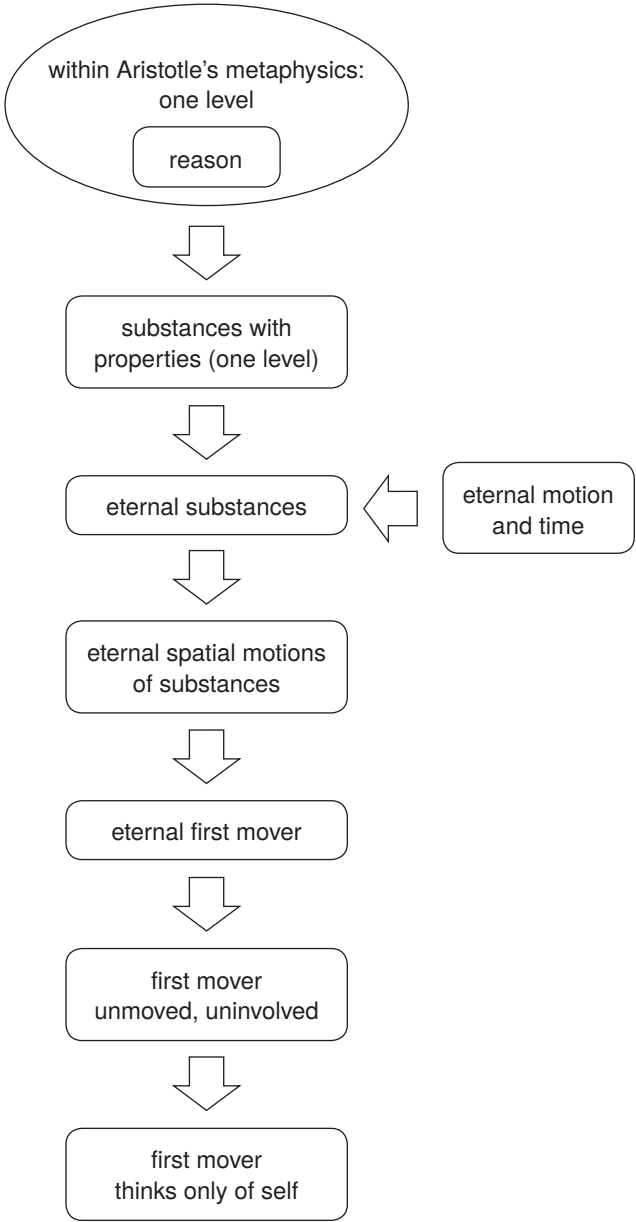


Fig. 25.1. Aristotle's Reasoning about God

Christian Reaction

Classical Christian theologians have uniformly rejected some aspects of Aristotle's conception. And yet Aristotle has still been influential. Particularly since Aristotle's works became available in Latin, he has had a tremendous influence on Christian thinking in the West. The temptation arises to assimilate Christian thinking about God's absoluteness to Aristotelian thinking, even when we do not go all the way and accept everything that Aristotle said. The assimilating pressure can be more subtle and more difficult to detect.

Pertinence of the Resurrection of Christ

As we indicated earlier, the resurrection body of Christ is pertinent for our understanding of the nature of the entire new order, the "new creation," to be fulfilled more fully in the new heaven and the new earth. What is revealed in Christ should have formative influence on our thinking about the nature of the world. This influence includes critical analysis of Aristotle. Moreover, when we are joined to Christ in his resurrection, by the power of the Holy Spirit, our minds also need to think in a manner conformed to the new creation.

Key Terms

attributes²⁰

eternal

unmoved mover

Study Questions

1. What is Aristotle's concept of the unmoved mover?
2. How is Aristotle's unmoved mover like and unlike the true God described in the Bible?
3. How did Aristotle express fragments of the truth?
4. Where and how did Aristotle go astray?

20. Key terms in bold are defined in the glossary at the end of this volume.

For Further Reading

Frame, John M. *A History of Western Philosophy and Theology*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2015. Chap. 2.

Prayer

We pray, our Father, that you would give us grace and wisdom to be discerning in our relation to Aristotle and his thought and those elements from Aristotle that continue within the realm of theological reflections.

Attributes of God in Thomas Aquinas

OUR NEXT FIGURE is Thomas Aquinas (1224–74).¹

The Situation with Aquinas

Thomas Aquinas is an important figure. He was brilliant, and he was able to write a theological synthesis that included not only the contributions of past centuries within the Western church, but also an influence from Aristotle. Aquinas stood at a point in time shortly after the translation into Latin of many of Aristotle's works.² Along with his teacher, Albertus Magnus, Aquinas was one of the first in the Latin world to reflect extensively on these works. His thinking sets a pattern for subsequent centuries in theology.

Aquinas modified Aristotle and adapted his system. He also paid attention to other sources. Aquinas quotes from Scripture, Augustine, Pseudo-Dionysius, “the Philosopher” (Aristotle), and others. Analysts

1. John M. Frame, *A History of Western Philosophy and Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2015), 144–54; K. Scott Oliphint, *Thomas Aquinas*, Great Thinkers (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2017).

2. Ralph McInerny and John O'Callaghan, “Saint Thomas Aquinas,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Summer 2018), introductory paragraph, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/aquinas/>. Some of Aristotle's works were translated earlier, by Boethius (Willem J. van Asselt, *Introduction to Reformed Scholasticism*, trans. Albert Gootjes [Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2011], 41).

have found elements of Platonism and Neoplatonism, whether through Pseudo-Dionysius or others.³

How should we deal with these influences? We should not ignore elements of common grace in all the sources outside Scripture. We cannot in a short compass do justice to these sources, nor to the overall synthesis that Aquinas crafted. Neoplatonism may have made an important impact on Aquinas at a deep level. But closer to the surface we can see at least some affinities to Aristotle: specific terminology, specific aspects of thinking about the ultimate structure of the world (*metaphysics*), and some specific modes of argument.

We focus on the influence from Aristotle in order to make a larger point about a broader historical development in theology. Aquinas believed in the Trinity. His overall theology is shaped by biblical teaching, including the teaching concerning the Trinity. In his works devoted to biblical interpretation, this use of the Bible as the source of teaching is prominent. The Bible is not so prominent a source in his works in systematic theology, but that is largely because of their form and purpose. The discussions are more “metaphysical.” Though there are a variety of influences on this metaphysical discussion, the system of categories has many echoes of Aristotle. That is a potential problem, because Aristotle’s system not only does not have the Trinity, but also has features that, in the end, are subtly anti-Trinitarian. The result was that Aquinas had a potentially problematic mixture. And as we will see, this mixture had effects on his treatment of the doctrine of God.

We focus on only three issues in Aquinas’s work: (1) the role of philosophical reason; (2) the framework for treating the attributes of God, particularly the doctrine of simplicity; and (3) the way to articulate the distinction of persons in the Trinity. We consider the first two issues in the present chapter and the third in the following chapter. These three issues are not necessarily representative of the whole of Aquinas’s thought. We choose them in order to illustrate some difficulties generated by the influence of Aristotle.

3. McInerny and O’Callaghan, “Saint Thomas Aquinas,” § 4.

The Role of Reason

To begin with, let us consider how Aquinas deals with the role of reason in knowing God. Here there is a potential problem because reason has a prominent role in ancient Greek philosophy. Aquinas wants to appeal to reason. Does Aquinas distinguish the conception of autonomous reason in Greek philosophy from the way in which Christians undertake to use their rational abilities? Does he acknowledge effects of sin on human reasoning? Does he see the pitfalls in the Greek philosophical concept of reason?

Near the beginning of his major theological work, *Summa theologica*,⁴ Aquinas assigns roles to reason and revelation. What might be the role of human reason in thinking about God? Three related issues face us: (1) Is reason separable from revelation? (2) How does human reason relate to God's revelation of himself, particularly verbal revelation such as we find in Scripture? (3) How far is human reason *after the fall* able to arrive at a true knowledge of God, without the aid of revelation?

It would take a long discussion to cover these questions thoroughly. Our own approach (in distinction from Aquinas) is based on three convictions:

(1) Man is made in the image of God (Gen. 1:26–27). So from the beginning, man's mind and man's reasoning operations are imitative of God. Man's very being reveals God. So there can be no reason and no operations of reason that do not also reveal God and reflect God's own original rationality.⁵ When Aquinas discusses reason and revelation as two sources of knowledge, perhaps the key word *revelation* really means the *special* revelation of Scripture. But Aquinas does not say so. Consequently, there is danger that his readers may consider

4. Thomas Aquinas, *The "Summa theologica" of St. Thomas Aquinas*, 2nd rev. ed. (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1920). In this chapter, we concentrate on part I, QQ. 1–26, which constitutes volume 1 in the 1920 translation. In the next chapter of this book, we concentrate on part I, QQ. 27–43, which is on the Trinity, found in volume 2 of the 1920 translation.

5. Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology: Prolegomena and the Doctrines of Revelation, Scripture, and God*, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2007), esp. chaps. 8 and 9.

reason to be something that is completely separate from *general* revelation as well as *special* revelation.⁶

(2) Even before the fall of man into sin, God intended that human beings should have knowledge and grow in knowledge in fellowship with God, and this personal fellowship includes verbal communication. Such communication takes place already in Genesis 1:28–30 and 2:16. Even if Adam and Eve had not fallen into sin, further verbal communication would have taken place over time, in harmony with the intensely personal relation that God establishes between himself and human beings. God from the beginning does not leave human beings “on their own” to figure out either the world or who he is. His verbal communication is supposed to play a central and directing role in their lives.⁷ To use reason in a manner independent of verbal revelation is to misuse it. (See fig. 26.1.)

(3) After the fall, human beings still know God in the manner described in Romans 1:18–23, but they rebel against this knowledge and suppress it (v. 23; see chapter 2 in this book). They need to be born again and have their minds renewed (Rom. 12:1–2). People in rebellion make for themselves substitute gods (1:25). These substitutes include not only physical idols that human beings make as representations of false gods, but intellectual idols in the form of false conceptions.

6. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1.144, [1a] Q. 12, art. 11, reply obj. 3, says:

All things are said to be seen [by creaturely knowledge] in God, and all things are judged in Him, because by the participation [*participationem*] of His light we know and judge all things; for the light of natural reason itself is a participation of the divine light.

This “participation” seems to come close to the idea that reason receives revelation. But Aquinas does not speak about any activity in which God *gives* revelation. Rather, reason “participates,” which could be understood to involve a fixed structure innate in the nature of reason, rather than a divine activity. And this participation logically precedes grace (Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1.147, [1a] Q. 12, art. 13, “I answer”). According to this point of view, a person such as Aristotle “participates” in the divine light just as surely as does a Christian. (The 1964 translation by Blackfriars [McGraw-Hill] has “sharing” instead of “participation.”)

7. Vern S. Poythress, Foreword to John M. Frame, *Apologetics: A Justification of Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2015), <https://frame-poythress.org/foreword-to-apologetics-a-justification-of-christian-belief/>, accessed May 26, 2018.

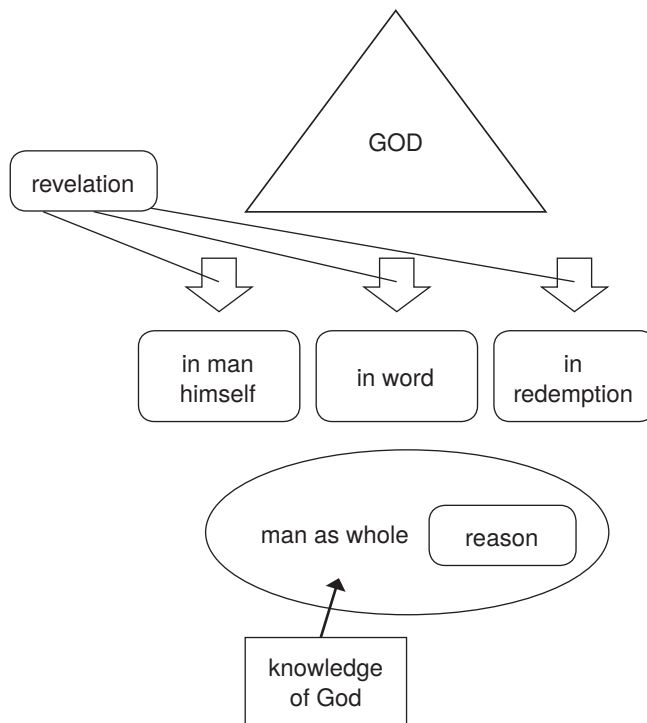


Fig. 26.1. Revelation Instructing Us

For example, in our own time, materialistic philosophy is such a conception. It uses an impersonalistic conception of scientific law and matter as a substitute explanation for reality. In Aristotle, the basic categories of substance, form, and matter serve in some ways as a substitute for saying that God created and sustains everything. Aristotle's unmoved mover also has a role, but it is not the universal Creator, who creates and comprehensively sustains and actively governs both form and matter and whatever other structures there may be.

The failure of human beings to hold to a true knowledge of God shows that human reason in its fallen state is itself infected by the fall—as are all other aspects of human nature (Eph. 4:17–24). Human beings remain human, but they are corrupted ethically and religiously by the fall of Adam and its effects on them.

It is disputed as to how far Aquinas takes into account the centrality of verbal revelation and the depth of corruption of the human

mind through the fall. On the one hand, as a Christian he knew at a practical level the value of Scripture and the need for salvation to overcome the fall. In his major work *Summa theologica*, he freely quotes from Scripture.

On the other hand, Aquinas starts *Summa theologica* with a division between the task of reason and the task of “sacred doctrine.”⁸ And in this division he does not make clear the problems in appealing to reason. He offers no discussion at an early point in his work about a differentiation between two forms of human use of rationality: (1) practice that is ignorant of Scripture or that rejects Scripture (such as in Aristotle) and (2) practice that seeks carefully to have Scripture serve according to God’s design as a fundamental guide:

Your word is a lamp to my feet
and a light to my path. (Ps. 119:105)

But he [Jesus] answered, “It is written,

“Man shall not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”
(Matt. 4:4)

Nor is there yet a discussion of the corruption of the human mind by the fall (Eph. 4:17–24).

Philosophy and Sacred Doctrine

Our understanding of reason also affects our understanding of how we should go about doing theology. Near the beginning of his major work *Summa theologica*, Aquinas discusses the nature of “sacred doctrine” (*sacra doctrina*) and distinguishes it from “philosophical science” (*philosophicas disciplinas*). (*Science* here basically means “knowledge,” such as is found in an academic discipline; the usage is not to be confused with our modern, more restrictive use of the term to designate natural science.) Philosophical science “has

8. Aquinas, *Summa theologica*, 1.2, [1a] Q. 1.

been built up by human reason.”⁹ Aquinas cites Aristotle in this connection.¹⁰ Philosophical science includes the knowledge of God (*theology*), insofar as this can be obtained through human reason.¹¹ Aquinas affirms the role of Scripture, but it seems to be a supplement, for the sake of salvation:

It was necessary for man’s salvation that there should be a knowledge revealed by God, besides philosophical science built up by human reason.¹² (See fig. 26.2.)

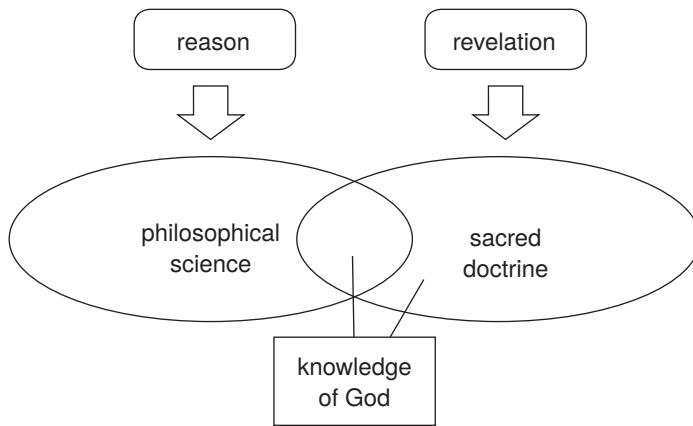


Fig. 26.2. Reason and Revelation according to Aquinas (Problematic)

9. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1.2, [1a] Q. 1, art. 1, “On the contrary.” Compare this atmosphere to what Augustine says at the beginning of his treatise on the Trinity:

The following dissertation concerning the Trinity, as the reader ought to be informed, has been written in order to guard against the sophistries of those who disdain to begin with faith, and are deceived by a crude and perverse love of reason. (Augustine, *On the Holy Trinity*, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. Philip Schaff, vol. 3 [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978], 22, 1.1.1)

In fairness to Aquinas, we should note that he maintains that natural reason cannot attain a knowledge of the Trinity, which is Augustine’s topic.

10. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1.2, [1a] Q. 1, art. 1, obj. 2, citing Aristotle, *Metaph.* vi.

11. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1.2, [1a] Q. 1, art. 1, obj. 2.

12. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1.2, [1a] Q. 1, art. 1, “I answer.”

Layering sacred doctrine on top of or alongside philosophical science attained by reason is not adequate because it does not alert readers to the difficulties inherent in Aristotle's system, which would have been viewed as a premier instance of philosophical science in that day. The danger increases because Aquinas more than once affirms that philosophical science is based on self-evident first principles.¹³ If they are self-evident, they do not need to be challenged. Unfortunately, what *appears* to be self-evident to one person may include hidden assumptions that are actually false. Aristotle's system of categories, for example, may produce a feeling of being self-evident until we ask the right questions and analyze underlying assumptions.

As we observed in some of the earlier chapters, the trouble with this affirmation of philosophical science is not only that readers may overestimate the powers of fallen reason, but that, in practice, they may adopt a starting point that will speculatively try to discover or construct what is ontologically basic. Aristotle did so. And readers of Aquinas may still be tempted to do so. If they go that way, they may do it corruptly, because they do not see the imprint of God's Trinitarian nature on creation itself. It is a procedure at odds with the Trinitarian nature of God.

Aquinas does note that what is discovered by reason comes "with the admixture of many errors."¹⁴ Aquinas also propounds that the deliverances from special revelation can overrule the deliverances of reason if the two come into conflict.¹⁵ Aquinas also makes it clear that the deliverances from Scripture are definitive, while the deliverances from other sources are only "probable":

Nevertheless, sacred doctrine makes use of these authorities [philosophers and natural reason] as extrinsic and probable arguments; but properly uses the authority of the canonical Scriptures

13. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1.3, [1a] Q. 1, art. 2, obj. 1: "For every science proceeds from self-evident principles"; Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1.7, [1a] Q. 1, art. 5, obj. 1: "other sciences, the principles of which cannot be doubted"; Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1.10, [1a] Q. 1, art. 6, reply obj. 2.

14. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1.2, [1a] Q. 1, art. 1, "I answer."

15. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1.10, [1a] Q. 1, art. 6, reply obj. 2.

as an incontrovertible proof, and the authority of the doctors of the Church as one that may properly be used, yet merely as probable.¹⁶

Those are significant qualifications, but we may ask whether they are sufficient to overcome the difficulties. Among the difficulties is that what is “ontologically basic” has already been laid out by reason before we come to Scripture. And what is ontologically basic includes the Aristotelian system of categories.

To be sure, the intent of Aquinas is to use reason as a servant (“ministerially”) in relation to sacred doctrine, not as a master governing sacred doctrine: “natural reason should minister to faith as the natural bent of the will ministers to charity.”¹⁷ But the danger here is that the principle of reason might be allowed to run loose in human thinking, at least at the beginning, in our initial choice of a category system. That is, the initial use of reason would be in contrast to seeking a framework purified by “the renewal of your mind” (Rom. 12:2), through God’s instrument of renewal, the Scriptures (2 Tim. 3:16–17). Jesus prays, “Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth” (John 17:17).

In Aquinas and his followers, the Aristotelian system of categories is modified here and there—at the edges, so to speak. But Aquinas never undertook a thoroughgoing critique. He thought there was no need, because he accepted a lot of what Aristotle said, especially in his adoption of Aristotelian terminology.

What Is Ontologically Basic

Now, if we had the energy and the ability, we could go on and explore in detail, even massive detail, both the brilliance of Aquinas’s synthesis with respect to the doctrine of God and its deficiencies. The most basic deficiency is that the Trinity cannot come in as ontologically basic. Aristotle’s system of categories, with the related technical terms, already plays that role. And that has the potential to corrupt everything that can be said about the attributes of God.

Fortunately, as we observed, Aquinas does have the teaching of

16. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1.14, [1a] Q. 1, art. 8, reply to obj. 2.

17. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1.14, [1a] Q. 1, art. 8, reply to obj. 2.

the Bible to guide him, and he gives it the primacy by treating it as a source of “incontrovertible proof” rather than merely “probable arguments.”¹⁸ We should be careful not to exaggerate the role of Aristotle’s categories. Yet those categories do have a kind of subliminal influence. And, as we shall see, they can actually be in tension with Aquinas’s theological goal of defending orthodox Trinitarianism.

Every attribute is an attribute of the Trinitarian God. We saw a bit of this truth earlier, using the attributes of love and infinity. The love of God is the love preeminently displayed in the reality that the Father loves the Son. The infinity of God is the infinity preeminently manifested in the infinity of the Father, who infinitely loves his infinite Son, in the context of the infinite gift of the infinite Holy Spirit. Both love and infinity have an inner differentiation. This differentiation, in the mystery of the Trinity, is just as “ontologically basic” as the unity. Each attribute of God, such as love, belongs to God, and it belongs to the Father, and it belongs to the Son, and it belongs to the Spirit, and it is displayed in the personal relations between persons of the Trinity: the Father *loves* the Son.

Now, in Christian charity, we want to assume the best. Let us assume that Aquinas was genuinely a Christian. He may have failed in some points in his knowledge, as we all do. But Aquinas as a Christian knew God. He knew the love of the Father, as manifested in the Son, and as taught by the Holy Spirit, who has become the means of receiving and tasting the love of God in Christ (Rom. 5:5). Aquinas knew, at least tacitly, by experience as well as by Scripture, that there was a differentiation as well as a unity in divine love.

He knew it. But, at least in *Summa theologiae*, the starting discussion did not include it at the most ontologically basic level. In that respect, the starting point is defective. For example, his rational arguments for the existence of God claim to arrive at “God.”¹⁹ But that one God is one but not (yet) three persons.

It would take too long to trace the influence of the role of reason and of the role of Aristotle’s categories throughout Aquinas’s work. We must content ourselves with a few examples.

18. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1.14, [1a] Q. 1, art. 8, reply to obj. 2.

19. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1.24–27, [1a] Q. 2, art. 3, “I answer.”

Essence

One significant difficulty appears when we come to the opening sections in Aquinas's treatment of the doctrine of God. The discussion includes the key idea of *essence* (*essentia*).²⁰ Within the immediate context, the idea is never defined. Aquinas simply relies on the usage of previous generations.²¹ As we showed in chapter 23, this reliance is problematic.²²

The lack of definition creates difficulties for the whole doctrine of God because the key expression leaves ambiguity as to whether we can know God (see app. D below). A form of non-Christian transcendence is one possible interpretation, but the ambiguities in Aquinas's language mean that we cannot confidently say that we have either Christian transcendence or non-Christian transcendence. Without this basic clarity, the discussion presents difficulties all the way through.²³

In Aquinas's work, there are two main expressions that designate

20. The idea of essence is used to organize the major subdivisions in the doctrine of God: Aquinas, *Summa theologica*, 1.19, [1a] Q. 2, introduction (*essentiam*). It occurs for the first time in Aquinas, *Summa theologica*, 1.11, [1a] Q. 1, art. 7, obj. 1 (*quid est*).

21. Aquinas has another work in which he directly discusses essence: Thomas Aquinas, *Concerning Being and Essence* (*De Ente et Essentia*), trans. George G. Leckie (New York/London: D. Appleton-Century, 1937). He relies heavily on Aristotle.

22. Aquinas is not using the term *essence* merely in the narrow context of Trinitarian doctrine, in order to distinguish the unity of God from the diversity of persons. The diversity of persons comes up for discussion only later in *Summa theologica* (pt. I, QQ. 27–43).

23. We may illustrate the difficulty with a quote:

Although by the revelation of grace in this life we cannot know of God *what He is* [the essence], and thus are united to Him as to one unknown [!]; still we know Him more fully according as many and more excellent of His effects are demonstrated to us, and according as we attribute to Him some things known by divine revelation, to which natural reason cannot reach, as, for instance, that God is Three and One. (Aquinas, *Summa theologica*, 1.147, [1a] Q. 12, art. 13, reply obj. 1, italics original)

On the one hand, God is “one unknown.” On the other hand, “we know Him.” But the knowledge is qualified. Do we merely know “His effects” and some truths that “we attribute to Him”? Or do we know God as well? Aquinas may be influenced by the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius, who stresses the inaccessibility of God's essence.

essence. First, there is the Latin term *essentia*, which Latin translators of Aristotle used for Aristotle's expression "the what it is" (see chap. 23 above). Aquinas also uses "what he/it is" (*quid est* or *quid sit* or other variants), which the English translators²⁴ of Aquinas sometimes render literally and sometimes render with the English term *essence*.

Form and Matter

Another difficulty arises when Aquinas discusses whether God is "matter and form," and concludes that he is "a form."²⁵ This discussion presupposes that the form-matter scheme offers some kind of ontologically basic analysis not only when it is applied to creatures but when it is applied to God. But Aquinas has not established whether such an ontological analysis can be carried over to God, even if for the sake of argument we were to assume that it will work for creatures. It is presumptuous to carry over such a scheme without any argument. Aquinas supplies no argument to show that the categories of *form* and *matter* are serviceable. He assumes that they are. And the arguments that he does furnish us in this section (1a, Q. 3, art. 2) are purely philosophical, rational arguments, with no appeal to Scripture.

Essence and Existence

Let us consider how Aquinas proceeds in his next article (1a, Q. 3, art. 3).²⁶ Aquinas asks "whether God is the same as his essence or nature."²⁷ He uses two expressions, apparently interchangeably: "essence" (*essentia*) and "nature" (*natura*). Neither of the key terms is

24. As our primary English-language reference point, we are using the translation of Aquinas's *Summa theologiae* by "Fathers of the English Dominican Province," 2nd rev. ed. (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1920). It should be noted that on occasion this translation also uses *substance* as an English rendering of the Latin *essentia*. See, for example, 1.33, [1a] Q. 3, art. 3, obj. 1. The same Latin phrase *essentia vel natura* is rendered twice as "essence or nature," once as "substance or nature."

25. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1.32, [1a] Q. 3, art. 2, "I answer."

26. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1.33–34.

27. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1.33, [1a] Q. 3, art. 3, title.

defined. This lack of definition continues the difficulty that we have already noted about the idea of essence.

The later discussion in the same section involves examples that illustrate an Aristotelian way of thinking. Aquinas uses the example of a man. A “man” is a thing, distinguishable from his nature, which is “humanity.”²⁸ “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.”²⁹ Here we find the same kind of conceptual link between definition and essence that we found in Aristotle.³⁰ And there is the same difficulty as there was with Aristotle because “definitions” may be of different kinds, and we need to distinguish between what God knows and what human beings do know or can know.

The continuation in this section of Aquinas’s book does not improve the situation. Aquinas goes on at some length concerning matter and form in man, and concerning *accidents* belonging to matter, while *form* supplies the essence. Matter provides the individualizing aspect (resulting in this *particular* man), while form is closely linked to essence:

humanity [the essence] is taken to mean the formal part [i.e., form] of a man, because the principles whereby a thing is defined [i.e., the essence] are regarded as the formal constituent in regard to the individualizing matter.³¹

This reasoning differs from a Christian approach in which both unifying aspects (humanity) and diversifying aspects (particular individuals) derive equally from the Trinity. (See table 26.1.)

As we indicated, Aquinas claims under part I, question 3, article 2, that God is pure form, not matter. If we were to ignore the context, this affirmation could conceivably mean merely that God is

28. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1.33, [1a] Q. 3, art. 3, obj. 2.

29. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1.33, [1a] Q. 3, art. 3, “I answer.”

30. We may also have an influence from Plato. In Platonic thinking, the *form* of humanity would play a role similar to what the *essence* of humanity plays in Aristotle.

31. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1.34, [1a] Q. 3, art. 3, “I answer.”

Table 26.1. Unifying and Individualizing

Worldview	Source of Unity	Source of Particularity (Diversity)
Aristotle	form	matter
Christianity	unity of the Trinity	diversity of the Trinity

immaterial, without a body, as Aquinas indicates in part I, question 3, article 1.³² But Aquinas interprets it as meaning that God is pure form within an Aristotelian scheme. And then he introduces a general principle, that “in things not composed of matter and form, . . . the very forms being individualized of themselves,” there is identity of the thing with the form (its nature).³³ If we assume the Aristotelian form-matter scheme, this idea makes sense. The individuation normally comes from matter, but without the matter the form must supply everything, and must itself be identical with the individual thing. It follows *by purely general reasoning*, using the form-matter scheme, that there can be no differentiation in God, but the individual is identical with the form, which is a thing’s essence or nature. The argument concludes that God is the same as his essence. (See fig. 26.3.)

The argument presumes that Aristotle’s form-matter scheme can apply to God, even though it is a doubtful inference from limited human observation of created things and their order. There is no reserve in the argument due to the Creator-creature distinction.

32. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1.29–30, [1a] Q. 3, art. 1, “I answer.”

33. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1.34, [1a] Q. 3, art. 3, “I answer.” The full passage runs as follows:

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*. [. . . oportet quod ipsae formae sint supposita subsistentia.] Therefore *suppositum* and nature in them are identified. [Unde in eis non differt suppositum et natura.] Since God then is not composed of matter and form, He must be His own Godhead, His own Life, and whatever else is thus predicated of Him.

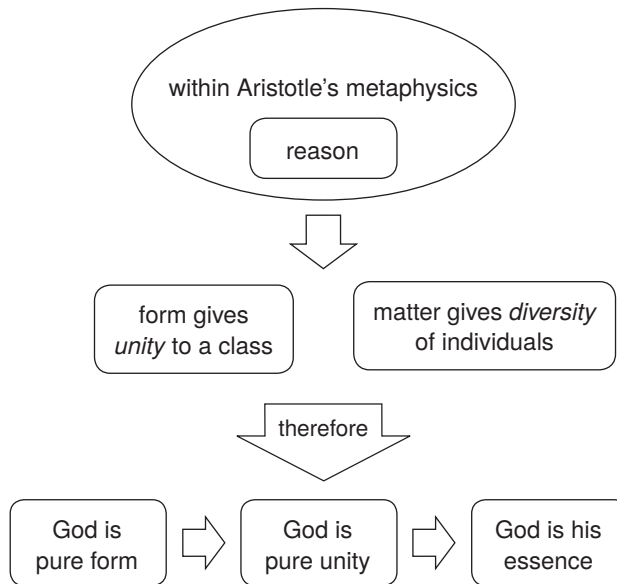


Fig. 26.3. Aquinas's Reasoning: Pure Form Implies Identical Unity

As an additional inference, Aquinas concludes that God is not only the same as his essence but the same as any of his attributes: "Since God then is not *composed of matter and form*, He must be His own Godhead, His own Life, and whatever else is thus predicated of Him."³⁴ This formulation opens the door to collapsing all the attributes into a pure unity, and allowing no differentiation between any two of them. The focus is entirely on the unity of God.

In the next passage in Aquinas, any differentiation is attributed only to effects in the world:

We can speak of simple things only as though they were like the composite things from which we derive our knowledge. Therefore, in speaking of God, we use concrete nouns to signify His subsistence, because with us only those things subsist which are composite; and we use abstract nouns to signify His simplicity. In saying therefore that Godhead, or life, or the like are in God, we indicate

34. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1.34, [1a] Q. 3, art. 3, "I answer," italics mine.

the composite way in which our intellect understands, but not that there is any composition in God.³⁵

This summary is problematic because it invites people to think that God himself is only unity, with no diversity. Allegedly, the diversity is due only to our limitations as creatures, according to which “we derive our knowledge” from composite created things, which are form and matter, and the matter introduces diversity. Within this scheme, the Trinity is impossible. Aquinas later affirms the Trinity,³⁶ but it is in tension with the scheme that he has laid down by philosophical reasoning, using the Aristotelian framework that he has adopted.

This result is to be expected. For Aristotle, form and matter make up an individual substance. The form is the source and foundation for unity, while diversity comes from matter. So once we say that God is form and not matter, there is only unity and not diversity.

The arguments we are considering occur under question 3, “Of the Simplicity of God.” Within the section on question 3, in the crucial articles, articles 2–8, Aquinas operates against the background of Aristotle’s categories. The articles use philosophical reasoning, within an Aristotelian system of categories, to arrive at conclusions, rather than by the special revelation of Scripture. At one point within 1a, question 3, article 3, Aquinas has one quote from John 14:6;³⁷ but the driving force for his argumentation comes from the Aristotelian scheme.

Since the Aristotelian scheme corrupts the knowledge of God and the knowledge of his relation to creation, we cannot depend on *anything* that Aquinas achieves in 1a, question 3, article 3, concerning God’s simplicity. The entire set of arguments must be rethought. As we saw in chapter 9, a certain understanding of simplicity follows

35. Aquinas, *Summa theologica*, 1.34, [1a] Q. 3, art. 3, reply obj. 1. The word *subsistence* (Latin *subsistentiam*) is used elsewhere (see chapter 24 of our book) to designate a person of the Trinity. But both the quotation itself (which is occupied with the contrast between being composite and being simple) and the surrounding context in Aquinas’s *Summa theologica* (in which the doctrine of the Trinity comes up only beginning with question 27) show that in this early quotation *subsistence* is nearly equivalent to *existence*.

36. Aquinas, *Summa theologica*, 2.1–210, [1a] QQ. 27–43.

37. Aquinas, *Summa theologica*, 1.33, [1a] Q. 3, art. 3, “On the contrary.”

from biblical teaching. But we should not confuse the earlier discussion in our chapter 9 above with the full framework for simplicity that Aquinas develops in 1a, question 3, of his *Summa theologiae*.

Aquinas in Relation to Augustine

It should be noted, in fairness to Aquinas, that in the middle of his discussion of simplicity he quotes Augustine: “Augustine says (*De Trin.* iv. 6, 7): *God is truly and absolutely simple*.”³⁸ So it is possible to interpret Aquinas as reaffirming simplicity in complete harmony with what has long been said in the stream of orthodox theology—and as we ourselves have discussed in chapter 9. We should maintain that God is indeed simple. The question is what we mean by *simplicity*. The word does not define itself.³⁹

Aquinas’s quotation of Augustine seems to invite us to understand simplicity in the same way that Augustine understood it. But when we turn to Augustine, he does not in fact give us the same Aristotelian environment of philosophical reasoning that Aquinas does. Aquinas may or may not recognize that, though he is appealing to Augustine, he is shifting the ground: he is shifting the nuances of meaning of simplicity by shifting the primary, “ontologically basic” framework for understanding simplicity.

So what does Augustine do in comparison to Aquinas? It would take a long detour to explore Augustine with any kind of thoroughness. Let us focus on Aquinas’s quotation from Augustine. According to the 1920 English translation of Aquinas’s work, there is a reference to “*De Trin.* iv. 6, 7” (the fourth book of Augustine’s work on the Trinity, sections 6 and 7).⁴⁰ But the original Latin of Aquinas’s *Summa*

38. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1.40, [1a] Q. 3, art. 7, “On the contrary,” italics original.

39. Jay Wesley Richards analyzes no less than eight senses of simplicity (Richards, *The Untamed God: A Philosophical Exploration of Divine Perfection, Immutability and Simplicity* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003], 217). This complexity suggests caution in trying to understand exactly what specific writers are proposing in any particular occurrence of the word *simplicity*.

40. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1.40, [1a] Q. 3, art. 7, “On the contrary” (in the 1920 translation by “Fathers of the English Dominican Province”). The 1947 online edition of the 1920 translation has the same English text, and in the parallel Latin

theologica does not include an explicit reference. An error has crept into the English. Aquinas is citing book 6, not book 4 (“iv. 6, 7”), from Augustine’s *De Trinitate* (*On the Holy Trinity*). Within book 6, it is not certain which exact words Aquinas is actually quoting. Probably it is book 6, chapter 4, paragraph 6, plus book 6, chapter 5, paragraph 7. Aquinas’s exact wording does not occur in Augustine, but the word *simplicity* (Latin *simplicitas*) does occur.

The chapters in question are chapters about the Trinity, rather than about simplicity! In book 6, chapter 4, paragraph 6, Augustine shows that the Son is equal to the Father, and confirms it by appealing to simplicity. Here is the crucial piece:

But in God [in contrast to human nature] to be is the same as to be strong, or to be just, or to be wise, or whatever is said of that *simple* multiplicity, or multifold *simplicity*, whereby to signify His substance. Wherefore, whether we say God of God [as in the Nicene Creed] in such way that this name [“God”] belongs to each [Father and Son], yet not so that both together are two Gods, but one God.⁴¹

Note Augustine’s wording, “simple multiplicity, or multifold simplicity.” It suggests a kind of equal ultimacy and interpenetration of unity and diversity. The term *simplicity* here does not represent a kind of “bare” simplicity, but “multifold simplicity.” Augustine uses the word *simplicity* to argue for the unity of “His [God’s] substance.” Therefore, the Father and the Son are not “two Gods” (two substances), “but one God.”

In chapter 5, paragraph 7, Augustine provides a similar confirmation with respect to the Holy Spirit:

therefore also the Holy Spirit is equal [to the Father and the Son]; and if equal, equal in all things, on account of the absolute *simplicity* which is in that substance [God].⁴²

it has “VI de Trin.” The 1964 translation *Summa theologiae* (London: Eyre & Spottiswood; New York: McGraw-Hill) has no citation in either the Latin or the English text, but includes a footnote referring readers to “*De Trinitate* VI, 4–8.”

41. Augustine, *On the Holy Trinity*, 100, 6.4.6, italics mine.

42. Augustine, *On the Holy Trinity*, 100, 6.5.7, italics mine.

In Augustine, simplicity is being understood directly in the environment of Trinitarian doctrine, rather than in the environment of Aristotle. *Simplicity* basically means that the attributes of God cannot be separated. Augustine says, “If equal, equal in all things.” Why? Because no one can separate *some* things in which the Spirit would be equal (let us say equal in power), and *other* things in which he would not be equal (for example, in knowledge, or in being, or in deity). The Spirit cannot have any attribute without having them all—and having them in perfect fullness. No attribute can be broken off and separately assigned to the Spirit, because of simplicity. Therefore, if the Son or the Spirit is God, he has all the attributes of God.

For Augustine, simplicity harmonizes with the differentiation of persons in the Trinity because the differentiation of persons is already understood as an aspect of the environment of the discussion. Simplicity (“multifold simplicity”) with respect to the unity of God is jointly articulated with an affirmation of the diversity of persons.⁴³ God cannot be divided up, and so for the Son and the Spirit to be God means to be fully God and to be equal to the Father.⁴⁴

We might hope that Aquinas has the same desire to understand simplicity in the context of the Trinity. But that is not what he lays out in print. The context, as we said, contains an Aristotelian framework, with general reasoning rather than appeals to Scripture. Aquinas

43. It is not immediately clear what exactly Augustine means by “simple multiplicity, or multifold simplicity” (*On the Holy Trinity*, 100, 6.4.6). Possibly, he is alluding to the mystery of the Trinity. His choice of language certainly differs from the pure focus on unity with no diversity in Aquinas’s treatment of simplicity. Similar concern to formulate simplicity in harmony with the Trinity can be found in *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*:

Divine simplicity was understood as a support of the doctrine of the Trinity and as necessarily defined in such a manner as to argue the “manifold” as well as the non-composite character of God. (Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*, 2nd ed. [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003], 3:276, quoted in Jordan P. Barrett, *Divine Simplicity: A Biblical and Trinitarian Account* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017], 96, with further discussion, 96–97)

44. Similar reasoning is to be found with the Cappadocian Fathers: Barrett, *Divine Simplicity*, 40–54.

comes to discuss the Trinity and the differentiation of persons only later (pt. I, QQ. 27–43).⁴⁵

Preference for Abstraction

We should note one more thing about Aquinas's section on simplicity. One of the quotes from Aquinas, given above, mentions using abstract nouns for simplicity, as opposed to the concrete nouns that have ties with composite things in created order.⁴⁶ This differentiation could easily lead to the conclusion that a more abstract description of God represents a deeper analysis. According to this kind of thinking, the more abstract description is closer to the literal truth. And this idea may promote a theological preference for abstraction in discussing the doctrine of God.

But the feeling that abstraction gets us closer to the reality about God is an illusion. Aquinas's treatment of God, using form and matter, essence and accidents, repeatedly relies on comparisons or analogies using examples from life, such as the example of a man and humanity to explain how matter and form are related. In its own way, this treatment is just as analogical as the anthropomorphic language that the Bible uses when it says that God thinks, speaks, loves, and is angry.⁴⁷

45. Thus, we need to exercise care in reading both Aquinas and later theology when they make reference to God's simplicity. Aquinas's account of simplicity in *Summa theologiae* (pt. I, Q. 3) has complexities. In the end, it does not stand alone, because it is followed by a Trinitarian discussion in later sections (pt. I, QQ. 27–43). Moreover, it attempts to combine Aristotelian metaphysics with Augustine's "multifold simplicity." These two do not easily mix. Jay Richards' delineation of eight senses of simplicity has relevance (*Untamed God*, 217).

46. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1.34, [1a] Q. 3, art. 3, reply obj. 1. See also Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1.176, [1a] Q. 13, art. 11, "I answer": "Therefore the less determinate the names are, and the more universal and absolute they are, the more properly are they applied to God."

47. It would take us into a complex discussion of mystery if we were to consider more thoroughly the idea of *analogy*. Aquinas distinguishes more than one kind of analogy, and distinguishes analogical language from univocal and equivocal uses. Suffice it to say that in this present book the word *analogy* is used as an ordinary word of English, with contrast, variation, and distribution. It has a meaning similar to that of *resemblance* and *similarity*. It does not obtain its meaning from the system of technical distinctions that Aquinas builds.

But once we have constructed the abstract system, it is easy to forget its use of analogy. So then the language of abstraction gets a preference. But it has the disadvantage that it is less vivid and less gripping than the personal language that is characteristic of the Bible. And the distance from the language of the Bible further encourages people to take a philosophical approach, based on reason, rather than a biblical approach, based on what the Bible says. For example, because the Bible does not contain any verses that directly use the idea of God's simplicity, it becomes tempting when we think about simplicity just to use general arguments based on human rationality.

Key Terms

Aquinas¹
Aristotle
categories
essence
false gods
form
matter
philosophical science
Pseudo-Dionysius
reason
revelation
sacred doctrine
simplicity
theology

Study Questions

1. What is Aquinas's view of the relation of reason to revelation?
2. What influence does Aristotle have on Aquinas's basic system of categories?
3. What problem is there in the way in which Aquinas argues for God's simplicity?

1. Key terms in bold are defined in the glossary at the end of this volume.

For Further Reading

Frame, John M. *A History of Western Philosophy and Theology*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2015. Pp. 144–54.

Oliphint, K. Scott. *Thomas Aquinas*. Great Thinkers. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2017.

Prayer

Our Lord, please enable us to think in a Christian manner, and not be enticed by unbelieving philosophy into compromise and confusion.

The Trinity in Aquinas

NOW LET US briefly consider one aspect of Aquinas's treatment of the persons of the Trinity. In his major work *Summa theologiae*, after a considerable number of topics dealing with the attributes of God, Aquinas comes to deal with the Trinity.¹ Aquinas believes in the Trinity and cites both Scripture and earlier theologians in confirmation. His major difficulty, as we have indicated, is that his category system derives from Aristotle.

Questions 27–43, a total of 17 questions, deal with the Trinity. We cannot cover everything. It must suffice to provide a few examples of the difficulties.

The Idea of Procession

First in order, within Aquinas's discussion of the Trinity, is the idea of procession. There are two processions, of the Son and of the Spirit. (The word *procession* is used broadly, to include the action in which the Father eternally begets the Son, as well as the action in which the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son.²) The difficulty for Aquinas lies in the fact that an Aristotelian view of pure

1. Thomas Aquinas, *The "Summa theologiae" of St. Thomas Aquinas*, 2nd rev. ed. (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1920). Volume 1 contains part I, QQ. 1–26, on God and his attributes; volume 2 contains part I, QQ. 27–43, on the Trinity.

2. Aquinas follows the Western view, which adds *filioque* ("and the Son") to the Nicæan-Constantinopolitan Creed.

simplicity allows no distinctions within what is simple. This Aristotelian view is in tension with what Aquinas knows to be true from Scripture and from earlier orthodox theologians.

Let us see what Aquinas does. Near the beginning, anticipating the major difficulty, he formulates an objection: "Further, everything which proceeds differs from that whence it proceeds. But in God there is no diversity; but supreme simplicity. Therefore in God there is no procession."³ He then undertakes to answer this and other objections.

Aquinas rightly rejects the idea of an *external* procession in God, which would issue in something outside God.⁴ He propounds that

since procession always supposes action, and as there is an outward procession corresponding to the act tending to external matter, so there must be an inward procession corresponding to the act remaining with the agent. This applies most conspicuously to the intellect, the action of which remains in the intelligent agent. For whenever we understand, by the very fact of understanding there proceeds something within us, which is a conception of the object understood, a conception issuing from our intellectual power and proceeding from our knowledge of that object. This conception is signified by the spoken word; and it is called the word of the heart signified by the word of the voice.⁵

Clearly, Aquinas's discussion depends on thinking about human understanding ("*we* understand") as a starting point. Having made observations about human intellectual operations, he then moves to conclusions concerning divine understanding:

Rather it [procession in the case of God] is to be understood by way of an intelligible emanation, for example, of the intelligible word which proceeds from the speaker, yet remains in him. In that sense the Catholic Faith understands procession as existing in God.⁶

3. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 2.4, [1a] Q. 27, art. 1, obj. 2.

4. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 2.4, [1a] Q. 27, art. 1, "I answer."

5. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 2.4–5, [1a] Q. 27, art. 1, "I answer."

6. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 2.5, [1a] Q. 27, art. 1, "I answer."

How do we evaluate this quotation? Based on biblical teaching, it is appropriate to compare God to a human being with his intellect and speech. Though any comparison with creatures has its limitations, John 1:1 involves a comparison between God and a human speaker. God speaks his Word; by analogy, human beings speak words. Aquinas uses this analogy. The Trinity is highly mysterious, and mystery remains in the midst of the analogy between God and human acts. But the analogies provide genuine knowledge. (See fig. 27.1.)

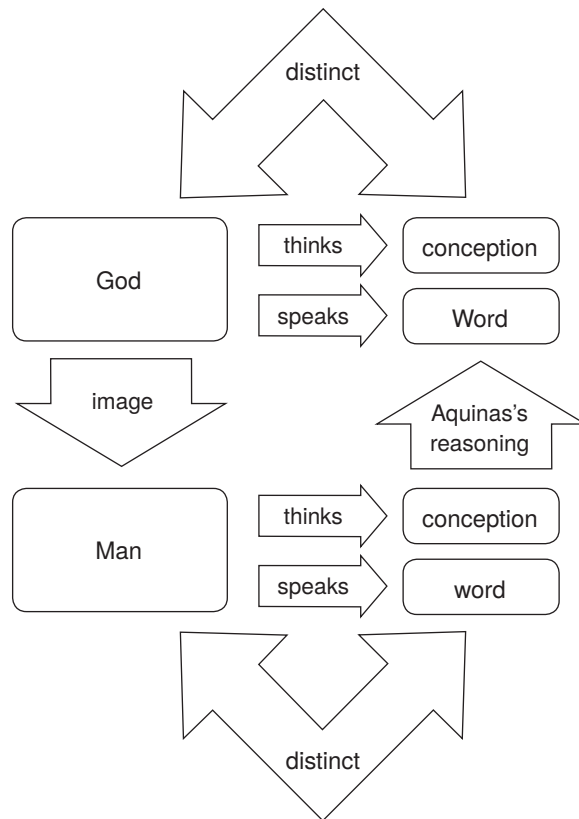


Fig. 27.1. Procession in Man and in God

The difficulty, however, is with the starting point in *human* intellectual operation. Human intellectual operations are not absolutely simple. On the human level, Aquinas can distinguish between the intellect itself and its operations, and between the process of

intellectual reflection and its product in the form of a *conception*, a “conception issuing from our intellectual power.” The conception also is “a conception of the object understood,” which presupposes an object, which in the usual case is distinct from the subject, the active intellect. But an Aristotelian-formed view of simplicity identifies God’s intellect with his essence. Within God’s essence there can be no differentiation. In particular, there can be no procession, because procession involves a source and a product that can be differentiated from the source. Moreover, God’s essence is immutable, as his knowledge is immutable. Hence, if we accept Aristotle, there can be no procession in God or in his knowledge.

Aquinas, of course, would say that the processions in God are eternal, and so are compatible with immutability. That is correct, but it is in tension with the Aristotelian framework, which relies on the analogy with human intellectual procession. (See fig. 27.2.)

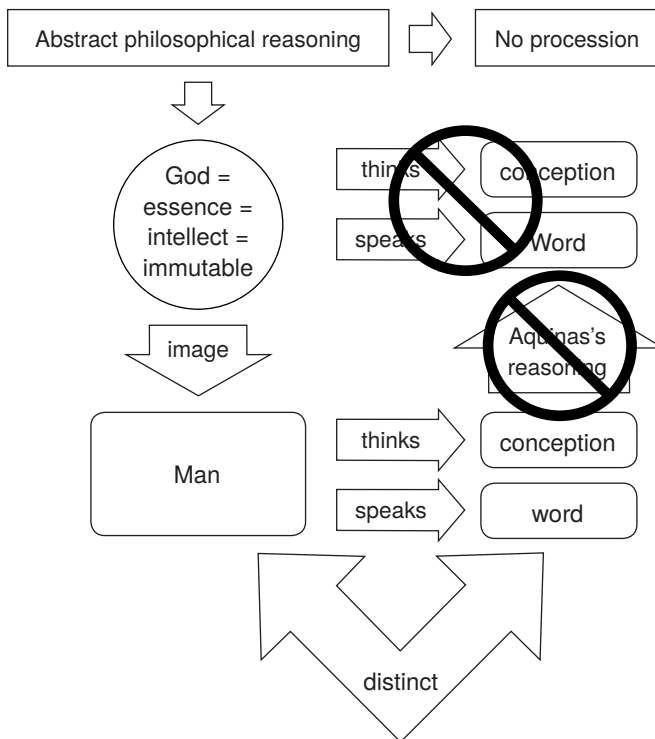


Fig. 27.2. Aristotle Undermines Procession in God

Aquinas's argument for procession in God appears to violate what he has earlier established. Aquinas is to be commended for his desire to affirm orthodoxy, such as is presented in Augustine's work on the Trinity. But we can see a tension between that desire and the philosophical framework.

Near the end of this particular article 1, Aquinas undertakes to respond directly to the earlier objection 2, which says that "everything which proceeds differs from that whence it proceeds."⁷ Aquinas says:

Whatever proceeds by way of outward procession is necessarily distinct from the source whence it proceeds, whereas, whatever proceeds within by an intelligible procession is not necessarily distinct; indeed, the more perfectly it proceeds, the more closely it is one with the source whence it proceeds. . . . Thus, . . . the divine Word is of necessity perfectly one with the source whence He proceeds, without any kind of diversity.⁸

Within the context of Trinitarian orthodoxy, the final sentence in the quotation must be understood as an affirmation of the one nature of God (*homoousios*; the Son has the same nature as the Father). But this strong affirmation of unity, in the context of *philosophical reasoning*, threatens to destroy the distinction of the two persons. Autonomous philosophy would reason that there either is or is not distinction/diversity. If there is, it undermines simplicity. If there is not, it undermines the differentiation of persons. Aquinas himself, in the key quotation, says "without *any* kind of diversity." To be compatible with Trinitarian doctrine, it should be stated as "without any kind of diversity in *essence*." There is a diversity in the *persons*.

7. Aquinas, *Summa theologica*, 2.4, [1a] Q. 27, art. 1, obj. 2.

8. Aquinas, *Summa theologica*, 2.5–6, [1a] Q. 27, art. 1, reply obj. 2. Within the quotation, the translation terms *distinct* and *diversity* correspond to the Latin terms *diversum* and *diversitate*. Aquinas wants to deny a certain *kind* of diversity. If we are using autonomous philosophical reasoning, however, it would seem to follow that an abstract concept of simplicity denies all distinctions.

Two Processions

Aquinas also undertakes to show why there can be *two* processions, rather than one. He knows from biblical orthodoxy that there are two processions: one procession for the Son and one for the Spirit. But how will he show how it is possible? He does so by affirming a distinction between intellect and will:

Such action [procession that remains in the agent itself] in an intellectual nature is that of the intellect, and of the will. The procession of the Word is by way of an intelligible operation. The operation of the will within ourselves involves also another procession, that of love, whereby the object loved is in the lover; as, by the conception of the word, the object spoken of or understood is in the intelligent agent. Hence, besides the procession of the Word in God, there exists in Him another procession called the procession of love.⁹ (See fig. 27.3.)

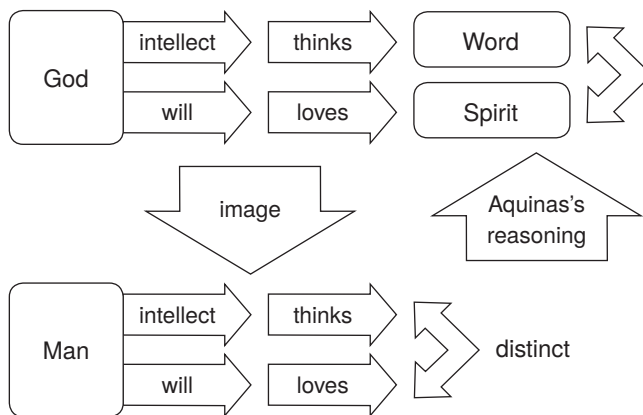


Fig. 27.3. Two Processions

Aquinas's view of simplicity has identified all the attributes of God with the essence of God, so there is no real distinction between intellect and will in God. (There is, however, a difference in our

9. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 2.9–10, [1a] Q. 27, art. 3, "I answer."

conceptions of the two.¹⁰) So what he says here appears to be inconsistent with what he earlier said concerning simplicity. (See fig. 27.4.)

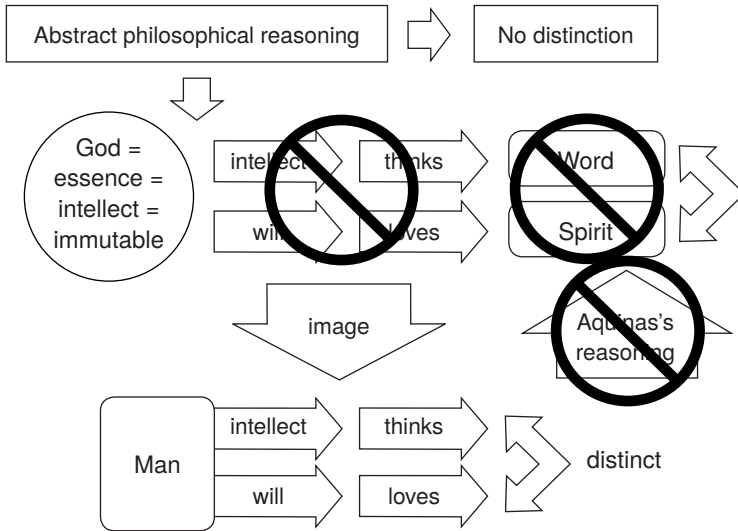


Fig. 27.4. No Distinction between Processions for Aristotle

10. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1.260, [1a] Q. 19, art. 1, “I answer”: “And as His intellect is His own existence, so is His will”; also Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1.158, [1a] Q. 13, art. 4, “I answer”; and Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1.268, [1a] Q. 19, art. 4, reply obj. 2 and reply obj. 4. Aquinas anticipates precisely this objection: “But such a procession [of love] is identified with the intelligible procession of the intellect, inasmuch as the will in God is the same as His intellect” (Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 2.9, [1a] Q. 27, art. 3, obj. 3). He answers: “Though will and intellect are not diverse in God, nevertheless the nature of will and intellect requires the processions belonging to each of them to exist in a certain order” (Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 2.10, [1a] Q. 27, art. 3, reply obj. 3).

This answer is hardly satisfactory. If indeed the “will and intellect are not diverse in God” in any sense, there can be no meaning to postulating an “order” between them. The textual transition from “not diverse” to “nevertheless the nature of will and intellect” is almost laughable. If there is no diversity, then with God we are talking about one nature of God, not two natures of two faculties, will and intellect. There can be no “order” to one “simple” nature of God. To obtain an order, Aquinas has to invoke implicitly an analogy with human intellect and will, in which there is a certain logical order. But as usual, the analogy with human operations does not work for God, once we allow a sweepingly general philosophical principle according to which there is no diversity in God. Aquinas arrives at the orthodox conclusions that he knows are true, by overruling or ignoring the natural implications of the abstract system with which he works.

The More General Challenge in Accounting for Diversity

The difficulty is more general than Aquinas's approach. The difficulty is that unless we understand that the Trinitarian character of God is ontologically basic, we will do as Aristotle did. We will use autonomous reason to produce an ultimate system of categories. And then we end up using a framework of categories that prioritizes unity or else prioritizes diversity. That is, we accept some kind of prioritizing, instead of starting with the Trinity. If we do that, we do not accept the ultimacy of both unity and diversity in the Trinity. And we do not move from the Trinity in order to consider how God may have created the world with a structure of unity and diversity in harmony with who he is as the Trinitarian God.

A system that prioritizes unity tends to end up with a supreme principle of unity that contains no diversity. Diversity comes only later. Then we have some form of unitarianism or modalism or Plotinus's "One," or an Aristotelian view of simplicity and of the unity of Aristotelian *form*. If, on the other hand, we prioritize diversity, we have some form of atomism or polytheism. (See table 27.1.)

Table 27.1. Prioritizing Unity or Diversity

Trinity	Prioritize Unity in Ultimate Framework	Prioritize Diversity in Ultimate Framework
One and three	The One: no diversity	The Many: no unity
Orthodoxy	Unitarianism	Polytheism; atomism
Unity and diversity in creation	Somehow (?) get diversity eventually, lower down	Somehow (?) get unity eventually, lower down

Relations: Paternity and Filiation as the Divine Essence

Aquinas also deals with the relations of paternity (for the Father) and filiation (for the Son). The nature of the divine essence, he thinks, requires that paternity *is* the divine essence:

Everything which is not the divine essence is a creature. But relation [e.g., paternity] really belongs to God; and if it is not the divine essence, it is a creature.¹¹

This reasoning depends on a view of divine essence derived without yet considering the Trinity, and so tends not to harmonize with the Trinity. If paternity *is* the divine essence, it is not a relation at all, but simply that essence. And then there is no such thing as the distinction between the Father and the Son. (See fig. 27.5.)

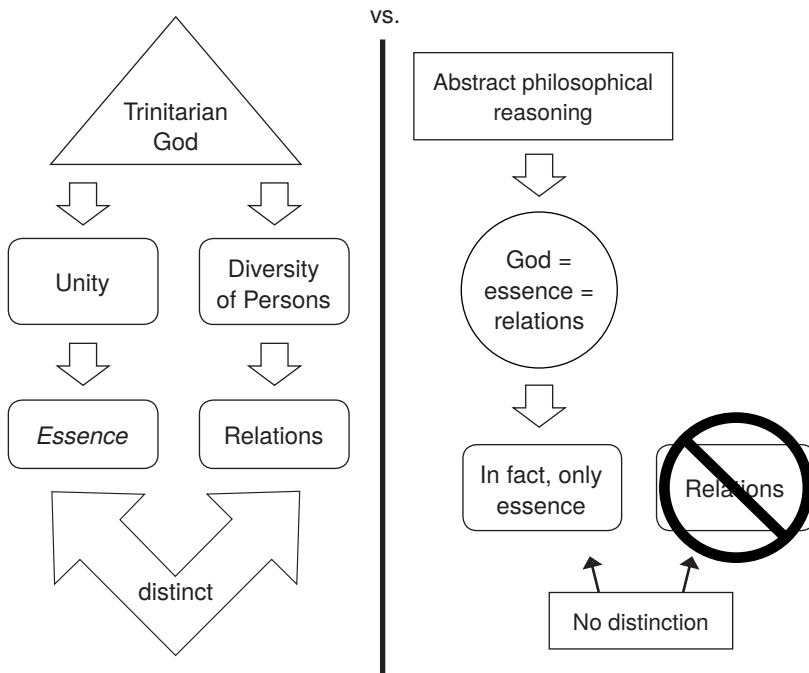


Fig. 27.5. Relations in God

Aquinas has an answer, as we will see; but the need for an answer is produced by the defectiveness of his category scheme.

The first part of Aquinas's answer consists in trying to articulate the uniqueness of Aristotle's category of "relative" (category iv). Aquinas undertakes to look at this category in comparison with "the

11. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 2.17, [1a] Q. 28, art. 2, "On the contrary."

nine genera of accidents.”¹² What are these “nine genera”? Aquinas is referring to Aristotle’s categories ii–x, nine categories in all. The tenth category, or rather the first category according to the normal order of listing, is category i, the category “substance,” to which the “accidents” attach. All the other nine categories, the categories ii–x, contain “accidents.” Within this list of nine kinds of accidents, the category of “relative” is the fourth category (iv).

The fact that Aquinas makes reference to Aristotle’s ten categories makes plain just how dependent Aquinas is on Aristotle’s categories. He is unable just to say that for God things do not work in the way that the categories postulate, and that the whole scheme of categories is only one possible, limited perspective. Rather, he attempts to show that among the entire set of ten Aristotelian categories, *only* the category of “a relative” derives “from its respect to something outside.”¹³ And so only it could signal a distinction within God.

But two questions arise. First, is it not arguable that other categories besides category iv derive from their “respect to something outside”? For example, the category of “where” (category v) has respect to the location of other things around; the category of “when” (category vi) has respect to the timing of other things around; the category of “acting upon” (category ix) has respect to the thing acted on; and the category of “a being affected” has respect to the thing acting upon the thing that is affected. All of these have “respect to something outside.” So the category of “a relative” (category iv) is not really distinct in the way that Aquinas proposes.

Second, does the distinctive idea of “something outside” work when applied to God? Aquinas’s phrase “something outside” applies to things in the world. And in the world there are other created things “outside” the original something. (See fig. 27.6.) But that phraseology does not apply to God’s relations *inside* God. In the case of God, and relations in God, there is nothing outside. So the explanation that Aquinas makes cannot apply to God. The analogy that appeals to relations between created things does not work. (See fig. 27.7.)

12. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 2.18, [1a] Q. 28, art. 2, “I answer.”

13. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 2.18, [1a] Q. 28, art. 2, “I answer.”

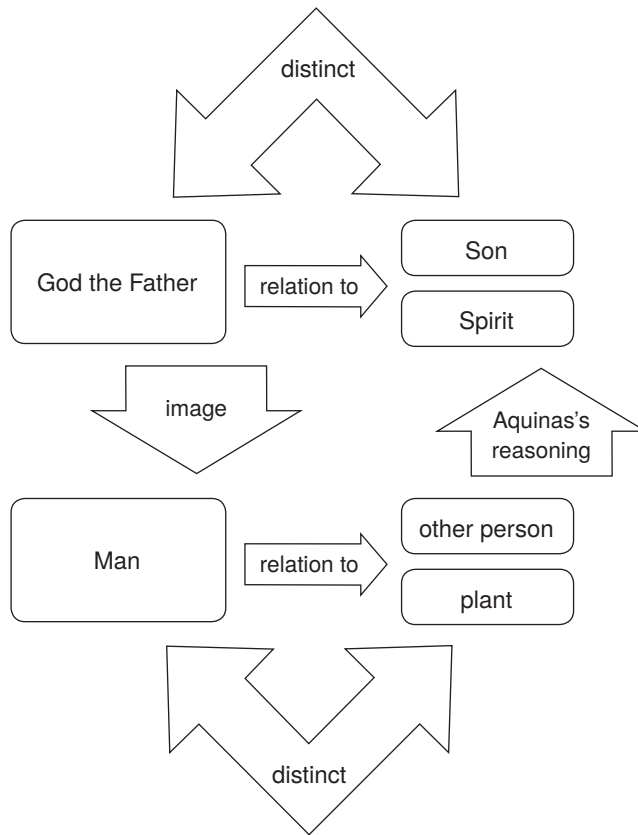
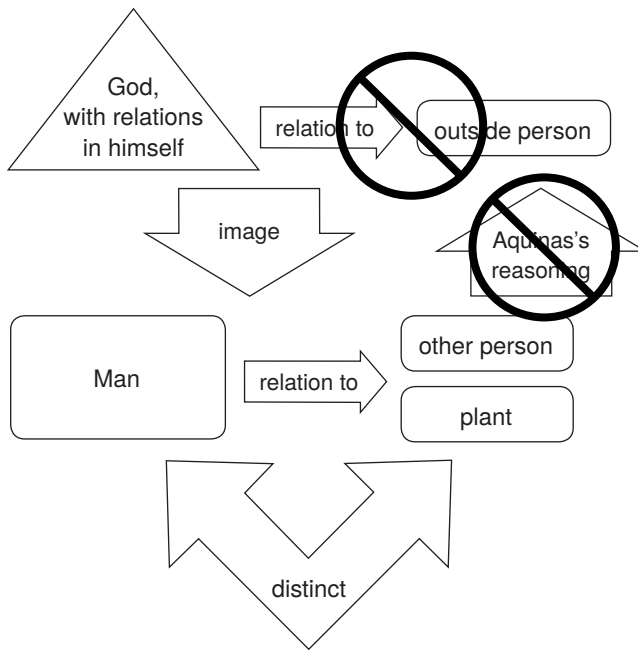


Fig. 27.6. Relations in the World

The Distinction between the Relations

Having identified paternity and filiation with the divine essence, Aquinas also has work to do in order to maintain that paternity and filiation are still distinct from each other. Here is one of the crucial paragraphs:

The idea of relation, however, necessarily means regard of one to another, according as one is relatively opposed to another. So as in God there is a real relation (A[rt]. 1 [Aquinas's preceding discussion]) there must also be a real opposition [i.e., a distinction between the Father and the Son, who are in relation to each other].



27.7. Trying to Explain Relations

The very nature of relative opposition includes distinction. Hence, there must be a real distinction in God, not, indeed, according to that which is absolute—namely, essence, wherein there is supreme unity and simplicity—but according to that which is relative.¹⁴

This paragraph makes considerable sense, but that is because it consists in little more than an elaborate way of saying that if we have a genuine relation between the Father and the Son, it implies a distinction between the two. And conversely, if we know that we have two distinct persons, it implies a genuine relation between them. The relation implies a distinction, and the distinction implies a relation. So we are traveling around in a rather narrow circle, which goes from relation to distinction and then back. It is true enough, but not illuminating. (See fig. 27.8.)

14. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 2.20, [1a] Q. 28, art. 3, “I answer.”

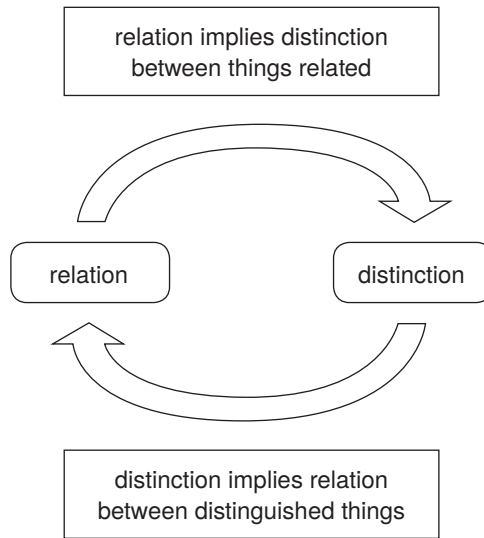


Fig. 27.8. From Relation to Distinction

What is of interest to us is whether this paragraph is consistent with what Aquinas has already said, namely, that the relation (i.e., of paternity) is the same as the essence. If there is sameness here, it seems to be in tension with the distinction made in Aquinas's last crucial sentence in the quotation, namely, the distinction between the essence ("wherein there is supreme unity and simplicity") and the relation ("that which is relative"). The assertion of identity between essence and relation (1a, Q. 28, art. 2) undermines the crucial distinction that Aquinas needs in question 28, article 3, namely, the distinction between "that which is *absolute*—namely, essence," and "that which is *relative*."¹⁵

On the next page, Aquinas makes another attempt to produce a distinction, relying on "the Philosopher":

According to the Philosopher [Aristotle] (*Phys.* iii.), this argument holds, that whatever things are identified with the same thing are identified with each other, if the identity be real and logical; as, for instance, a tunic and a garment; but not if they differ logically.

15. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 2.20, [1a] Q. 28, art. 3, "I answer."

Hence in the same place he [Aristotle] says that although action is the same as motion, and likewise passion; still it does not follow that action and passion are the same; because action implies reference as of something *from which* there is motion in the thing moved; whereas passion implies reference as of something *which is from* another.¹⁶

The difficulty here is that Aquinas (and Aristotle's example) uses things in the world that are distinct from each other, such as the action and the thing that it moves. Consider an example. Jane throws a ball, and Jane's action of throwing is distinguishable from the ball that is thrown. In this case, the motion consists in Jane's throwing the ball. The action is the aspect of motion focusing on the actor, namely, Jane. She throws. The passion is the aspect of motion focusing on that which receives the action, namely, the ball. It is thrown. Thus, we may distinguish two aspects, action and passion, within a single instance of motion.

But the whole question is whether there is anything analogous in God. The doctrine of divine simplicity, if understood using Aristotelian categories, says that no distinction is possible in the divine essence. Over against this pure unity, Aquinas attempts to establish a distinction by comparing God to what goes on in the created world in the case of motion, action, and passion.

So on the one side there is God, together with the relations of paternity and filiation. On the other side there stand certain happenings in the world, namely, motion, action, and passion. The ball moves passively because Jane throws it. Jane's arm moves actively in order to put the ball in motion. Aquinas's comparison appears to involve comparing the divine essence with motion, while the paternity and filiation are being compared, respectively, to action and passion. But action and passion in the world depend on there being distinctions among things in the world (Jane and the ball she throws). Action is action with respect to something else, namely, "the thing moved" (the ball); and passion is passion in receiving from something else ("another," Jane). The logical distinction between

16. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 2.21, [1a] Q. 28, art. 3, reply obj. 1, italics original.

action and passion depends on real distinctions among things in the world (Jane and the ball). So Aquinas's comparison with action in the created world looks like it begs the question whether there are analogous distinctions in God. The doctrine of simplicity, within an Aristotelian system, looks as though it says that there can be no such distinction because there is only one "thing"—namely, the divine essence. (See fig. 27.9.)

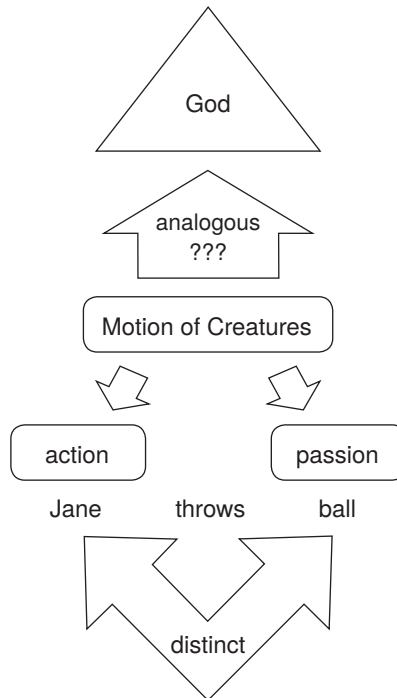


Fig. 27.9. Comparing God with Motion, Action, and Passion

Aquinas arrives at the right conclusion because he knows the orthodox doctrine. But it is in spite of the category system, which has to be bent by using analogies that do not really work within the Aristotelian system.

Yet the analogies *do* have some usefulness if we remain outside Aristotle's system, and if we take a Trinitarian starting point as "onto-logically basic." Then we can maintain that God's own words about his actions, given in Scripture, are expressions of his Trinitarian

nature, as we saw in chapter 12 above. His Trinitarian nature is the archetype for distinctions in modes of human action and other kinds of causal action among created things. So then the analogies between God's action and created action have some value. As usual, they do not dissolve the mysteries or the uniqueness of who God is.

The Difficulties in Appropriating Aristotle

In sum, Aquinas maintains the doctrine of the Trinity, but he has difficulties in doing it. At the heart of the difficulties is the fact that Aquinas has appropriated Aristotelian metaphysics. Now, Aquinas himself believes that "it is impossible to attain to the knowledge of the Trinity by natural reason."¹⁷ So according to Aquinas's view, Aristotle himself has access only to the unity of God. But once the unity is articulated in terms of Aristotle's framework of categories, there is no real room for the Trinity.

To his credit, Aquinas makes room for the Trinity nonetheless. But there is repeated strain, because Aquinas must work in tension with the Aristotelian categories that he himself employs. He is working against the grain. He may succeed at many points in making distinctions in such a way as to show his readers a certain kind of rational resolution of difficulties. But he would be better off if he set aside the Aristotelian framework, because it is unsuitable. Even from Aquinas's own point of view, he cannot show that the Aristotelian framework is suitable, because he thinks that the whole system is derived from observations about creatures, and the Creator is not subject to the same rules. Aquinas must frequently postulate differences in the way things are for the Creator in order to keep in line with orthodox doctrine. Yet he continues to use the Aristotelian categories as though they were unproblematic.

The Predominance of Abstract Categories

We may also ask, more pastorally, whether the dominance of abstract categories in Aquinas's discussion is altogether healthy. Very

17. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 2.61, [1a] Q. 32, art. 1, "I answer."

abstract terms can have some usefulness in opposing heresies that are equally abstract. (And Aquinas more than once mentions the threat of heresies.) But two questions remain: (1) Does abstraction really get us free from analogy involving created things? It does not. Argument after argument in Aquinas appeals to the way that Aristotelian categories work with created things, and then uses the conclusions analogically in relation to God. (2) What does abstraction do to the atmosphere in our knowledge of God? We may illustrate by asking whether communicative language connects more vitally and effectively with our souls when we talk about *paternity* (a rather abstract term) or when we talk about the Father's being the Father to the Son, and then becoming Father to us.

Aquinas continues the practice of abstraction when he maintains that the persons are the same as the relations: that is, the Father is the same as his paternity¹⁸ and the Son is the same as his filiation. This conclusion is understandable, given the constraints of an Aristotelian view of simplicity. But it translates the personal relation that a believer has with the Father into an abstract term, *paternity*. Do we have, can we have, a personal, communicative, loving relation with paternity?

In charity, we should say that Aquinas as a Christian knows that we have an intimate relation with the Father, through Christ the Son, in the power of the Holy Spirit. But the language of abstraction threatens to distract us with expressions that give the illusion of being more ontologically basic.

Key Terms

abstraction

action

Aquinas¹⁹

Aristotle

categories

diversity

filiation

18. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 2.36, [1a] Q. 29, art. 4, "I answer."

19. Key terms in bold are defined in the glossary at the end of this volume.

motion
passion
paternity
prioritize, priority
procession
relative
Trinity
unity

Study Questions

1. What is meant by the term *procession* in the context of the Trinity?
2. How does Aquinas attempt to establish that a procession is possible in God?
3. How is this attempt in tension with an Aristotelian system of categories?
4. How does Aquinas attempt to argue for two distinct processions in God?
5. Why does his argument run aground within an Aristotelian system?

For Further Reading

Frame, John M. *A History of Western Philosophy and Theology*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2015. Pp. 144–54.

Prayer

We thank you, Father, that you are our Father. Thank you that you have loved us and spoken to us affectionately, using the language of father and son and adoption and love, language that you yourself have crafted in harmony with who you are.

Aquinas's Avoidance of Disaster

AQUINAS'S DISCUSSION OF the attributes of God and his discussion of the Trinity have their difficulties. Nevertheless, all in all, we may be struck with appreciation at how well Aquinas does in spite of the difficulties generated by the Aristotelian system of categories. We may further underline the difference between Aquinas and Aristotle by reflecting on where Aristotle's system of categories might lead us if it were *not* constrained by the biblically based doctrines that Aquinas also has in his larger circle of knowledge.¹

The Aristotelian Distinction of Substance and Qualities

Let us suppose that we start with Aristotle's system of categories, but without the constraint of what we know from the Bible. The system of categories includes a distinction between substances (category i) and qualities (category iii). Typical qualities such as *white* and *brown* are *accidents* that attach to the substance, which is closely associated with *essence*.

In Aristotle, the distinction between substance and qualities is ontologically basic. So when we come to consider God, what do we

1. Note the discussion in Earl Muller, "Real Relations and the Divine: Issues in Thomas's Understanding of God's Relation to the World," *Theological Studies* 56, 4 (1995): 673–95. Aquinas works for *synthesis*, so nothing, including the categories adapted from Aristotle, remains quite the same in the process of incorporation into a larger whole.

do with this distinction? If we assume that Aristotle's system carries over without alteration, God divides into substance on the one hand and qualities on the other. Since God is simple, he cannot be a composition from two ontologically distinct basic sources, substance and quality. Now, according to Aristotle, qualities always inhere in substances; they do not exist "on their own." Since God exists on his own, he is not a quality. If he has both substance and qualities, he is not simple. So he is substance *alone*. He has no qualities. So he is unknowable. This conclusion is a form of non-Christian transcendence.²

Aquinas does not take this route. What Aquinas chooses to do instead is to *identify* attributes (quality-like attributes such as being *good* and *infinite* and *simple*) with God's essence or substance. The first difficulty is that this identification breaks Aristotle's system, since his system presupposes the distinction between the two as one of the basic distinctions in all of reality. (The distinction is as basic to Aristotle as the distinction between subject and predicate. Within Aquinas's framework, attributes are still predicates that attach to God as the subject.)

If all the attributes are identical with the essence, they are also identical with one another, and therefore not accessible to us. Aquinas does not think that the essence of God is accessible in this life.³

2. We could rescue ourselves by modifying the reasoning to say only that God has no *accidental* qualities. That is close to the alternative of identifying God's attributes with his substance. But then we still have to deal with the threat of there being nothing we can say about God, because we have in our languages words such as *righteous* and *infinite* and *merciful* that "look like" qualities. Moreover, nonaccidental qualities would be derivable from (or implicit in) God's essence; and according to Aquinas, God's essence is not knowable in this life.

3. Thomas Aquinas, *The "Summa theologiae" of St. Thomas Aquinas*, 2nd rev. ed. (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1920), 1.11, [1a] Q. 1, art. 7, obj. 1; Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1.21, [1a] Q. 2, art. 1, "I answer"; Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1.22, [1a] Q. 2, art. 2, obj. 2; Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1.28, [1a] Q. 3, introduction; Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1.35, [1a] Q. 3, art. 4, obj. 2. In the early pages, the idea of inaccessible essence occurs without further explanation and without any reasoning to justify it, beyond a citation from "Damascene" (Saint John of Damascus), *De Fid. Orth.* I iv (*Summa theologiae*, 1.11, [1a] Q. 1, art. 7, obj. 1; Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1.22, [1a] Q. 2, art. 2, obj. 2). In the writing that Aquinas cites, John of Damascus affirms unknowability, without a definition of *essence*

Aquinas escapes the difficulty by maintaining that the attributes are not synonymous, even though they are identical in God (1a, Q. 13, art. 4).⁴ This move threatens non-Christian transcendence again, because our conceptions are distinct (nonsynonymous), and yet the object of those conceptions, namely, God, does not match the conceptions. Aquinas tries to deal with this tension:

The many aspects of these names [attribute-like descriptions of God] are not empty and vain, for there corresponds to all of them one simple reality [God, who is simple] represented by them in a manifold and imperfect manner.⁵

Aquinas is doing his best, but what he has provided is an assertion, not an explanation, to the effect that the “manifold . . . manner” can be trusted and is not “empty and vain.” A rigid application of the Aristotelian scheme would lead to concluding that the manifold character is a failure to properly describe (“imperfect”), since the manifoldness belongs only to “the [human] intellectual conception.”⁶ (See fig. 28.1.) The danger is at hand of falling into a non-Christian concept of transcendence, a form of transcendence in which God becomes unknown or indescribable.

God as Eminently Good

Aquinas offers another approach to the difficulties when he discusses the goodness of God. God is essentially good and eminently good. He is “the supreme good.”⁷ This and similar affirmations are reassuring because it sounds as though we can know God and describe him. But is God good only in the sense that he is at the high end of a

and without any citation of Scripture. Later, Aquinas argues that the “blessed” may know (or rather “see”) the essence of God in the next life (Aquinas, *Summa theologica*, 1.121–22, [1a] Q. 12, art. 1).

4. Aquinas, *Summa theologica*, 1.157–58, [1a] Q. 13, art. 4.

5. Aquinas, *Summa theologica*, 1.158, [1a] Q. 13, art. 4, reply obj. 2.

6. Aquinas, *Summa theologica*, 1.158, [1a] Q. 13, art. 4, “I answer,” final paragraph, which functions as reply obj. 1.

7. Aquinas, *Summa theologica*, 1.67, [1a] Q. 6, art. 2, “I answer.”

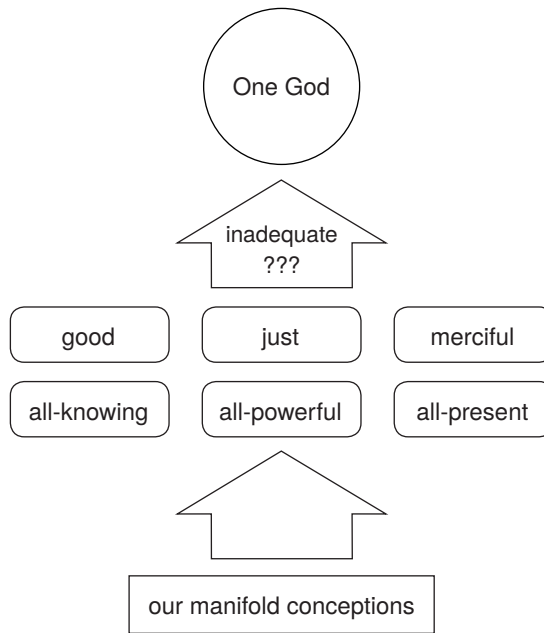


Fig. 28.1. One God and Manifold Conceptions in an Aristotelian System

scale of goodness? This idea of a scale might threaten to relativize the Creator-creature distinction. (See fig. 28.2.)

Aquinas says that a created thing is good “inasmuch as it participates in it [divine goodness] by way of a certain assimilation which is far removed and defective.”⁸ The expressions “far removed” and “defective” attempt to protect the transcendence of God, so that the goodness in created things is not simply identical with the goodness of God himself. But the two key expressions have liabilities. The expression “far removed” is in tension with the presence of God, and “defective” with the perfect wisdom in God’s creative and sustaining power. In a basic way, nothing that God makes is defective. Everything corresponds exactly to what he plans. (Sin, of course, is a “defect.” But it is an intrusion into a creation that was originally good.)

We may hope that Aquinas means the best. But the description he gives is not ideal. It opens doors to misunderstandings in the form

8. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1.71, [1a] Q. 6, art. 4, “I answer.”

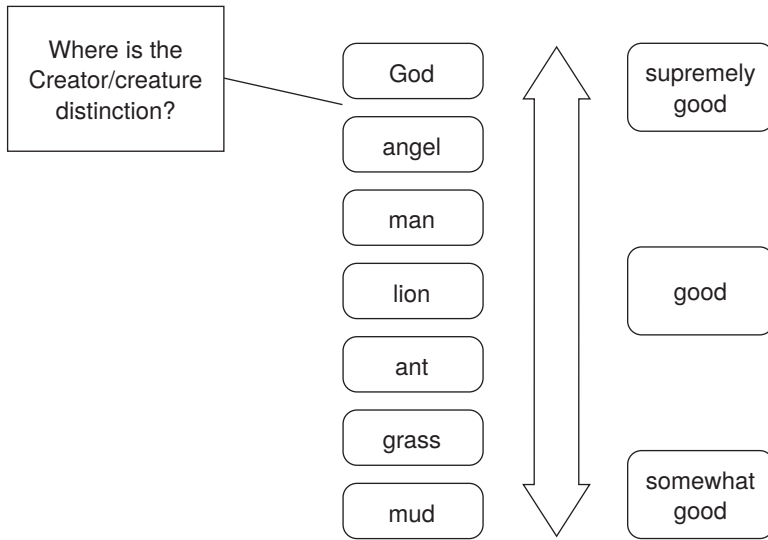


Fig. 28.2. The Idea of a Scale of Goodness in Aquinas

of both non-Christian transcendence and non-Christian immanence. Non-Christian transcendence is at hand in the idea of God's being "far removed" and the creature's being "defective." "Far removed" can mean that God is inaccessible, unknowable. Being "defective" can mean that the created thing is not a suitable revelation of the character of God through general revelation. On the other hand, non-Christian immanence is at hand when creatures "participate" in divine goodness, and therefore participate in the divine essence that is identical with divine goodness. God is in danger of being identified with the creature—albeit only in a certain aspect.⁹

In some ways, difficulties confront any Christian who wishes to talk about the implications of divine transcendence and immanence. God makes himself known and at the same time is mysterious. But the difficulties increase when we have a category scheme such as

9. Second Peter 1:4 asserts that we "become *partakers* of the divine nature." The context urges us to have godly characteristics, such as virtue, knowledge, self-control, steadfastness (vv. 5–7), which reflect on a creaturely level divine virtues. Depending on context, *participation* could mean this kind of reflection of God. The lack of further specification is what makes the language less than ideal when used in a philosophical context.

Aristotle's that does not have built into it the distinction between Creator and creature. Nor does it have built into it an acknowledgment of mystery. That framework opens the door to tripping over ourselves when we must then say that *good* is a single quality (Aristotle's one level) and at the same time has to be differentiated (by degrees of participation, perhaps). The category system has only one level, and however many later distinctions we create *within* the system, in order to try to do justice to the doctrine of God, the system itself remains stubbornly a one-level system.

The Philosopher versus the Ordinary Believer

We may also note how the philosophical reasoner may be tempted to think that he has superior knowledge. In what way? The ordinary believer naively confesses that God is good. He believes it because God tells him so in Psalm 119:68 and other verses. But according to the philosopher's viewpoint, the ordinary believer has no idea that he does not actually know what he is saying. The actual situation is that goodness is identical with the essence of God, which believers do not access in this life. The philosopher thinks that he knows the actual situation, but the naive believer does not.

We may picture this idea of philosophical insight by comparing it to a two-story house. Let us imagine that people on earth are on the first story, while God is on the second story. (See fig. 28.3.)

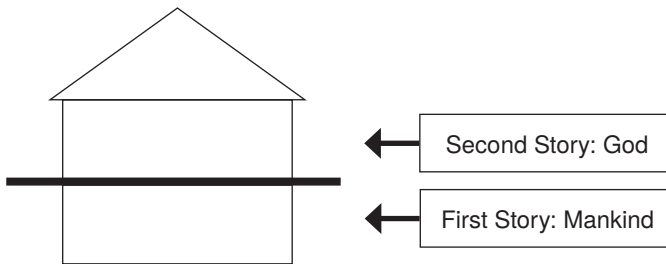


Fig. 28.3. Two Separate Stories in Philosophical Thinking

According to the philosopher, the people on the first story have no visible stairway by which they may walk up to the second story and

actually see the nature of who God is. They can look at pictures that God the owner has placed on the first story. Some of the pictures are very good and very beautiful. But it is still all on the first story. The philosopher, however, is like the manager of the house. He knows about a secret, hidden back stairway, used only by the manager of the house. (See fig. 28.4.)

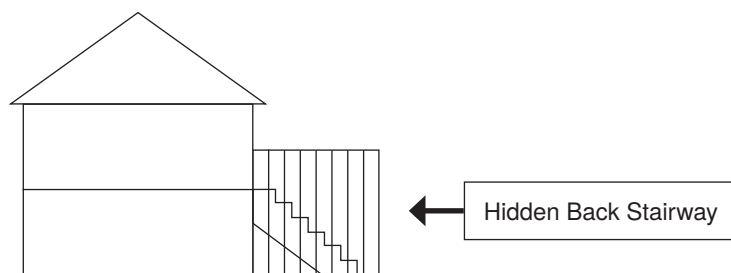


Fig. 28.4. A Hidden Back Stairway

He has been up the stairway, by means of reason and Aristotle's categories. He has special qualifications. He can tell us what the actual situation is. The secret back stairway is an exciting discovery because of its intellectual power.

But does the secret back stairway actually exist? Or is the philosopher himself under an illusion? We will return to this danger at a later point.

Key Terms

Aquinas¹⁰

Aristotle

categories

good

10. Key terms in bold are defined in the glossary at the end of this volume.

Study Questions

1. What happens if we try to use Aristotle's category system without correcting it by using biblical teaching?
2. What happens to the distinction between substances and qualities in Aristotle's categories when we apply it to God?
3. Why should we anticipate that there will be problems when we try to apply Aristotle's metaphysics to God?

For Further Reading

Frame, John M. *A History of Western Philosophy and Theology*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2015. Pp. 70–77.

Prayer

We thank you, Lord and Father, for the grace and insights that you gave to Thomas Aquinas, enabling him to do better than the natural end point of Aristotle's metaphysics. May you make us discerning in our relation to Aristotle and other unbelieving philosophers.

Attributes in the Reformers

WHAT HAPPENED CONCERNING the knowledge of God when the Reformation came? The major first-generation Reformers, such as Luther, Zwingli, Oecolampadius, and Bucer, were able to bring light and spiritual health to the people of God. They were not perfect—none of us are—but they had several notable strengths, which helped not only in other areas of doctrine, but with the doctrine of God as well.

Strengths of the Reformers

First, they all held to the principle of *sola scriptura*. Scripture *alone* is an infallible source of doctrine, and is to be used to test all other ideas. So they were free to be critical of Aquinas and past theological tradition. They focused their attention intensely on what Scripture taught. That was the right direction.

The Reformers focused particularly on questions about how to be saved, because that was the crucial question of their time. But they also had as a background the question of who God is. Who saves us, and from what does he save us? In their reflections, they saw Scripture as the central source for knowledge of God as well as knowledge of salvation. They continued to affirm much of what patristic and medieval theologians had said about God, because they saw earlier theology as being in continuity with Scripture.

Second, they had a more sober assessment of the power of fallen reason than did Aquinas. Human reason was corrupted by the fall. We should not trust the reasonings of the Greek philosophers. We need the continual light of the special revelation in Scripture, including the times when we do anything that might be called *philosophy*.¹

The Scripture, of course, taught the Trinity. So the Reformers could freely use any and all aspects of Trinitarian teaching anywhere it seemed appropriate. They did not bracket off a region of philosophy where reason ran free. God was Trinitarian every time they thought or taught about him.

Third, the early Reformers were primarily preachers and teachers and pastors who cared for the spiritual state of ordinary people. They focused on genuine needs for understanding and for salvation. They used a lot of ordinary language to communicate to ordinary people. They appealed to Scripture and to the language of Scripture itself. From time to time, they might use a term from the theological tradition that went back eventually to an origin in Greek philosophy. But the use of technical terms did not dominate. The Reformation represented a massive change in the *tone* or *style* in which theological reasoning was typically done. The Reformers filled sermons and their written volumes with direct references and allusions to Scripture. And even when they were not quoting or alluding, their language tended to “sound” biblical. It was imitative of the language of Scripture in its accessibility and its ties with the realities of people’s struggles and questions. In their Latin works, of course, they addressed a more learned community, but even then they never lost sight of what they most wanted—to train the learned community to communicate the gospel to ordinary people and to serve as pastors for ordinary people.

Focus on Christ and His Revelation

Fourth, the Reformers knew that, above all, people needed to know Christ and the salvation of God that is found in him. (One of

1. Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids:

the Reformation principles was *solus Christus*, Christ alone as our salvation.) The Reformers preached Christ and him crucified (1 Cor. 2:1–5). So in their preaching, even the discussion of the attributes of God got tied in to the revelation of those attributes in time and history, and above all in the climax of redemption in Christ.

As an example, we may take John Calvin, who belonged to the second generation of Reformers. Calvin knew that people could get into a tangle if they tried to speculate by reason about their election. Instead, they had to behold their election *in Christ*. Look to Christ, he says. Do you want to know God’s love, and his mercy, and his justice, and his omnipotence? Look to what the Father did for us in his Son.² Pray for God to send his Holy Spirit, to open your spiritual eyes to see who God is in beholding the glory of Christ the Son.

The Reformers preached Christ. And they understood that Christ and his work come in the context of the full manifestation of all three persons of the Trinity. In this way, at least, the Reformers had a view of the attributes of God that was Trinitarian. They did not work out everything in massive detail, but they understood in their preaching who God is and how his character and his glory had to be brought home to the people of God.

Table 29.1. Strengths in the Early Reformers (Simplified)

Approach of the Reformers	Medieval Alternative
<i>sola scriptura</i> : Scripture alone as the infallible basis for doctrine	Scripture acknowledged in theory as a principal basis for doctrine; but tradition often used uncritically to support current practice
fallen reason: no separate source of doctrine is to be sought in philosophy	philosophical, “natural” reason as a separate source for doctrine

Baker Academic, 2003), 1:99–103, 108.

2. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 2.244–45, 3.24.5.

teaching focused on pastoral needs of the people	pastoral needs addressed by the sacramental system; school teaching of theological topics can be distant from practical needs of salvation for ordinary people, because it is thought enough for the people to have implicit faith in what the church has formulated
focus on Christ and his salvation	Christ formally acknowledged as God and Savior; but practical focus on the institution of the church, its ceremonies, and its hierarchy (bishops, priests, abbots and abbesses, monks, nuns, saints in heaven, with the Pope at the top of the earthly institution)
God acknowledged as Trinitarian, and explained in biblical language	God acknowledged as Trinitarian, but much doctrinal discussion of the nature of God based on abstract attributes and ideas of how to ascend to God

Key Terms

fallen reason
Reformation
sola scriptura
solus Christus

Study Questions

1. What did the Reformers do that was distinctive in comparison with most of the Roman Catholic tradition in the medieval period?
2. What role did Scripture play in their thinking?

3. What was their attitude toward Greek philosophy?
4. What role did Christ have in their preaching?

For Further Reading

Frame, John M. *A History of Western Philosophy and Theology*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2015. Pp. 168–74.

Prayer

Our Father, thank you for sending your Spirit and raising up many Reformers who boldly proclaimed the gospel and brought spiritual health to your people. May we in our day be faithful to the tasks of truth and service that you set for us, and may we always be faithful in how we speak of you and explain your glory.

Attributes in Francis Turretin

FRANCIS TURRETIN (1623–87) is our next figure to examine. He belongs in the theological stream of Reformed theology. He is one of many figures in the post-Reformation period who continued and developed the tradition of Reformed theology. He can serve as a representative.¹ The principal work on the doctrine of God is his first volume of the larger three-volume work *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*.²

Style

Turretin builds on the theology of earlier generations, including Calvin, who in turn builds on the early work of the first generation of Reformers. But his style is somewhat different from Calvin's. He is writing in an academic context.³ And he appropriates much more technical language than is typical of Calvin. It makes more difficult reading.

1. An extensive discussion of post-Reformation Reformed theology can be found in Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*, 2nd ed., 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003).

2. Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison Jr., trans. George Musgrave Giger, 3 vols. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1992).

3. Turretin also served as a pastor. But we are focusing on his principal academic writing. On the larger academic and historical context, see Willem J. van Asselt, *Introduction to Reformed Scholasticism*, trans. Albert Gootjes (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2011); Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*, vol. 1, *Prolegomena to Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003).

The technical language has resonances with Aristotle and his system. But Turretin is self-consciously Reformed. The use of Aristotelian terms is piecemeal. It is in service of theological questions, not primarily to build up a self-standing philosophy of ontologically basic things.⁴ Moreover, Turretin is Trinitarian in his theology. So we should read everything that he says about the attributes of God in the context of his Trinitarian commitments.

Nevertheless, there are two challenges.

The first is the one that we have already seen in discussing Aristotle and Aquinas. The Aristotelian system at its base is not Trinitarian. And anything not Trinitarian can produce tensions if not contradictions with Trinitarian doctrine. So we should be thinking carefully in cases in which Turretin carries over terminology derived from Aristotle.

Second, Turretin organizes his topics of discussion very systematically for the sake of the academic context. He discusses the Trinity at a later point (Third Topic, QQ. 23–31). But he begins the section on the doctrine of God by discussing the existence of God (Third Topic, Q. 1) and the unity of God (Third Topic, Q. 3). He then moves to the attributes of God (QQ. 5–22). So nothing is *self-consciously* Trinitarian when he develops his discussion of the attributes of God. If, as we have argued, every attribute of God intrinsically involves Trinitarian differentiation according to the persons, as well as Trinitarian unity according to the unity of God, more can be said than what Turretin has made explicit.

Distinction of Attributes

Turretin has several sections discussing the attributes of God one by one: simplicity, infinity, immensity, eternity, and so on. Before these

4. Van Asselt, *Introduction to Reformed Scholasticism*, 26–27; Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:446–50. Note Muller's summary: "The result [in Reformed orthodoxy] was a highly eclectic appropriation of philosophy accompanied by a restriction of its positive use in theology" (*Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:446); "their [Protestant scholastics'] borrowings reflect a wariness of excessive rationalism and excessive speculation" (*Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:449).

sections, he introduces his discussion of the attributes of God with a section about attributes in *general* (1.187–89, III.v). We will focus on this section. It is only a little more than two pages long. It bears reading and rereading. The opening question is “*Can the divine attributes be really distinguished from the divine essence? We deny against the Socinians.*”⁵ Turretin’s subsequent discussion deals with both the question whether the attributes are distinguished from the essence and whether the attributes are distinguished from one another.

Turretin understands that he has to find a way of discussing the attributes without falling into one of two errors.

(1) On the one side is the error of overdistinguishing. We must avoid conceiving of attributes as capable, even theoretically, of being added to or subtracted from God. That would imply that God was changeable. If someone thinks that any of the attributes can actually be “detached” from God, he falls into this error. The Bible indicates that God is one and that God is ultimate. It thereby implicitly rejects this error.

(2) On the other side is the error of underdistinguishing. If we identify the attributes too closely with the essence, we also identify them with one another. A person would not be able to distinguish the attributes in any way. If that happens, none of the distinct meanings of the attributes is available, and we lose ways of describing God meaningfully. The Bible rejects this error by positively affirming the genuineness of human saving knowledge of God, in accord with the principle of Christian immanence. (See fig. 30.1.)

So the whole section wrestles with how to make distinctions in the right way, and not in the wrong way. It turns out that it is a difficult issue. And that makes the whole section difficult to read. We would ask readers to bear with it.

Conceptual Resources

At this early point in his book,⁶ Turretin has not yet had a discussion of the perfection of God or the absoluteness of God or the

5. Turretin, *Institutes*, 1.187, III.v.title, italics original.

6. Turretin, *Institutes*, 1.187, III.v.

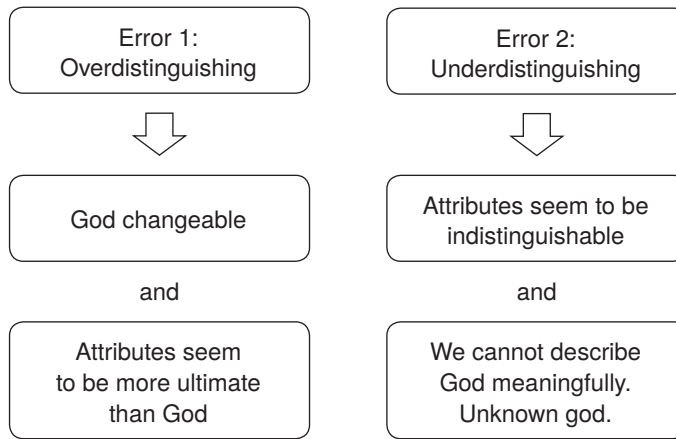


Fig. 30.1. Errors to Avoid with Attributes of God

simplicity of God, all of which are relevant to how we conceive of the unity of God. Simplicity gets discussed under question 7 (1.191–94, III.vii), and absoluteness primarily under the related topic of infinity under question 8 (1.194–96, III.viii). But these are preceded by an opening section, question 5 (1.187–89, III.v), which provides the general framework for understanding what the attributes of God actually are.

How do we evaluate this arrangement? There is a certain pedagogical advantage in first presenting the general framework for dealing with God’s attributes. But there is also a certain danger of circularity, because, to produce the framework and to try to convince readers that it is correct, Turretin has to appeal to certain things that we know about God. In other words, he is already using a knowledge that involves God’s attributes. But he has not worked out that knowledge by appealing to the Bible.⁷

The result is that the reasoning under question 5 has no reference to the Bible. It rests on prior conceptions concerning God’s perfection, which Turretin has not yet established from Scripture. Now, in writing a book in linear order, one has to start somewhere. And

7. Turretin does briefly touch on some attributes of God in discussing the name *Jehovah* (*Institutes*, 1.184–85, III.iv.5).

wherever one starts, Christians come with a preceding knowledge of God. So we must sympathize with the order that Turretin chooses. But the order of topics sets an ambiguous example in one respect, because readers could suppose that the starting point in God's perfection is produced by reason alone rather than from Scripture. That is not Turretin's intention. He wants to be guided by Scripture, and his "Second Topic," preceding the doctrine of God, is "The Holy Scriptures."⁸ He maintains the principle of *sola scriptura* (Scripture alone is the infallible basis for establishing church doctrine).⁹

Next, Turretin's discussion at this point (III.v) uses many highly abstract terms deriving from the theology and philosophy of previous generations. He raises no questions about the framework of assumptions that may come with these terms. They are taken for granted.

Introducing the Attributes

With this much prelude, let us begin to consider the text of Turretin's discussion. In the opening paragraph, Turretin describes what attributes are:

I. To understand the question [question 5 about distinguishing attributes] certain things must be premised concerning the divine attributes. The divine attributes are the essential properties by which he makes himself known to us who are weak.¹⁰

In the first sentence of the quote, on what basis are things "pre-mised"? Does the conceptual framework come from Scripture or from a tradition of abstract categories? As we said, Turretin *wants* to be scriptural. But he or his readers may without realizing it begin to shift their ground in practice. Rational analysis by categories, perhaps categories derived from a source outside Scripture, can come to play a central role.

The second sentence sounds like a definition of what Turretin

8. Turretin, *Institutes*, 1.55–67, II.

9. Note especially Turretin, *Institutes*, 1.134–43, 154–67, II.xvi, xx–xxi.

10. Turretin, *Institutes*, 1.187, III.v.1. The key expression is *Proprietates essentielles*.

means by “divine attributes.” The expression “essential properties” has a key role. What does the key term *essential* mean? Turretin could be using the word in the context of Trinitarian doctrine, to distinguish *essential* properties, belonging to the one essence of God, from personal properties, which distinguish the persons. (*Sonship* is a personal property belonging to the Son, in *distinction* from the Father and the Spirit. By contrast, *infinity* or *omniscience* is an *essential* property, a property that describes God according to his *essence* and does not touch on the differentiations pertaining to a distinction between persons). On the other hand, Turretin could also be using the word *essential* within the Aristotelian system of categories. Then *essential* has its technical meaning within Aristotle’s system; it means “belonging to the essence.” It presupposes that we know what *essence* is. As we have seen in previous chapters, this is problematic. There is a Christian way of seeing the rough distinction between essence and accidents as a reflection within the created order of the distinction between the Father and the Spirit. Yet Aristotle’s construal of the distinction is not Trinitarian, but depends on the assumption that autonomous reason is competent to discern essences.

Part of the difficulty is how to be sure which conception of *essential* Turretin has in mind.

The word *property* fits into Aristotle’s system, as being closely related to Aristotle’s category of quality. But it could also be used colorlessly.

Let us proceed to paragraph 2:

II. Attributes are not ascribed to God properly as something super-added (*epousiōdes*) to his essence (something accidental to the subject), making it perfect and really distinct from himself; but improperly and transumptively inasmuch as they indicate perfections essential to the divine nature conceived by us as properties.¹¹

Here Turretin is already guarding against the first error, of overdistinguishing or detaching attributes from God. That is good and is in accordance with God’s unchangeability. But the terms that he

11. Turretin, *Institutes*, 1.187, III.v.2, italics original.

uses can carry freight. The distinction between essence and accidents appears, a distinction that goes back to Aristotelian metaphysics. Second, we have a distinction between what is said “properly” or “improperly.” Both terms are used in a technical sense. An “improper” use of language is “transumptive.” The word *transumptive* describes a transfer or a metaphor. Is Turretin saying that all attributes of God are metaphorical? At the least, he indicates that they are being transferred from one sphere to another. The transfer takes place *from* a sphere of familiar or “proper” use, and then results in a transfer *to* a use in describing God.

Now, this idea of transferred use is close to what we have discussed in considering how God communicates in language (chaps. 13–16). God is the archetypal Father, and human fathers are ectypal fathers. We might say that we “transfer” the term *father* from one sphere to the other, from human to divine. But the transfer occurs in both directions. Turretin’s choice of terms, *properly* and *improperly*, suggests that the starting point is in human fatherhood. The same would hold for other terms describing attributes of God. But God, not man, is the origin of language, and gives us language. If God calls himself *Father*, it is because he *is* Father. He created human fathers according to the pattern that already existed in himself. If we move away from this insight, we run the risk of thinking that our language starts on a merely finite level, and that we are the ones who are reaching out to God, who is initially beyond the reach of our language. In fact, the movement goes in the reverse direction. God reveals himself by speaking, and his speech is a reflection of the eternal Word.

Turretin ends the paragraph with the expression “conceived by us as properties.” That is not an ideal expression. It runs the risk of suggesting that (1) our conceptions arise purely from using our rational powers, and not from the teaching of the indwelling Holy Spirit; and (2) though we conceive of the divine perfections “as properties,” they really are not. It is only the best that we can do. But it is pointedly *not* the best that *we* can do—on our own, as it were. God speaks, reflecting the eternal Word. Turretin earlier indicates that our theology must be derived from God’s Word.¹²

12. Turretin, *Institutes*, 1.2, I.i.7.

Plurality in Attributes?

In the following paragraphs, Turretin begins to focus on what way the attributes are plural, that is, distinguishable from one another. He is dealing with an issue concerning diversity in God.

III. Although the several [plural] attributes represent the most fertile and simple nature of God, yet they can represent it only inadequately (i.e., not according to its total relation, but now under this perfection, then under another). For what we cannot take in by one adequate conception as being finite, we divide into various inadequate conceptions so as to obtain some knowledge of him (which is not a proof of error in the intellect, but only of imperfection). Thus omnipotence is the divine essence itself apprehended as free from every obstacle in acting; eternity is the essence of God as without limit in duration; and so of the rest.¹³

It is useful to provide some explanation of this dense, difficult paragraph. In this paragraph, the terms *adequate* and *inadequate* are used in a technical sense. Turretin does not intend to deny the genuine nature of human knowledge of God. But he is trying to reckon with our finiteness, as is indicated by the expression “as being finite.” We cannot “take in” everything, either by comprehensive knowledge of God or even by exercising a full focus of our attention on each and every attribute *simultaneously*. Turretin is laboring vigorously and thoughtfully in an effort to preserve theology from the two errors. If we overdistinguish the attributes, we undermine the unity and simplicity of God. If we underdistinguish them, we make them all the same in every respect. Turretin affirms distinctions at the level of human knowledge. He says that these distinctions are *not* an “error.”¹⁴

But Turretin’s choice of language suggests that the diversity occurs *only* as human beings struggle to produce knowledge of God. Note

13. Turretin, *Institutes*, 1.187–88, III.v.3.

14. We may compare this effort to what Thomas Aquinas has in the section where he discusses whether the names of God are synonymous (*The “Summa theologia” of St. Thomas Aquinas*, 2nd rev. ed. [London: Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1920], 1.157–58, [1a] Q. 13, art. 4).

some key expressions: “we divide into *various* inadequate conceptions so as to obtain some knowledge.” What is it that we divide? Is it “one adequate conception” that would have unity in God himself? Probably not. Rather, we divide the “divine essence [unity in God],” an essence “itself *apprehended* [by us human beings] as free from every obstacle in acting.”

A particular danger here is that we would think of the diversity as purely a product of human thinking working on its ideas of God. If we were to go this way, we would say that God is pure unity. But in our human thinking, we introduce diversity in our concepts. By implication, we deny that God has spoken truly to us in language that has diversity.

It would have been better if Turretin had appealed to verbal revelation in Scripture. In verbal revelation, God himself produces speech with a multitude of distinctions and pluralities built into it. We as recipients are not thrown back on our own autonomous resources to do the best we can to make sense of a revelation that would offer us only unity with no diversity. Turretin’s preceding discussion on Holy Scripture shows that he believes verbal revelation. But it does not come out explicitly at this later point.

Turretin’s struggle against the two errors continues in some of the later paragraphs.

IX. Although the attributes are essentially and intrinsically one in God, yet they may properly be said to be distinguished both intellectually (*noēmatikōs*) as to the diverse formal conception and objectively and effectively as to the various external objects and effects.¹⁵

Turretin’s choice of language suggests that there is pure unity without diversity in the attributes “in God.” They are “one in God.” The diversity appears at the level of the creature. The diversity exists “intellectually,” that is, in a diversity found in the conceptions in the human mind. For example, as human beings we have a conception of goodness,

15. Turretin, *Institutes*, 1.188–89, III.v.9. In fact, practically all the paragraphs in III.v are related to the same difficulty.

and we call God *good*. We have a conception of justice, and we call God *just*. In our mind, we make a distinction between goodness and justice. Turretin also says that diversity exists “objectively” and “effectively” in God’s works displayed in “objects” and “effects” in the created sphere. What is one in God becomes plural in its effects, both in human minds and in the world. (See fig. 30.2.)

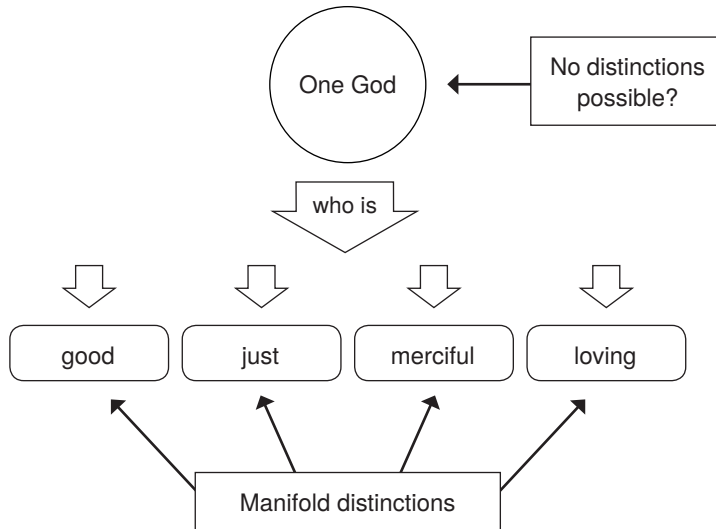


Fig. 30.2. One God and Diverse Conceptions in Turretin

Once Turretin describes the divine sphere as a pure unity, with no diversity (at least with respect to attributes), he has to labor vigorously to avoid the impression that the diversity in human conceptions is an illusion or a mere appearance. And once again, he does not appeal to the diversity of words and sentences *in Scripture* as an assurance that we can put full confidence in this diversity. If he did, it would still leave the question whether this diversity was *merely* some kind of appearance, adapted to human weakness.¹⁶ In the end, what is needed is to trace the origin of divine speech to God himself: God speaks his eternal Word. Without a diversity in origin, namely,

16. Note the opening lines of this section in Turretin, which contain the expression “us who are weak” (Turretin, *Institutes*, I.187, III.v.1).

the diversity in the distinction between the Father and the Word, the diversity in the *product* (our conceptions) is not fully grounded.

Turretin's difficulty is analogous to the difficulty in avoiding the Trinitarian error of modalism. According to the heresy of modalism, the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are three modes of acting that belong to a God who is intrinsically one but not diverse. That is to say, according to modalism, when God produces effects in the world, he appears in three modes. We may call these appearances *Father*, *Son*, and *Spirit*. But God in himself, apart from his interaction with the world, is one distinct person, not three. Over against this heresy, the Bible affirms that God is intrinsically one God and *also* three persons. Both unity and diversity are intrinsic to him.

Turretin rejects modalism in his sections on the Trinity. But he struggles here with how to deal with an analogous difficulty. Here he does not root the diversity in Scripture and the diversity in human conceptions directly in an intrinsic diversity in God. Rather, the diversity appears to remain merely at the human level and the level of effects in the created world.

Turretin continues:

Hence it is evident that this distinction [between any two attributes] is neither simply real between things and things, nor formal (which is only in our manner of conception), but eminent (which although it does not hold itself on the part of the thing as between thing and thing, yet has a foundation in the thing on account of the diversity of objects and effects).¹⁷

Some explanation of this quotation is useful.

Turretin rejects two alternatives and proposes a third. (See fig. 30.3.)

The first alternative is that the distinction between attributes is “real between things and things.” The word *real* is awkward because it could suggest that any other alternative to the first one is “unreal,” and in the end illusory. But that is not what Turretin means to imply. He explains himself by saying “between things and things.” His main

17. Turretin, *Institutes*, 1.189, III.v.9. Something similar is found in Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1.158, [1a] Q. 13, art. 4, “I answer.”

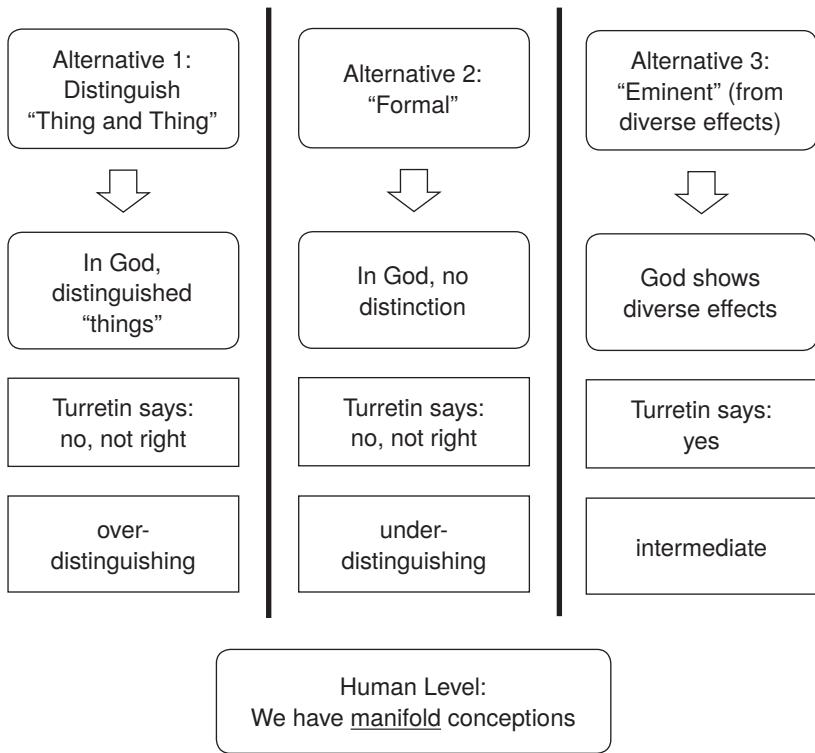


Fig. 30.3. Turretin's Alternatives for Distinctions in Attributes

point seems to be that a distinction between attributes is not of a kind that would allow us to divide God into two gods (two "things"). God's justice and his mercy are distinct, in a way, but not so that we could divide God into two smaller gods, one of whom would be just and the other of whom would be merciful. Turretin thus repudiates error 1, of overdistinguishing.

The second alternative is that the distinction is "formal," that is, "in our manner of conception." The word *formal* goes back to the form-matter distinction in Aristotle. But it is reapplied, in order to describe a certain view of human conceptualization that Turretin rejects. According to this view, our concept of justice and our concept of mercy would be like "forms" that would shape the underlying "matter," namely, the thing (in this case, God) to which the forms are applied. The forms, that is, the two conceptions, are no doubt distinct

from each other in our minds. But they do not correspond to a distinction in the thing that they designate. Turretin rejects this second alternative. He thereby repudiates error 2, of underdistinguishing. This alternative would in the end leave us with at best a minimal knowledge of God, because the forms through which we have our knowledge belong only to our own minds. They do not appear to convey a reliable view of the object of knowledge, that is, of God.

Turretin thus repudiates both error 1 and error 2. He proposes, instead, a third alternative. The distinction between attributes is “eminent” (Latin *eminentem*). The label is not transparent. Turretin explains what he means in the subsequent parenthesis: “(which although it does not hold itself on the part of the thing as between thing and thing, yet has a foundation in the thing on account of the diversity of objects and effects).”

The parenthetical material has two main parts, separated by a comma. The main point in the first part seems to be to reject again the first alternative (“between thing and thing”). The second part then positively indicates how the distinction has relevance to the thing to which it applies: “[the distinction] has a foundation in the thing on account of the diversity of objects and effects.” This formulation appears to repeat what was said in the first sentence of paragraph 9. With the phrase “objects and effects” Turretin has in mind the effects of God’s acts in the created world. God’s acts affect events and objects within creation. For example, we can see God’s justice in his destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. We can see his mercy in the fact that he rescued Lot.¹⁸

So what about the distinction between two attributes? Is it rooted in God or not? What do we conclude from Turretin’s third alternative? As we listen to this explanation and continue to ponder it, we may question whether the foundation for the distinction of attributes is actually in the thing, that is, in God. Turretin has assured us that the attributes “are essentially and intrinsically one in God” (paragraph 9,

18. As usual, we meet complexity and mystery. Whenever God acts, he is present with *all* his attributes. His rescuing Lot is an act consistent with and in some way displaying his mercy *and* his justice. Mercy can be exercised to sinners with justice because the sacrifice of Christ has made a way by which sins can be forgiven in a manner that displays God’s justice (Rom. 3:26).

first sentence). So it sounds as though the foundation of diversity is actually in “the diversity of objects and effects.”

This kind of description can suggest that we have pure unity without diversity in the attributes *in* God. And then, diversity exists in the effects (such as in Sodom and Gomorrah). Starting with the effects, diversity can be projected back into “the thing” on account of what is outside the thing in its effects. Turretin assures us that distinction “has a foundation in the thing.” But the foundation is “on account of” something else, “the diversity of objects and effects.” That can sound like we are projecting from distinct effects back into God. The projection in fact is not really based on “the thing,” that is, on God, but is based on the effects.

Turretin repeats his solution several times in the course of two pages, but without relieving the tension. The foundation for diversity either is or is not “in the thing.” If it is, it seems to undermine Turretin’s view about the unity of all attributes. If it is not, then projecting it back from the effects through *eminence* feels a little like a sleight of hand. It is as if the magician makes the rabbit appear to be inside the cage when actually it is in front of the cage.

Turretin’s language gives the impression of prioritizing unity over diversity. In his view, the simplicity of God cannot be compatible with a diversity of attributes, except by means of rooting the diversity in the effects in the world. The unity is in God, the diversity in the world.

Turretin’s Christian instincts are good. He wants to avoid errors 1 and 2. He wants a third way. He does his readers service by steering them away from the erroneous paths. And yet the result is not fully satisfying. He does not really solve the difficulty that he set himself to solve.¹⁹ And as we indicated, there remains some long-range danger in phraseology that prioritizes unity and seems to degrade diversity.

Reliance on Views of Human Conceptions and Views of the Structure of the World

Now let us think about the background for Turretin’s procedure. We may wonder about possible liabilities in what Turretin has to do

19. Like me, Jordan P. Barrett is sympathetic with Turretin and other orthodox

positively in order to produce a third way. At least in a sketchy way, he has to have at least two frameworks for interpreting distinctions.

The Framework of the Human Mind and Experience

The first framework is the framework of the human mind, human perception, human cognition, and human “conceptions.” Along with this framework comes some idea of how human beings relate to the world around them by using their mental conceptions. In the immediate context, Turretin does not delve into this area very much.

But if we were to travel into this area, we could ask about how the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, who is the Spirit of Christ, affects cognition and conceptions. How does the reading of Scripture affect conceptions? How do our conceptions relate to words and sentences that God has given in Scripture? Those questions would move us into reflections on the Trinitarian structure of both divine verbal communication to us and human reception. We receive instruction through hearing the voice of the Father in the Son (John 17:8), through the teaching of the Holy Spirit (16:13). “The Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God” (1 Cor. 2:10). He unites us to Christ, giving us “the mind of Christ” (v. 16). The apostle Paul imparts this knowledge “in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths [truths searched out by the Spirit in the depths of God] to those who are spiritual” (v. 13).

Discussion of our conceptions apart from this rich Trinitarian context of revelation is impoverished. Are we treating our conceptions in a vacuum, or in a context that, from Aristotle, is conceived of impersonally?

Distinguishing How Qualities Attach to Things

The second framework that Turretin needs is a framework for understanding different *kinds* of diversity, in a way that can be

expositors of simplicity, but does not find fully satisfying the traditional ways of asserting identity and distinction in the attributes (Barrett, *Divine Simplicity: A Biblical and Trinitarian Account* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017], 175–76).

illustrated by things in the world. This second framework is closer to what he explicitly discusses. He gives us three alternatives. All three alternatives involve general formulations that are intelligible because their meaning can be illustrated using created things. The formulations are capable of being used not only when human beings consider God, but when they consider anything in the world.

Let us illustrate. The first alternative is for distinctions to be “real” distinctions “between things and things.” In the world, Fido is a brown dog, while Rover is a black dog. Fido and Rover are two “things.” The attributes *brown* and *black* are one way among many of distinguishing them. (See fig. 30.4.)

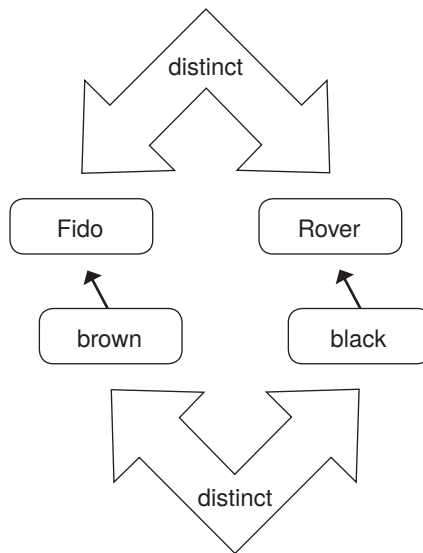


Fig. 30.4. Distinctions between Things and Things

This knowledge concerning how distinctions are made in the world around us offers the framework for Turretin’s discussion. In order for Turretin’s language to be understood, we must have a larger background framework, in which we know what it is for two things to be distinct things (Fido and Rover), and in which we know what it means for attributes or qualities such as *brown* and *black* to be ascribed to things. Turretin does not directly discuss this background, because all his readers already know it. All Turretin thinks he needs

to do is to apply the general formulations specifically to the case of God, instead of to the case of Fido and Rover.

But there are difficulties. The first is the most obvious. God is unique. To assume that we can carry over structures from the world and apply them to God is an assumption that may not be true. In fact, at a deep level, it is not true, because God is the Creator and the world is created. We have to deal with analogies based on revelation. This analogical character of knowledge is concealed from view in Turretin's discussion because he simply assumes, without discussion, that he can move from creature to Creator. The *same* scheme of organizing human thoughts and things and attributes of those things applies. There is no focus on a transition that makes use of analogy.

Turretin himself might be aware that he is invoking an analogy, but he does not say anything to tell readers of the points of similarity and difference involved in the analogy. And without some discussion of this kind, readers may easily assume that his discussion dispenses with analogy and gives us a specially privileged univocal view of God.

A second difficulty lies in the way that Turretin goes about framing three alternatives. Turretin postulates that there are three alternative ways in which distinctions can relate to the world on the one hand and to human conceptions concerning the world on the other hand. The first alternative is that distinctions are "real." In this case, human beings have distinctions in mind, and these distinctions match real distinctions in the world. The distinctions are not illusory or imaginary. As human beings, we distinguish Fido and Rover, and we are right, because Fido and Rover are two distinct things in the world, even before we start observing them.

In the second alternative, the distinctions are "formal." In this case, the distinctions are in our minds, but the "matter" to which they relate, namely, Fido and Rover, is one and the same, without distinction. Now, Fido and Rover do not serve as a good example for this kind of distinction because the two dogs are two distinct things. But suppose we give two distinct descriptions of one thing, namely, Fido. Suppose we first say that Fido is brown. Then, as a second "conception," we describe in detail the frequencies of light that are bouncing off Fido's fur. There is a lot of detail here, but what we imply about Fido himself is in one sense the same. We are producing an

alternative conceptualization of *brown*, not an alternative conception that conceives of a second dog Rover. The distinction between these two descriptions is (largely) “formal.” (See fig. 30.5.)

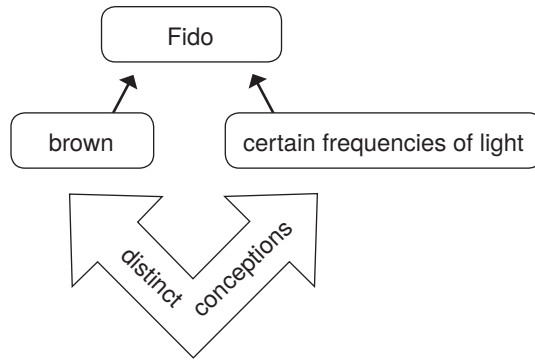


Fig. 30.5. A Formal Distinction

As a third alternative, the distinctions may be “eminent.”²⁰ Suppose that at one time we observe Fido sit and fetch in response to his master’s commands. He shows by effects in the world that he is an

20. The word *eminent* is difficult for modern readers. Fortunately, the immediately following words in Turretin’s text (*Institutes*, 1.189, III.v.9) go on to explain it. Turretin may have left an additional clue when, on the previous page (*Institutes*, 1.188, III.v.6), he speaks of “eminent virtue,” where *virtue* (Latin *virtus*) has a range of meaning including “strength,” “virtue,” and “excellence.” Turretin at this earlier point is designating the perfection of God as a source of outward effects. But the word *eminent* in this context may evoke the idea of *via eminentiae* (“the way of excellence”). The *via eminentiae* is a label for one of three ways in medieval philosophy for talking about God. According to this way, one speaks positively of God, but adds “some kind of mark of superexcellence” (Paul Vincent Spade, “Medieval Philosophy,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta [Winter 2017], § 4.3, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2017/entries/medieval-philosophy/>). This idea is at least vaguely similar to Turretin’s concern to move from effects in the world to the virtue or excellence in God himself. For example, we see good effects in the world, and from there we move to contemplate the goodness of God. God is superlatively or superexcellently good, in comparison with good food (Acts 14:17). Or, to use the key word, God is *eminently* good.

If Turretin intends an allusion to the way of eminence, it still does not help to solve the difficulty, which concerns how we preserve and also dissolve the distinction between attributes as we move from the effects in the world to the source in the one God.

obedient dog. At another time we see him outside chasing a squirrel. He shows by effects in the world that he is interested in chasing squirrels. Fido has two qualities, obedience and squirrel-interest, all the time. But it takes particular circumstances to bring out the qualities in the form of effects in the world. (See fig. 30.6.)

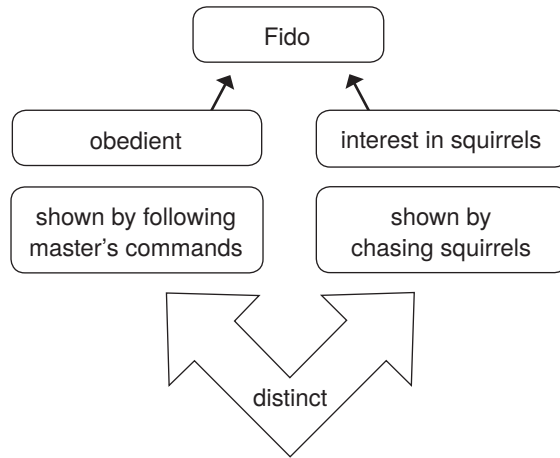


Fig. 30.6. Attributes Shown by Their Effects

This illustration will not effectively serve to illustrate what Turretin wants. In the case of Fido, it might seem to us that the two qualities are distinct qualities *in* Fido, even before they get displayed in effects. And Turretin seems not to want distinct qualities *in* God. Attributes such as *good* that are used to describe things in the world are applied to God “eminently.” Would Turretin say that at this point God is different from any created thing? Perhaps. But then the whole point seems to be lost, for which Turretin provided us with three alternatives involving three kinds of distinctions. None of the three actually applies to God in the same way as it applies to the world.

We might also raise questions about the scheme of three alternatives even when it is applied to the world. Are there difficult cases, or problematic cases, that might not fit? Is there contrast, variation, and distribution in each of the three categories, so that their exact boundaries are fuzzy?

What does it mean for a quality or attribute to be *in* Fido? When

taken in isolation, the word *in* suggests a spatial relationship. A shirt is inside a drawer or inside a suitcase. If Fido is brown, is *brown* in Fido? What would we mean? Or is *brown* an effect on our retina and in our mind when we see Fido? Now, by analogy, what do we mean when we say that something is “in God” or “in the most simple divine essence”?²¹

Given that God is Creator and we are not, and the creatures around us are not, we must exercise caution and grow in humility. God is not exactly like us or these creatures around us. God is unlike Fido. God also surpasses the ability of human conceptual schemes to capture him and pin him down analytically. We cannot simply take a scheme that appears to work well for us with Fido, and apply it to God. A highly generalized conceptual scheme, including a framework with Turretin’s three alternatives for how distinctions function, does not apply to God in exactly the same way as it might apply to Fido.

God is mysterious to us. Distinguishing between types of distinctions does not dissolve mystery. Unfortunately, contrary to Turretin’s own Christian instincts, multiplying distinctions may appear to present us with a clear alternative without mystery within it. Though God himself is still mysterious, we think that our conceptual scheme solves our problems with reference at least to our own knowledge of distinctions. We know where to draw the boundaries.

Should we rather say that God is mysterious, that his attributes are mysterious, and that we do not know exactly how the unity of God fits together with distinctions between attributes? Because God is mysterious and incomprehensible, we must continue to remind ourselves that our own descriptions of him do not dissolve mystery. On the basis of what the Bible says, we may try to grow in knowledge and to clarify our knowledge. We may engage in extended theological reflections, and these may help us to love God with all our *mind*. We know God truly. But we always run up against our finiteness. Sometimes it may be best just to stop our talking and our thinking and admit that we are stumped. We must trust God. The purpose of our theological reflections is not to eliminate trust on the basis of transparent mastery, but to grow in trust.

21. Turretin, *Institutes*, 1.188, III.v.8–9.

Key Terms

analogy
Aristotle²²
attributes
Calvin
diversity
essence
language
modalism
mysterious
Turretin
unity
univocal

Study Questions

1. Where does Francis Turretin stand in the history of theological development?
2. What is the relation of Turretin to Aristotle?
3. What complementary truths is Turretin trying to protect in his discussion of the relation of the attributes of God to God's essence?
4. What liabilities might there be in the way in which Turretin makes his formulations?

For Further Reading

Pictet, B. "Sketch of the Life of the celebrated Francis Turretine, Professor of Divinity at Geneva, who died Anno 1687." *Evangelical Guardian and Review* 2, 12 (April 1819): 529–38. <https://books.google.com/books?id=RiQ2AAAAMAAJ&pg=PA529#v=onepage&q&f=false>. Accessed February 27, 2020.

Turretin, Francis. *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1992. Vol. 1, III.v. Pp. 187–89.

22. Key terms in bold are defined in the glossary at the end of this volume.

Prayer

Lord, we confess that you have made yourself known, and yet you also remain mysterious to us. Your attributes remain mysterious. We thank you for your servant Francis Turretin, to whom you gave insight and who alerts us to two errors to avoid. We pray that we would learn, and that you would enable us to grow in understanding and worshiping you. At the same time, may we keep to your teaching in Scripture.

The Trinity and Attributes

CAN ANYTHING MORE be said beyond what Turretin has given us?
Can the situation be helped?

A Root in God's Power and His Plan

Perhaps Turretin could have gone a little further by discussing at greater length (as he does later on in his book, Topics V and VI) the diversity of effects in the world. This diversity arises from God, the one God, because it is God who produces all the effects. In this sense, diversity in the world *does* have a “root” in God. God, with all his attributes, produces diverse effects. Now, if we ask *how* it is that God produces diverse effects, we say that it is because he planned and willed those effects. And he carries out his will by exercising his power. So the will of God and the power of God offer a background, a background *in* God, for understanding diversity.

But then the mystery still exists at the deeper level of God's will and God's power. Are God's will and God's power distinct from each other? The unity of all attributes, when pressed in the way that error 2 follows, would lead us to conclude that God's will and God's power are merely two human conceptions that are not distinct in God.

And we can also ask whether there are distinctions in God's will. Let us consider a case in which there are two distinct effects in the world, such as the exercise of justice in defeating Pharaoh and the exercise of mercy in choosing David to be king. The effects are distinct from each other. How can they be distinct when they both originate

in God? Is it because God's will includes two distinct purposes, a distinction within God himself? How would such a distinction be compatible with the unity of God, as Turretin has expounded it?

The Root for Diversity in God

God has resources in himself to do what he does, including the production of diversity.¹ He is Father, Son, and Spirit. He plans, he executes his plans in the Son, and he applies them fruitfully in the Spirit. It is one God who initiates, executes, and applies. At the same time, a distinction exists between initiating and executing because that distinction mysteriously reflects the distinction between the Father who initiates and the Son who executes in power. That one distinction, between plan and power, reflects an *intrinsic* distinction between the Father and the Son. So the distinction does not have its origin *merely* in the effects.²

We can make a similar observation starting with the fact that the Son is the Word of God. God the Father as the speaker is distinct from God the Son, who is the Word, the Word spoken. And as we observed, the Holy Spirit functions in a manner like both the breath of the word and its recipient (John 16:13, "he hears"). He is also the recipient of the "depths of God" that he searches (1 Cor. 2:10). The knowledge of God is represented preeminently by the Father, who speaks, and the control of God preeminently in the Word, who

1. Herman Bavinck sees this connection between diversity in God and diversity in effects in the world, but does not yet fully develop the implications:

The diversity of the subjects [the three persons] who act side by side in divine revelation, in creation and in re-creation, arises from the diversity that exists among the three persons in the divine being. There could be no distinction *ad extra* in the unity of the divine being, if there were no distinction *ad intra*. (Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004], 2:332, italics original)

Note also how Earl Muller sees in the Trinity a way to pass beyond conundrums in Aquinas's use of Aristotelian metaphysics. Muller, "Real Relations and the Divine: Issues in Thomas's Understanding of God's Relation to the World," *Theological Studies* 56, 4 (1995): 673–95.

2. Note a similar appeal to the Trinity in Jordan P. Barrett, *Divine Simplicity: A Biblical and Trinitarian Account* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017), 179–86.

shapes the character of the world when it was created. Knowledge and control can be differentiated because they reflect the Father and the Son, respectively. That is, omniscience (knowledge) and omnipotence (control) can be differentiated. On the one hand, God's omniscience and God's omnipotence are the omniscience and omnipotence that belong fully to all three persons. On the other hand, there is a distinction in meaning between the two words *omniscience* and *omnipotence*. This distinction in meaning reflects the distinction between the Father and the Word.

Do we understand it? No. It is a mystery.

John Frame makes the case that three aspects of God's lordship, namely, his authority, his control, and his presence, reflect mysteriously the authority of the Father, the control of the Son, and the presence of the Holy Spirit.³ All three aspects belong to all three persons because of the indwelling of persons. But we can also see a differentiation. One person is preeminently associated with one aspect. The three aspects of lordship correspond to three attributes: moral absoluteness (authority), omnipotence (control), and omnipresence (presence). Once again, the differentiation in persons in the Trinity is reflected in a differentiation of attributes. (See fig. 31.1.) But we *also* need to affirm that each attribute belongs to God himself, and to each person in the one God. The differentiation between attributes is a subtle one. It reflects the differentiation of persons, but also reflects the coinherence of persons. All attributes belong to all three persons.

Many Attributes

Now, there are many attributes of God, not merely three. For various purposes, we can organize the attributes in a number of different ways. So we must not think that the triad consisting in authority, control, and presence is the only way to deal with God's attributes. Yet it is one way that enables us to see how a distinction between two attributes may have its roots in a deeper distinction, namely, a

3. John Frame, "A Primer on Perspectivalism," rev. 2008, <https://frame-poythress.org/a-primer-on-perspectivalism-revised-2008/>; Vern S. Poythress, *Knowing and the Trinity: How Perspectives in Human Knowledge Imitate the Trinity* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2018), chap. 14.

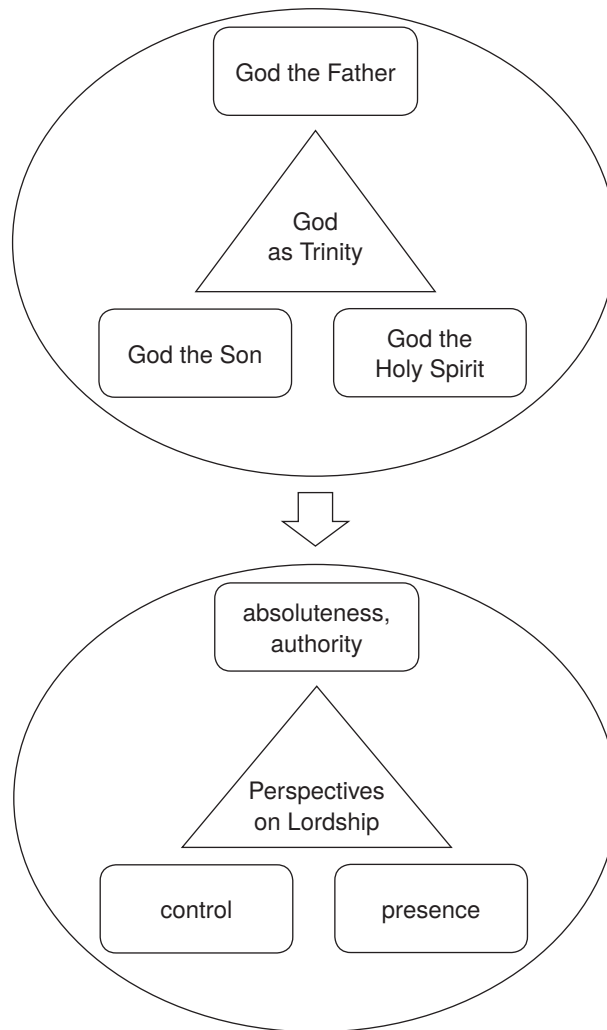


Fig. 31.1. Attributes Reflecting Persons

distinction between two persons of the Trinity. Ultimately all subordinate distinctions, both distinctions among created things and distinctions in God's attributes, reflect an archetypal diversity in the persons of the Trinity.

Turretin is right to avoid positively asserting, in a bare affirmation, an intrinsic diversity in the attributes in God, in the essence of God. If he did, such a diversity would be construed by many readers

as a diversity independent of and unrelated to the Trinity. Rather, the diversity in attributes is an ectypal reflection of the archetype, the diversity in the persons.

Coinherence of Attributes

The persons of the Trinity indwell one another. They cannot be isolated from one another. They are not separable. It is all mysterious. And so also, the attributes of God have a kind of derivative form of coinherent indwelling. The attributes have a unity in one God. They also have a diversity, in the fact that distinct attributes are not synonymous. This unity in diversity exists because the attributes are coinherent. Each attribute is mysterious, and their relations are mysterious. We can never dissolve this mystery. It may help somewhat to say that the mystery about attributes reflects the mystery of the Trinity. But then we are explaining one mystery by referring to another mystery, which is the ultimate mystery.

An Anticipation in Augustine

We can find a partial anticipation of this use of unity and diversity in Augustine. Let us see how it works out.

In his major work on the Trinity,⁴ Augustine appeals to Scripture as the basis for his doctrine. He knows that the Trinity is unique, and that nothing in the created world is a perfect model of or analogy to it. But he also discusses some partial analogies. These partial analogies arise from the fact that God created the world. Especially he created mankind in his image. So it should not be surprising that we might see faint, partial analogies to the Trinity within the world. Augustine develops several analogies related to the human mind.⁵ He argues that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are analogous, respectively,

4. Augustine, *On the Holy Trinity*, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. Philip Schaff, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978).

5. Dale Tuggy, "Trinity," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Winter 2016), § 3.3.2, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/trinity/>.

to the mind, its knowledge, and its love.⁶ They are also analogous to remembering, understanding, and loving.⁷ (See fig. 31.2.)

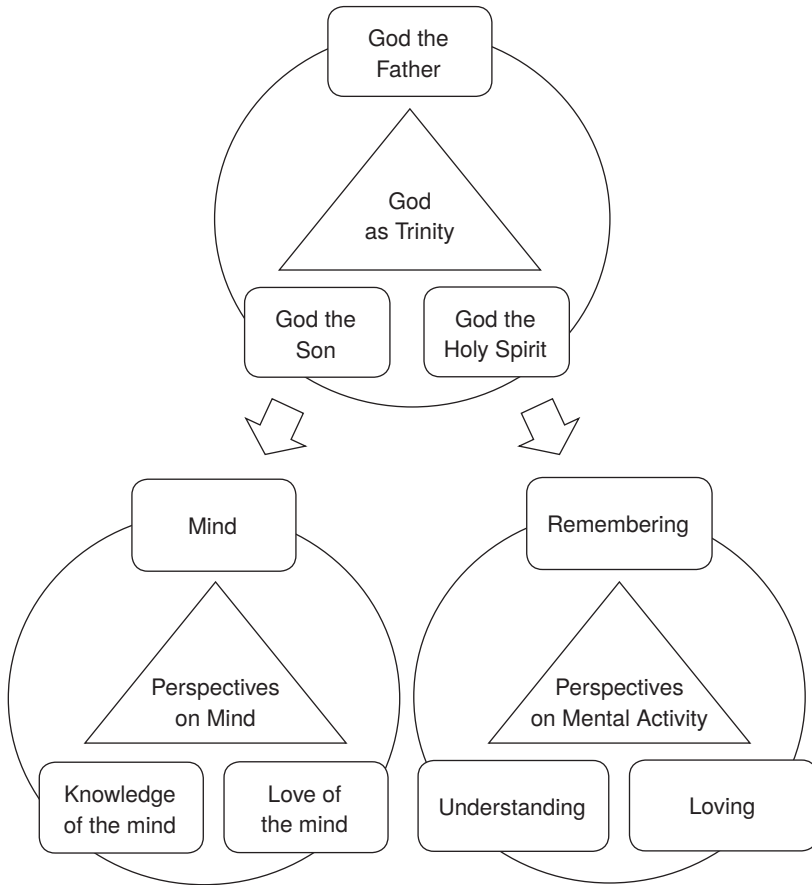


Fig. 31.2. Two of Augustine's Analogies for the Trinity

Let us now compare what Augustine says to what Scripture does with anthropomorphic language about God. It speaks of God's remembering, understanding, and loving. These three descriptions correspond to attributes of God: his remembering expresses his

6. Augustine, *On the Holy Trinity*, 133, 9.12.18.

7. Augustine, *On the Holy Trinity*, 190–91, 14.10–12; see also Augustine, *On the Holy Trinity*, 142–43, 10.11–12, where the third category is "will" rather than "love."

omniscience; his understanding is closely related to his omniscience, but we can also say that it expresses his wisdom; and his loving expresses his attribute of love. All of God's attributes belong to all of God, and to each person of the Trinity. For example, the Father is omniscient, wise, and loving. So is the Son. And so is the Spirit. And yet we can also say that God's wisdom reflects the Son in a specially prominent way: "in whom [Christ] are hidden all the treasures of *wisdom* and knowledge" (Col. 2:3). God's love expresses the Spirit in a specially prominent way: "God's *love* has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us" (Rom. 5:5). It follows that the distinction between wisdom and love reflects the distinction between the Son and the Spirit. (See fig. 31.3.)

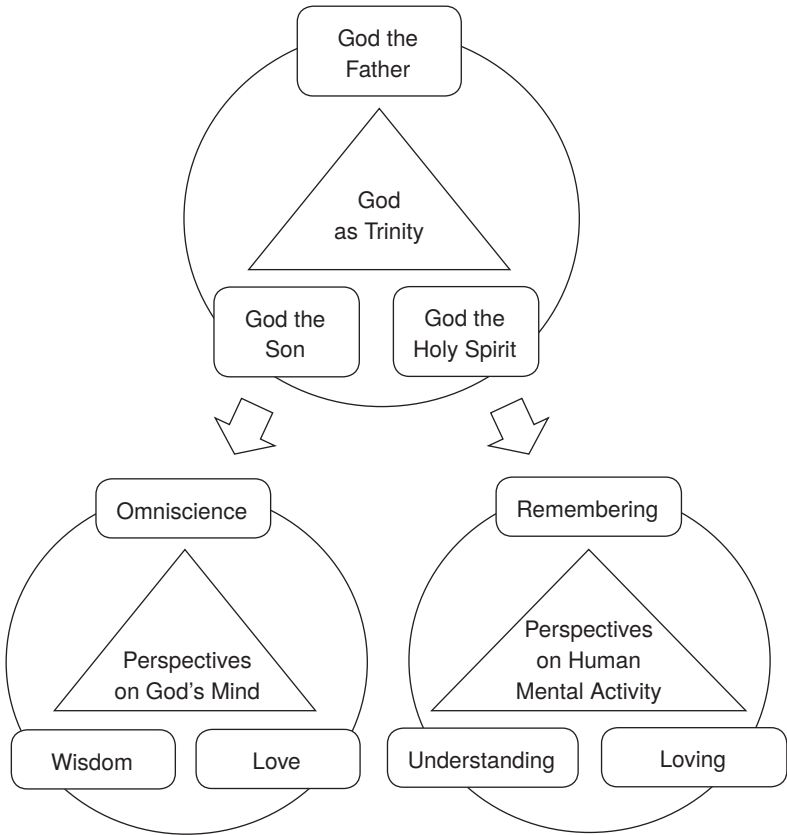


Fig. 31.3. The Distinction between Wisdom and Love

As far as we know, Augustine did not take this additional step of seeing attributes as reflecting distinctions in the Trinity. But such a step is close at hand, once we follow Augustine by acknowledging a reflection of the Trinity in distinct aspects of the human mind. If the Trinity is reflected in distinct aspects of the human mind, it is also reflected conceptually in the verbal designations and concepts that we have for the human mind. And then these verbal designations, or designations similar to them, may also apply in an analogical way to God. It follows that terms such as *omniscience* and *love* reflect distinctions in the Trinity.

An Anticipation in Aquinas

Thomas Aquinas has a similar anticipation of diversity in attributes. From chapter 27, let us recall what Aquinas does in presenting an argument for two “processions” in God. He argues for (1) a procession of intellect and (2) a procession of will, which is also the procession of love.⁸ The procession of intellect means the generation of the Son, while the procession of love means the procession of the Holy Spirit. (See fig. 31.4, and earlier fig. 31.3.)

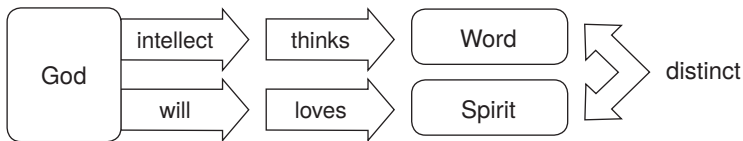


Fig. 31.4. Two Distinct Processions

In this twofold procession, Aquinas uses an analogy between the human mind and the divine mind. The human mind has distinct faculties, namely, intellect and love. The faculty of intellect reflects the Son (who is the Word, expressing the intellectual aspect of God). The faculty of love reflects the Spirit, who manifests the love of God (Rom. 5:5). The Son and the Spirit are distinct persons in God. It

8. Thomas Aquinas, *The “Summa theologiae” of St. Thomas Aquinas*, 2nd rev. ed. (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1920), 2.9–10, [1a] Q. 27, art. 3.

follows that when Scripture speaks about God's mind and his love, or his knowledge and his love, the attribute of knowledge and the attribute of love reflect the Son and the Spirit, respectively. Moreover, the *distinction* between the Son and the Spirit is reflected in a *distinction* between the attributes of knowledge and love.⁹ (As usual, we may observe that the attributes of God, such as knowledge and love, apply to all three persons of the Trinity. We are considering a difference arising from a *preeminent* manifestation of an attribute in a person.) (See fig. 31.5.)

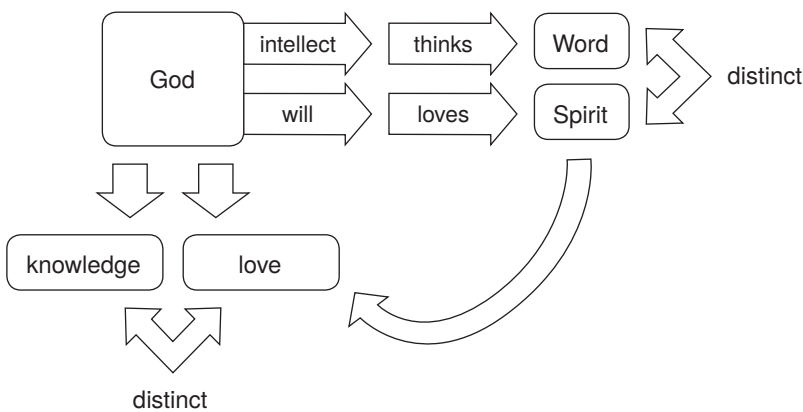


Fig. 31.5. From Two Processions to Two Attributes

Like Augustine, Aquinas does not take this step. He does not use the Trinity as a foundation for affirming a distinction between attributes. But it is a natural step to take, once we observe how Aquinas uses analogies between the mind of man and the mind of God, and also uses analogies between the mind of man and the distinct persons in the Trinity.

In sum, Augustine and Aquinas both discuss Trinitarian doctrine. When they do so, they use analogies in order to explicate and confirm

9. It might seem to be inconsistent that Augustine associates knowledge with the Father, while Aquinas associates knowledge with the Son. But the contexts are different. Augustine uses an analogy with human remembering, which is a stable aspect of knowledge. Aquinas uses an analogy with mental production of a new concept, which is an active, creative aspect of knowledge.

what is taught in Scripture. The analogies they use already contain natural resources for a Trinitarian approach to God's attributes. We can profit by using those resources explicitly when we think about attributes. We will take up this use of resources again when we try to develop more positively a Trinitarian approach to God's attributes.

Mystery

We may also consider briefly the challenge of using abstract language, such as we find in Turretin. We might wish that we could simply avoid traveling into the language of high abstraction, where Turretin travels in order to deal with his question 5.¹⁰ We could wish that Turretin had avoided depending on a speculative scheme about three alternative ways in which distinctions work. But he goes there because he has to deal with defective and heretical conceptions of God, such as with the Socinians (whom he mentions).¹¹ He goes into these regions because others have gone there before him and produced heresies out of their attempts. They have fallen into error 1 or error 2 (the Socinians have error 1). He means to advise us about the mistakes into which others have fallen.

So his journey into the land of abstraction bears fruit. It may help readers, including modern readers, because both old and new heresies are going to travel into the regions of high abstraction.

Potential Liabilities

But we should attempt to be realistic about the challenges. There are liabilities that are difficult to avoid.

(1) Extreme abstractions, extremely general formulations, are hard to understand.

(2) It may seem to readers that extreme abstractions bring us into a realm alien to ordinary human living, a realm that is cold, objective, analytical, and ultimately impersonal. They may unwittingly produce

10. Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison Jr., trans. George Musgrave Giger (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1992), 1.187–89, III.v.

11. Turretin, *Institutes*, 1.188, III.v.5.

an atmosphere in which it seems that impersonal structures are more ultimate than personality. God comes to seem remote and impersonal.

(3) The technical terms in use may assume a framework, some aspects of which are problematic or erroneous.

(4) Usually, extreme abstraction does not highlight mystery. The Trinity is mysterious. Consequently, language, revelation, human beings themselves, and human knowledge of God are mysterious. The attributes of God are mysterious. Even the attributes of dogs are mysterious, because the dogs and their attributes are specified by the controlling word of God.

(5) Extreme abstraction in orthodox response to heretics may fail to highlight the fact that heretics, in traveling into these regions, attempt to produce an abstract framework of their own, a framework more ultimate than Scripture. They make the Scripture fit into their abstract framework, rather than vice versa. The adoption of extreme abstraction in orthodox response may give the impression of continuing the same pattern: Scripture fits into the abstract framework. Scripture is filtered through Aristotle—or through Kant or some other philosophical scheme.

(6) Extreme abstraction can give us the illusion that we have freed ourselves from analogical reasoning and entered into a kind of reason that is freed from the limitations of interacting with this world, with Fido and Rover. So we prioritize the truths we find there over the ordinary anthropomorphic language of Scripture. We do not acknowledge the limitations of our reasoning powers.

Attributes in the Resurrection of Christ

What does the resurrection of Christ show us about the attributes of God? God is one God in his climactic, central work of salvation through the resurrection. The New Testament encourages us to understand the resurrection of Christ not in a philosophical vacuum, but in the context of the Old Testament. The Old Testament teaches the unity of one true God, in contrast to the idols of the nations. It also teaches that only God can save us. This true God comes to us in Christ. This one salvation comes to fulfillment in Christ, and preeminently in the resurrection of Christ. The resurrection of Christ is

a work that comes about only through divine power. So it highlights that it is God who saves. The coherence between the resurrection of Christ and the predictions that he made during his preceding life on earth, as well as the coherence with the preceding teaching in the Old Testament, shows us that we have one God acting with perfect coherence in all his ways.

So the *unity* of all the attributes of God is manifested in the resurrection of Christ. The attributes are also manifested in their *diversity*. The resurrection of Christ shows the infinity of God's *power* (Eph. 1:19–20). The resurrection is also an aspect of his judicial vindication: it shows God's *justice* in pronouncing Christ in the right and his Jewish accusers and executioners in the wrong (1 Tim. 3:16, “vindicated by the Spirit”). It is an act of God's *mercy* toward us: Christ's resurrection lays the foundation for the forgiveness of sins, the imputation of his righteousness, and our being raised in him (Eph. 2:4–6).

All these attributes and more are on display in the same event, the resurrection of Christ. There is only one event, the event of the resurrection. But we can distinguish the attributes conceptually, since with each one we focus on some particular aspects of the one event. How does this use of a conceptual distinction relate to Turretin's view? So far, Turretin would be satisfied, because he affirms that the diversity in attributes belongs to what he calls “formal conceptions” and the “objects and effects.” That is to say, the attributes of God are distinct as formal conceptions in our minds. So likewise, the attributes are conceptually distinct when we use them in describing how the resurrection of Christ displays the attributes.

But we can also see a subtle differentiation in the modes in which the three persons of the Trinity are at work in the resurrection of Christ. The power is closely tied to God the Father, who “raised Christ Jesus from the dead” (Rom. 8:11). The life of God is closely tied to the Holy Spirit, who “will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you” (v. 11). The presence of God is closely associated with the Spirit, who “dwells in you” in order that we may receive the benefits of resurrection life, in the form of new life in ourselves. The justice of God is the justice of God the Father, but made over to us in the person of the Son.

As we have observed, God reveals himself climactically in the

Son (Heb. 1:2–3). And the pinnacle of the climax is found in the resurrection, which plays a central role in Christian proclamation (Rom. 1:4). It would accordingly be wise for us to pay attention to what God actually gives to us in the resurrection of Christ. Should we not have some caution about the possibility of being distracted by philosophical reasoning *in the abstract* about how the attributes of God relate to one another and to his essence?

All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. (Matt. 11:27)

And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. (John 17:3)

Key Terms

abstraction
analogies
Aquinas¹²
attributes
Augustine
coinherence
mystery
persons
Socinians
technical terms
Trinity

Study Questions

1. In what sense is there is an original *diversity* in God?
2. What is the relation of the diversity of persons in the Trinity to diversity in attributes?
12. Key terms in bold are defined in the glossary at the end of this volume.

3. In what way is the term *coinherence* applicable to attributes of God?
4. What ideas found in Augustine and in Aquinas can be seen as anticipating a way in which the Trinity can serve as a foundation for a diversity in God's attributes?

For Further Reading

Poythress, Vern S. *Knowing and the Trinity: How Perspectives in Human Knowledge Imitate the Trinity*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2018. Chaps. 4, 32, 34.

Prayer

Our Lord, we thank you that you have made yourself known and saved us in Jesus Christ. We pray that you would lead us and illumine us through your Holy Spirit in growing in and learning how to profit from Scripture, but also from those faithful servants of past generations such as Francis Turretin.

The Trinitarian Structure of Predication

WE SHOULD FOCUS on one other issue that runs like a thread through the entire history of Western philosophy, the issue of *predication*.

What Is Predication?

What is predication? *Predication* is the name that people have given for saying something about something. In the affirmation “Fido is a dog,” *Fido* is the something that we are talking about, and *is a dog* is what we are saying about him. *Fido* is the subject and *is a dog* is the *predicate*. We have several ways of talking about this situation. We may say that the predicate, *is a dog*, is *predicated* of Fido. The act of doing so is the act of *predication*, and the result is a *predication*, expressed by the entire sentence. The predication involves two parts, namely, the subject (*Fido*) and what is predicated concerning the subject. (See table 32.1.)

Table 32.1. Predication

Subject	Predicate
Fido	is a dog
A dog	is a mammal
Fido	is brown

Grammatically, predication can take other forms besides a classifying clause such as “Fido is a dog,” which has the general form “A is a B.” We can also have a sentence “Fido is brown,” in which the predicate is the expression *is brown*, with an adjective *brown* rather than a noun such as *dog*. Some languages do not require a linking verb such as *is*. So people also sometimes say that the predicate is *brown*. Or we can have a sentence, “Fido is chasing a squirrel,” in which the predicate is everything that is said about the subject: *is chasing a squirrel*.

It is easiest to illustrate what we mean when we choose to deal with speech or writing. But speech or writing also expresses what people are *thinking*. So the idea of predication can easily be applied to what people do in their minds when they are thinking about Fido. Finally, predication can be extended to apply to what is actually out there in the world, namely, Fido. The sentence “Fido is chasing a squirrel” can be either true or false, depending on the state of things in the world. If it is true, Fido is actually chasing a squirrel. There is an appropriate relation in the world between Fido and chasing a squirrel. This relation might also be called a predication.

We can see that the topic of predication is closely linked to the attributes of God. Any attribute of God is something that is *predicated* of him. For example, God is good. Because God is good, we *think* that God is good and *say* that God is good. These are predications. In speech, *God* is the subject and *is good* or simply *good* is the predicate. Goodness is ascribed to God in a predication. And we do this because God is good, even before we say so. Goodness belongs to God, and this connection between goodness and God can be seen as the analogue outside our minds to what we see taking place in language, namely, predication in language, in the act of saying, “God is good.”

All our discussion of the attributes of God presupposes that predication is possible, in human thought, in language, and in the world.

To recognize what is going on in our language and in our thought, we rely on analogies between different instances of predication. When we say, “Fido is brown,” we are using an English clause structure analogous to what we do when we say, “God is good.” Interpreting the meaning of “God is good” depends on our recognizing an analogy in structure. Suppose, instead, that all we have is three words thrown together at random: *good*; *God*; *is*. In that case, we are not dealing

with an affirmation about anything at all. We must have a specific *structure*, in the form of a clause: “God is good.”

The details about how a clause hangs together vary from language to language. But each language has resources in structure, which we often call *grammar*. The grammar shows *how* the words hang together to make up a single larger whole, a clause or a sentence. The grammar serves the meaning, which is to state or communicate an affirmation: God is good. There are also complex higher levels of structure, which directly involve the people who are communicating. One person uses verbal communication and grammar in order to say something. We are able to interpret what someone else is saying only because we have analogous cases, such as “Fido is brown.” And we are able to interpret because we also have analogous cases of other instances of social interaction, in which people want to communicate in many other ways.

We can see, then, that our understanding of God’s attributes presupposes a more general understanding of predication; and that more general understanding has ties with predications about the world, such as “Fido is brown.” Aristotle, Aquinas, Turretin, and indeed the whole course of Western philosophy depend on predication. Aristotle uses predication as one main criterion for distinguishing “primary substances” from everything else. A primary substance is something that can function as the subject of a predication, but *not* as the predicate.

Now, we are encountering and using predication all the time in everyday life. We take it for granted. But once we slow down and focus on it, we find deep mysteries. What exactly is predication? What is going on, and how is it possible for it to go on? How is predication possible?

The Mystery of the Environment

Predication depends on an environment. We must have three things:

(1) We must have something that will serve as the subject of predication. For example, Fido can be the subject. The subject for predication is not just the word *Fido*, but Fido out there, either in

the real world or perhaps in an imaginary world. But an imaginary world makes sense only against the background of the real world, with things in it.

(2) We must have a *truth* or truths about Fido. Something has to hold true. In a “world” of pure chaos, nothing could be said.

(3) We must have persons who can appreciate the world, and think, and speak.

For any *knowledge* about the world, we must actually have not only these three, but these three in relation to one another, each actually involving the others. Fido, to be meaningfully stable and identifiable, depends on truths about Fido. The truths in turn depend on there being something about which they are true, namely, Fido. And both, to be known, depend on persons with rational faculties and abilities in observation. (Even if no human persons exist, God exists, and he knows.)

John Frame has made this point in his book on *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*. The truth and the world and persons go together. He also observes that these three produce three *perspectives* on knowledge: the normative perspective (focusing on truth as the norm for knowledge), the situational perspective (focusing on the world about which the truths hold), and the existential perspective (focusing on the persons who interact with the truth and the world).¹ (See fig. 32.1.)

The three hold together because God, the one God in his unity, is the source of all three. God is the source of truth because he specifies it and he knows it, even before the creation of the world. God is the source of the world because he created it and sustains it. God is the source of human persons because he made them in the image of God. As people in the image of God, they can think God’s thoughts after him on a creaturely level. They can imitate him in their thoughts. And that means that they can reflect the truth of God in their minds. It also means that the truth in their minds is in harmony with the world, which God specifies in accord with his knowledge.

1. John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987), chap. 2. The first perspective, the normative perspective, is described by Frame as focusing on *law*. But law is closely related to the truth. The law of God is the truth concerning that which it specifies.

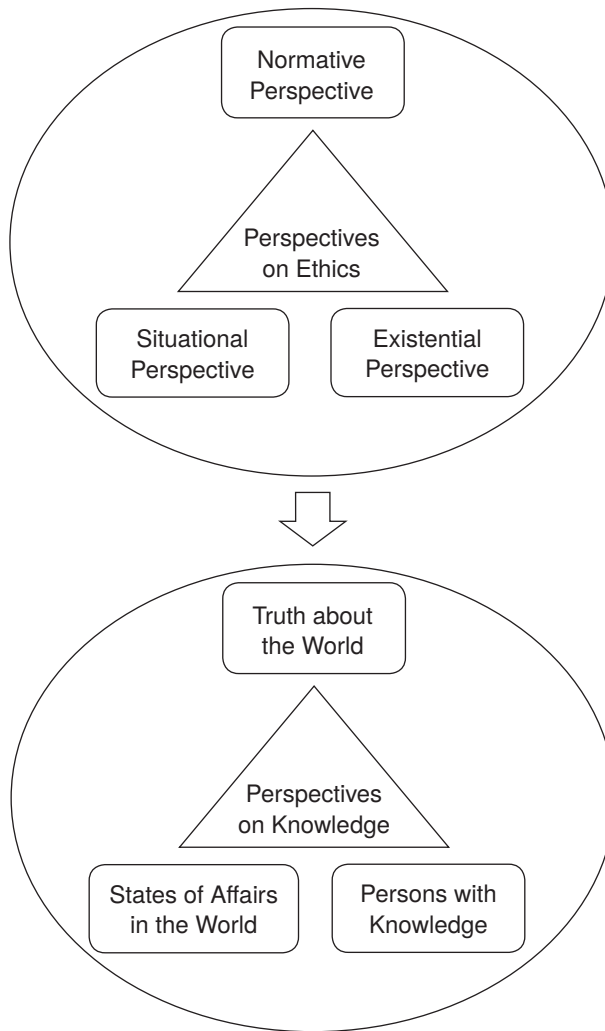


Fig. 32.1. Perspectives on Ethics, Leading to Perspectives on Knowledge

Aristotle cannot explain how we can have predication. Aristotle does postulate a first cause, his unmoved mover. But though the unmoved mover is first in the series of causes, he is not the Creator who is personally involved and specifies absolutely everything—everything about the truths in the world, for all time, and everything about the nature and structure of the human mind, in his image.

Aquinas and other Christians can explain it, because through the

Bible they have come to know the true God, who is Creator. But at an early point, when Aquinas is endeavoring to produce universal arguments for God's existence, arguments that would be based on reason, he cannot appeal to God.

Moreover, it is worth noting that the environment for predication is structured in a manner reflecting the Trinity. John Frame has indicated that the three perspectives on knowledge, namely, the normative perspective, the situational perspective, and the existential perspective, reflect the unique roles of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, respectively.² We can see this by recalling the distinct roles of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit in the historical acts of God. God the Father is preeminently the planner and initiator, and the plan of the Father functions as the norm for action. So the Father's uniqueness is reflected in the normative perspective. The Son is preeminently the executor, who brings about God's plan in the world. The focus on the world is found in the situational perspective. The Holy Spirit is preeminently the one who applies the accomplishment of the Son. Human knowledge in human persons is an application by the Holy Spirit to them personally. (See fig. 32.2.)

The Mystery of One and Many

Next, we also find a mystery in the relation of one and many, unity and plurality, unity and diversity. Predication involves both, and it depends on relating the one to the many. A predicate such as *brown* represents a unified concept. This predicate gets applied or attached to many individuals, such as Fido and other dogs. When we say, "Fido is a dog," we have a predication, in which Fido is the one dog and the class of dogs is a single class, applying to many dogs.

How the one can relate to the many is a mystery. Decades ago, Cornelius Van Til pointed out that in Western philosophy, if you start

2. John M. Frame, "A Primer on Perspectivalism," rev. 2008, <http://frame-poythress.org/a-primer-on-perspectivalism-revised-2008/>, accessed November 21, 2016; John M. Frame, *Theology in Three Dimensions: A Guide to Triperspectivalism and Its Significance* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2017); Vern S. Poythress, *Knowing and the Trinity: How Perspectives in Human Knowledge Imitate the Trinity* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2018), chap. 13.

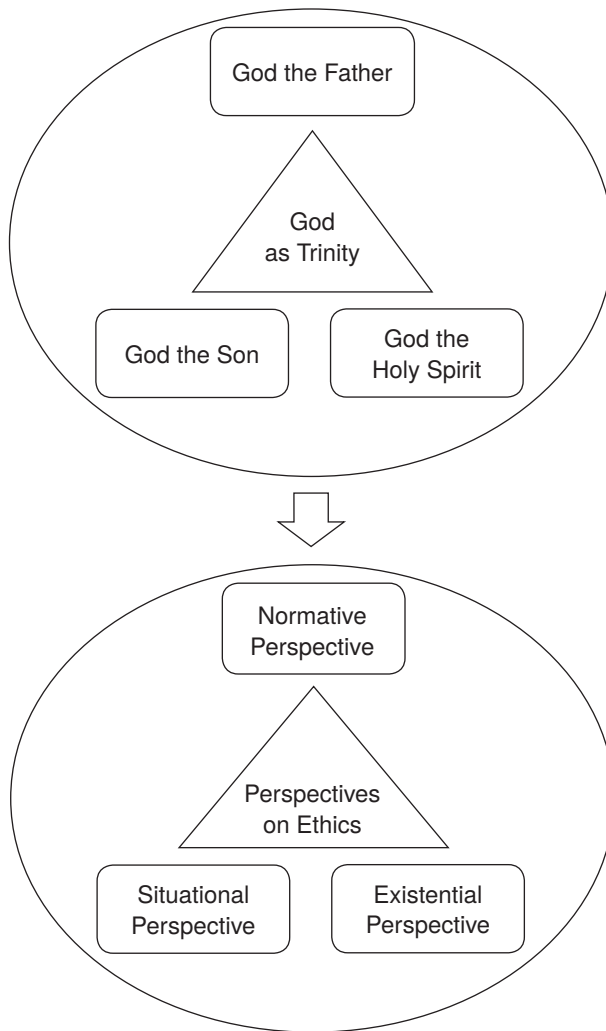


Fig. 32.2. From the Trinity to Perspectives on Ethics

with autonomous reason and try to speculate, there is a difficulty. If you start with pure unity, and no diversity, as the most ontologically basic, you can never explain diversity. Everything is one, as in Plotinus's philosophy. You cannot explain how there could be a plurality of dogs. On the other hand, if you start with pure diversity, you can never find a basis to unite the diverse pieces in a larger class or larger whole. You have a pure atomism, and the atoms can never unite.

Van Til thought that only the Trinity could serve as a correct starting point.³

Turretin in his introductory section on the attributes depends on predication.⁴ While the philosophers have the challenge of relating a diversity of dogs to the unity of the one class, the class of dogs, Turretin has an analogous problem. He has to explain the unity of God and the apparent plurality of attributes (predicates applying to God). But in the end, it is still the same problem. He needs Trinitarian doctrine. And as we observed, he does not draw it in at an early point in his discussion.

The Mystery of Structure

Next, we have the mystery of structure. If we focus on language, we find structure in predication. “Fido is brown.” It has three smaller pieces, *Fido*, *is*, and *brown*. These three fit together into a single larger unit, a descriptive clause. In detail, the structure itself consists in a noun (*Fido*), functioning as subject, a linking verb (*is*), functioning as the link, and an adjective (*brown*), functioning as the descriptor and the main part of the predicate. We have a corresponding structure in thought. We think about Fido, as a subject, and we ascribe something to him, namely, the color *brown*. We do so because, in the world, Fido is brown. In the world, the two pieces, Fido and the color *brown*, are somehow linked. How? By God’s specifying a link, in the truth that he knows about Fido. God has ordained that Fido would be brown.

As we saw earlier in considering the ideas of *form* and *matter*, form and matter in Aristotle’s system focus on two aspects of structure. *Form* is comparable to the result of focusing on unity. The *form* is the unifying aspect of the thing when it is viewed as a whole. The

3. Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, ed. K. Scott Oliphint, 4th ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), chap. 2; Vern S. Poythress, *Logic: A God-Centered Approach to the Foundation of Western Thought* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), chap. 18; Vern S. Poythress, “Reforming Ontology and Logic in the Light of the Trinity: An Application of Van Til’s Idea of Analogy,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 57, 1 (1995): 187–219, reprinted in Poythress, *Logic*, app. F5.

4. Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison Jr., trans. George Musgrave Giger (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1992), 1.187–89.

form is the whole structure as a completed unit. *Matter* is the pieces out of which the structure is formed.

But there is a third aspect, namely, the fitting together of the pieces into the whole. Or we may describe it as the functioning of the pieces with reference to the whole. Perhaps we might treat this “fitting together” as one aspect of form, or one implication of form. But we can also treat structures as having three interlocking aspects. (1) We focus on the unity of the one complete structure. This focus reflects the unity of God preeminently represented by God the Father. It is comparable to or analogous to the idea of *form*.⁵ (2) We focus on the fitting together of pieces into the whole. This focus reflects the role of the Word, who specifies the fit. (3) We focus on the pieces in relation to one another. This focus reflects the role of the Holy Spirit in expressing the relation between persons. This focus on the pieces is analogous to the idea of *matter*. Structure involves all three aspects. Structure, including the structure of predication, has an archetype in the Trinity.

The Mystery of Prominence

We have still another mystery in predication, namely, the way in which the subject is prominent in comparison to the predicate. When Fido is brown, it is natural to see *Fido* as the main focus or prominent “thing” in the picture, and to see *brown* (along with many other possible predicates that we might ascribe to Fido) as derivative. So we have a situation in which we have a prominent, central piece (*Fido*) and a peripheral piece (*brown*). Once again, this phenomenon has a root in the Trinity, which we have discussed earlier under the topic of essence and accidents (chap. 23).

The Mystery of God in Theophany

We have one more mystery concerning God’s attributes, namely, the mystery in theophany. In theophany, God reveals himself for who he is, and he reveals his attributes. This revelation is pertinent to

5. See the discussion of *form* and *matter* in chapter 22.

understanding how predication works with God, since in theophany we deal with God, the subject, and his attributes, which are predicated of him.

In some theophanies, some attributes are particularly prominent. For example, when God appears to Joshua in human form in Joshua 5:13–15, his personal abilities to speak and to wage war strike us. In the thunderstorm theophany in Exodus 19, his power and his holiness impress us. In Ezekiel 1:26–28, God appears in human form with a more extended description.

A comparison with Revelation 1:12–16 shows that this appearance in Ezekiel 1:26–27 prefigures the coming of Christ and his glory. At the same time, the symbolism in Ezekiel 1 and Revelation 1 shows us some of the attributes of God: God's ability to speak is summed up not only in the voice that Ezekiel hears (Ezek. 1:28), but in the very fact that the human figure at the center has a mouth, as implied by the fuller description of Christ in Revelation 1:12–16. The eyes in Revelation 1:14 symbolize his knowledge, his power to see into human hearts (2:18, 23).

The Holy Spirit gets associated with the eyes of the Lord in Revelation 5:6. That is, the Holy Spirit is associated with God's knowledge. Revelation 5:6 also associates the Spirit with the "horns" of the Lamb, signifying his power. The Holy Spirit is linked to the mouth of the Lord by being the source of inspiration (Acts 1:16). What happens here is that the Holy Spirit is associated with particular attributes, which are symbolized in distinct symbolic language. All the attributes come together in the figure of Christ in Revelation 1:12–13 and the Lamb in 5:6. And as Ezekiel 1 shows, the figure of Christ in Revelation 1:12–16 displays the character of God, the same as God showed in Ezekiel 1. God the Father is manifest in God the Son, with individual attributes associated with the Holy Spirit.

We may sum up the Trinitarian roots of theophany and of predication. First, God, the one God, is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The unity of one God is the archetypal unity. The distinctions among the persons of the Trinity are the archetypal distinctions. Second, God displays who he is in theophanies. In each theophany, God appears as the one true God. His unity is displayed. At the same time, there is diversity. In the Old Testament, the visible manifestations of God

anticipate the incarnation of the Son. We can distinguish between God on the one hand and the specific visible manifestations on the other hand. God the Father is preeminently associated with God in his capacity of being the origin of theophany. God the Son is preeminently associated with God's actually *manifesting* himself. The Father is in the Son, and the Son in the Father. There is no *separation*. But there is a distinction between the person of the Father and the person of the Son. So by analogy, there is no separation between God the original and the visible manifestation.

Some of the specific attributes of God in his manifestations are preeminently associated with the Holy Spirit. There is no separation between God and his attributes. But we can make a distinction between the two. And this distinction reflects the archetypal distinction between the Father and the Spirit.⁶ Predication, which takes place when we ascribe attributes to God, has its root in the distinction of persons and the unity of one God who reveals himself in theophany.

Lessons

One lesson to learn here is that when we look carefully, we find mysteries all around in the meaning of predication. It *seems* simple to use because we take it for granted. But it has mysteries. We are tacitly relying on God, who has put in place and sustains every aspect of predication, in accord with who he is as the Trinitarian God. The mysteries *all* involve relations of analogy between examples in the world and the example of God. For example, Fido is brown. God is good. The two predications are analogous. But in the analogy there is mystery, deriving from the mystery of the Trinity.

The archetype for all analogies in the world is the reality that the Son is the exact image of the Father. From that archetype, as we saw earlier, God creates man in his image. Man is analogous to God. Elements in creation reflect the Creator. But there is mystery, bound up with what the archetypal pattern is: an image *within* God. We cannot

6. Vern S. Poythress, *Theophany: A Biblical Theology of God's Appearing* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), chaps. 15–17.

remove mystery from analogy except by knowing God comprehensively, which is impossible for human beings.

Attributes and Essence

A second lesson is to gain insight with regard to Turretin's problem with the diversity of attributes. Along with trying to understand how the attributes can be diverse from one another, Turretin deals with the question whether the attributes differ from God, to whom they apply. He says no: "The attributes of God cannot really differ from his essence." Yet a paragraph later, he acknowledges that they must differ: "Yet that the attributes of God differ both from his essence and mutually from one another is evident from the diversity of conceptions."⁷ His solution is the same as the solution we have already seen him use with the distinction of one attribute from another: namely, to distinguish between a "real" distinction and a distinction in "conceptions."

But now the Trinitarian archetype for predication helps to explain why he cannot get further. In the Trinity, the Father and the Son and the Spirit are distinct from one another, and at the same time they are one, in that each is God. This is mysterious. We cannot explain it by any appeal to some more ultimate system of categories, whether Aristotle's or any other, because God is ontologically basic. And God is Trinity. The unity of God is not *more* ontologically basic (which would be a kind of modalism), and the diversity of persons is not *more* ontologically basic (which would be a corruption of the unity of God). The Father is the archetype for the subject of a predication. The Son is the archetype for the predicate of the predication, because in God it is the Son who is the Word who speaks articulately about the Father (John 14:9). The Spirit hears what is spoken by the Word.

We can illustrate with specific examples from Scripture. These examples have mysteries of their own. But they could still be helpful. In John 14:6, the Son says, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life." In particular, he is the *truth*. The expression is striking. Not merely is he truthful or true, but the truth. Jesus is speaking primarily in the context of redemptive knowledge. The *way* that he has in mind

7. Turretin, *Institutes*, 1.188, III.v.7–8.

is the way to be reconciled to the Father and to know the Father in saving joy. The *life* is eternal life, rescuing us from the curse of death. But though the focus is on redemption, the background from John 1 is the Son's role as Mediator of *creation*, not simply of *redemption*. As the Word of God, the Son is the comprehensive truth of God altogether, not just redemptive truth.

As the truth, the Son gathers in his person all the predications about God. One such predication has the form that we have already had in focus: "God is true" (John 3:33). But there are many others. Jesus draws a line between himself and the predicate here, the predicate *true*. We can see in John 3:33 a human conceptual distinction between the subject, *God*, and the predicate, *true*. But does this human conceptual distinction imply a distinction *within* God? The distinction derives from God himself. God's word, expressing the reality of the eternal Word, has given us John 3:33. But it derives from the distinction of persons, *not* from a disunity in God.

Let us return to Turretin's problem. Is the attribute *true* distinct from God? If Turretin says yes, it will be taken by some readers to mean that the quality of truth is an independent reality, independent of God at the most ontologically basic level, and then ascribed to God at a later point in logic. This approach involves non-Christian immanence, in which we impose a preknown quality of *true* on God. Turretin rightly rejects this idea of a quality *behind* God, a quality more ultimate than God.

So his other alternative is to say no. But that would seem to imply that the predicate is identical with the subject. That is, God is identical with the quality *true*. If so, the expression "God is true" would seem to be equivalent to saying, "A is A." We know nothing about A. This approach involves the non-Christian view of transcendence, according to which God is unknowable. Turretin knows that he must reject this alternative as well. But his third alternative, as we have seen, sounds like a way to project a multiplicity of effects in the world back to God, while denying that any multiplicity is really there in God.

The way forward, we may suggest, is to take seriously that the Trinity is ontologically basic. If God is ontologically basic, he is ontologically basic at every point and in every way. The unity between the subject and the predicate must derive from and be based on the

unity of God himself. In addition, the diversity between subject and predicate must come from the ontologically basic diversity among the persons of the Trinity. And this diversity does not undermine, but affirms, the unity of subject and predicate in one God, who is God, and who is true, and who is true to himself. Turretin is *right* that the essence and the attributes of God are one. But this affirmation of unity has its meaning from the ontological basis of the Trinity. God is the subject (*essence*) and the predicate (*attributes*). And he is also the relation between the two, subject and predicate. He is so, not because there is no differentiation with him, but because he is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God.⁸

Do we understand it? No. It is a mystery. Turretin knows that it is a mystery. He knows that God is Trinitarian. We could wish that he had said so in his chapter on attributes. His knowledge of the Trinity is the actual background for everything that he means. So at a deep level, when we take into account the Trinity, we see mystery also in Turretin's formulations. Below the surface, they reflect Trinitarian reality, because all meaning is impossible except in the way that actually reflects Trinitarian structure.⁹

Predication in the Resurrection of Christ

How does the resurrection of Christ throw light on the meaning of predication? We can approach this question by considering a particular instance of predication, namely, in John 11:25, where Jesus says, "I am the resurrection and the life." Within the context in the Gospel of John, this verse is further illumined by the resurrection of Lazarus a few verses later. And the resurrection of Lazarus foreshadows the resurrection of Christ in John 20. So given the context, John 11:25 offers us not merely a statement about Jesus' power to raise Lazarus, but a comment on the resurrection of Christ.

We can see a predication. In the key verse, Jesus is the subject, represented by *I*. There are two predicates, *resurrection* and *life*. But

8. See also Poythress, *Knowing and the Trinity*, 291.

9. For more on the Trinitarian roots of predication, see Vern S. Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language—A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), chaps. 30–31.

we can see that in this verse, the predication itself is reaching mysterious depths. Jesus does not merely say that he is “alive,” using an adjective. He uses two nouns. The nominal form seems to suggest some kind of closer identity between Jesus and resurrection. Yes, he will be raised from the dead, at the point in time reached in John 20. But that event is not merely one that happens to him from outside, as it were, and then leaves everything fundamentally unaltered. He is the fundamental source and foundation for *all* resurrection.

It is as if we see a coalescence of all blessings (Eph. 1:3) in the one who is “I am.” So here we have adumbrated a mystery of unity and diversity that extends even into the very structure of predication. This mystery involves not only the unity of one God who is “I am,” but the diversity hinted at with the word *life*. The life, in the context of the Gospel of John, is the eternal life supplied by the Holy Spirit (see “living water” in John 7:38, and compare with 4:10, 14).

This mystery of life in God comes to be applied to us when we are united to Christ. Through faith in Christ, we have eternal life: “everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die” (John 11:26).

Key Terms

attributes¹⁰

diversity

grammar

predication

theophany

Trinity

unity

Study Questions

1. How is the Trinity the ultimate foundation for predication?
2. How are the divine attributes manifested in theophany?
3. How are unity and diversity in the Trinity reflected in unity and diversity in theophany? In predication?

10. Key terms in bold are defined in the glossary at the end of this volume.

For Further Reading

- Poythress, Vern S. *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language—A God-Centered Approach*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009. Chap. 31.
- . *Theophany: A Biblical Theology of God's Appearing*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018. Chap. 16.

Prayer

O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth. You are the great “I am.” We pray that we would honor you in the mystery of your revelation in Christ, and in the mystery of the way in which you have crafted language, including even the taken-for-granted aspects such as predication. We thank you for giving us life through Christ, who is the life.

Attributes in Stephen Charnock

NEXT WE CONSIDER Stephen Charnock's work *The Existence and Attributes of God*,¹ because it is a recognized classic. Stephen Charnock (1628–80) was a Puritan pastor, whose life was roughly contemporaneous with Francis Turretin. He was familiar with Turretin's work.² He was a pastor, rather than a teacher and theologian in an academic setting, so his work shows a focus on shepherding the people of God. He produced a series of lectures that were posthumously assembled in the book *The Existence and Attributes of God*.

Each chapter in Charnock's book has an extended section near the end on "use." Charnock spells out several practical uses of biblical teaching for the lives of his hearers. The discussion of practical implications is one of the strengths of the book, and it helps to keep the chapters away from the impression of dealing with the attributes merely on an abstract level of general reasoning.

Charnock's work is massive. So we will examine what is happening in only one chapter, the chapter on the immutability of God. We can find many commendable points in this chapter. We choose to concentrate on what further light might be thrown on the subject by a Trinitarian approach.

1. Stephen Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, in *The Complete Works of Stephen Charnock* (Carlisle, PA/Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2010), 1.121–536, 2.1–544.

2. James M'Cosh, "Introduction to Charnock's Works," in *The Complete Works of Stephen Charnock* (Carlisle, PA/Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2010), 1.xiii.

Context

Charnock begins the chapter on immutability by quoting from Psalm 102:26–27:

They shall perish, but thou shalt endure; yea, all of them shall wax old as a garment: as a vesture shalt thou change them, and they shall be changed: but thou art the same, and thy years shall have no end.³

Then Charnock provides a short historical and literary introduction to Psalm 102 as a whole. He thinks that the psalm speaks of redemption by the Messiah, in verses 13, 16, 20, and 22. He mentions that the last verses are quoted in Hebrews 1. He tells us that some interpreters divide the psalm into three parts: (1) verses 1–2, “a petition”; (2) verses 3–11, “the petition strongly . . . enforced”; and (3) verses 12–28, an expression of faith.⁴ Charnock’s treatment is more expansive than the treatment of the same psalm in a volume of systematic theology such as Turretin’s, because Turretin has space constraints and must focus more exclusively on the general topic of God’s attributes.

Charnock helps people by explaining the immediate historical background and the larger plan of redemptive history leading to the Messiah. The observations about historical background put the key verses 26–27 in the context of immediate needs for the people of God at the time when Psalm 102 was written. The attention to the larger plan of God puts the verses in the context of Christ and climactic redemption. Charnock also helps us by noting the literary context because that provides fuller expression, describing God and his works. The immutability of God does not appear in a vacuum, but appears in the context of human petition and faith.

3. Charnock, *Existence and Attributes*, 1.374. The quoted verses in Charnock are identical with the KJV, except that the KJV has “like a garment.”

4. Charnock, *Existence and Attributes*, 1.374.

Exposition of Verses 26–27

Charnock then provides us with several pages where he comments on verses 26–27 of Psalm 102, line by line. A lot is there, but we may confine ourselves to a few points.

First, Charnock understands the way in which the psalm uses creaturely comparison:

yet this firmness of the earth and heavens is not to be regarded in comparison of the unmoveablenes [*sic*] and fixedness of the being of God. As their beauty comes short of the glory of his being, so doth their firmness come short of his stability.⁵

His understanding fits what we have said earlier about creaturely comparison.

Second, Charnock, as a good preacher, freely uses biblical language without raising distracting questions about anthropomorphism and how the language harmonizes with God's immutability. Thus:

Again, the Lord is to *rejoice* in his works, Ps. civ. 31.

How *short* was that *joy* God had in his works, after he had *sent* them beautified out of his *hand* [in creating the world]!

How *soon* did he "*repent*" not only "that he had made man," but "*was grieved at the heart*" also that he made the other creatures which man's sin had disordered! Gen. vi. 7.

It is the *joy* of God to *see* all his works in their due order.⁶

The creatures must have that goodness [of unfallen creation] restored . . . before he [God] can *again rejoice* in his works.

5. Charnock, *Existence and Attributes*, 1.375.

6. Charnock, *Existence and Attributes*, 1.378, italics mine.

Let us look upon sin with no other notion than as an object of God's *hatred*, the *cause* of *his grief* in the creatures.⁷

Immutability

Charnock then comes to the key line in Psalm 102, in verse 27. He says:

“Thou art the same.” The essence of God, with all the perfections of his nature, are [*sic*] pronounced the same, without any variation from eternity to eternity.⁸

The key word *essence* is used with its technical meaning. But Charnock does not commit himself to Aristotle or to some theory about essences in general. Charnock helps ordinary readers to understand him by adding the explanation “with all the perfections of his nature.” He has in mind the usual list of attributes: infinity, immensity, omnipresence, eternity, love, goodness, and so on.

He also feels free to use ordinary language, such as the expression “from eternity to eternity.” This expression invites readers to think about the immutability of God by using a timeline from the past to the future. Charnock expects readers to understand that expression as they would understand similar expressions in the Bible. He does not offer a theoretical model for how God relates to time. His phraseology suggests the picture of a timeline, but is not meant to imply that God is caught in time or is subject to time. Rather, it describes his immutability in terms accessible to human understanding.

We should also note that, here and elsewhere, Charnock is careful to indicate that the unchangeability of God pertains to his “essence,” his “perfections,” and his attributes. Charnock does not choose phraseology that could seem to imply that it would be a problem for God to be active in governing and evaluating the world. Philosophers have sometimes entangled themselves in concerns over whether a change in the world produces a change in the relation of the world

7. Charnock, *Existence and Attributes*, 1.379, italics mine.

8. Charnock, *Existence and Attributes*, 1.379.

to God and therefore a kind of “change” in God. But at this point, Charnock does not address the philosophical question.

Most people do not worry about the philosophical question. We can even illustrate with a human analogy. If Carol asks Don whether Susan “has changed,” the meaning may depend on the situation. But typically Carol is not asking whether Susan “changed” by going to sleep and then waking up, or by eating a pizza. Has Susan changed by ceasing to lie, or by a commitment to a different religion? Has something weighty about her character changed? Of course, this is only a human analogy. But it can underline the judiciousness of Charnock’s phraseology, which focuses on God’s attributes. The attributes do not change.⁹

Charnock continues in various ways to reinforce the point that God is unchanging. We may pick out a particularly striking part:

All things else are tottering; God *sees* all other things in continual motion under his *feet*, like water passing away and no more seen, while he remains *fixed* and *immoveable* [*sic*]. His wisdom and power, his knowledge and will, are always the same. His essence can receive no alteration, neither by itself nor by any external cause; whereas *other things* either naturally decline to destruction, pass from one term to another till they come to their period; or shall at the last day be wrapped up, after God hath *completed* his will in them and by them; as *a man* doth a garment he intends to repair and transform to another use.¹⁰

Charnock’s instincts as a preacher make him gravitate to anthropomorphic language, in order that his readers may vividly grasp who God is, and may take it to heart. His language describing God as “fixed and immoveable” works well only if we envision God as being like a human being who occupies a particular spatial location, and from this location watches the events in the way that a man watches

9. The word *attributes* could theoretically be stretched to apply to any predication about God whatsoever. But that is not typically the meaning of the word. Rather, it means things such as the traditional lists of attributes: absoluteness, infinity, immensity, etc.

10. Charnock, *Existence and Attributes*, 1.380, italics mine.

water pass by. Charnock expects his readers to understand what he will later take up under the subject of omnipresence, that God is everywhere. Charnock is not providing a technical theory about God's relation to space, but rather giving a vivid illustration to depict God's immutability by analogy with human stability in relation to passing water. The rest of the paragraph contains further anthropomorphic language and the language of creaturely comparison.

Identity of Two Attributes?

Charnock, like those before him, uses language about the identity of attributes, but also qualifies it:

Indeed true eternity is true immutability Yet immutability differs from eternity in our conception. Immutability respects the essence or existence of a thing, eternity respects the duration of a being in that state; or rather, immutability is the state itself, eternity is the measure of that state.¹¹

This articulation is similar to Turretin's. Charnock may run the risk here of becoming too abstract, but the distinction between the two attributes helps assure readers that for practical purposes we can indeed think of two attributes. Similarly, "mercy and justice have their distinct objects and distinct acts."¹²

Charnock for his pastoral purposes wisely sees that it would not be profitable to explore with greater detail in what specific ways two attributes may be distinct or may be one. He does not advance the theoretical discussion that Turretin conducted. But neither does he create for himself serious problems that will plague readers.

Charnock also has a paragraph that discusses the identity of attributes with the essence:

being the most simple being, his understanding is his essence; and as from the infiniteness of his essence we conclude the infiniteness

11. Charnock, *Existence and Attributes*, 1.380.

12. Charnock, *Existence and Attributes*, 1.381.

of his understanding, so from the unchangeableness of his essence we may justly conclude the unchangeableness of his knowledge.¹³

As we observed in chapter 30, equating attributes with essence runs the risk of collapsing all distinctions. But Charnock refuses to be drawn into a complete collapse. Rather, he shows how to use the concepts of *simplicity* and *essence* positively. He urges us to see that three attributes such as infinity, knowledge, and immutability relate to one another intimately. God's knowledge is infinite and immutable. Charnock could equally have argued that God's infinity is immutable and omniscient. God's immutability is infinite and omniscient. All three statements are true because all the attributes are ways of talking about the one true God. They describe all of God, not merely one part of God. And so they also describe the other attributes. (See fig. 33.1.)

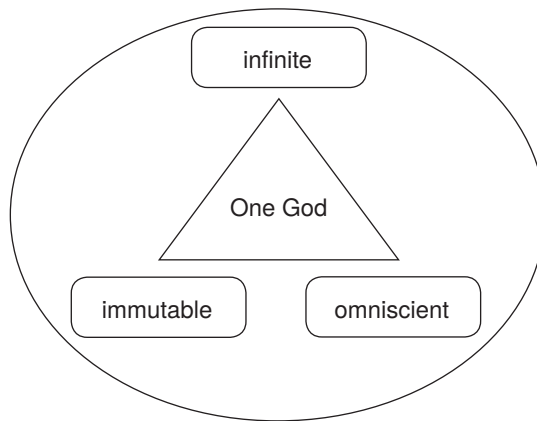


Fig. 33.1. Interlocking of Attributes

But these observations also mean that it was not essential for Charnock to use the traditional terms *simplicity* and *essence*. Given the possibility of misunderstanding, and given the fact that Charnock's readership includes nonacademic readers, perhaps the goal could have been achieved more simply if he had said:

13. Charnock, *Existence and Attributes*, 1.385.

All the attributes are ways of talking about the one true God. They describe all of God, not merely one part of God (for he has no parts). And so they also describe the other attributes.

Confirming Immutability

At times, Charnock puts forward arguments for the immutability of God that appear to rest not on scriptural citations, but on general philosophical reasoning.¹⁴ The danger arises that readers may treat these arguments as exercises in autonomous philosophical reasoning. Could reason, apart from revelation, determine what God has to be, if he is to be perfect? The arguments could be taken that way.

But that would be a misunderstanding. Before and after these philosophical pieces come other arguments based on appeals to biblical texts. As we observed, the chapter as a whole started with an exposition of Psalm 102. So it is better to understand Charnock's philosophical arguments as further confirmations of what is shown by Scripture. He is attempting to highlight the inner logic, so to speak, that connects various attributes. Human reason does not force God into its mold—that would be to treat reason as autonomous. Rather, in submission to Scripture, human reason traces out the harmony and “reasonableness” connecting all that Scripture says about God.

Key Terms

anthropomorphism¹⁵

Charnock

immutability

14. E.g., Charnock, *Existence and Attributes*, 1.383. The argument for infinite, unchangeable knowledge is also framed as a philosophical argument, without direct appeal to Scripture, on 1.385.

15. Key terms in bold are defined in the glossary at the end of this volume.

Study Questions

1. What is the context for Charnock's work?
2. What is the effect of choosing a biblical text as the starting point for Charnock's discussion?
3. How does Charnock set forth the doctrine of divine immutability?
4. What difficulties come up in the course of discussion?

For Further Reading

Charnock, Stephen. *The Existence and Attributes of God*. In *The Complete Works of Stephen Charnock*. Carlisle, PA/Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2010. 1.vii–xxvii; 1.374–97.

Prayer

Dear God, help us to learn and profit from what our brother and pastor Stephen Charnock says, and also to learn to be humble and circumspect ourselves about how we think and talk about you. May we so grow that we may worship and serve you in awe, as you deserve. We thank you that you are the same through the ages and that your years have no end.

Charnock's Answers to Objections

WE NOW CONSIDER how Stephen Charnock deals with objections to the immutability of God.

In his chapter on immutability, Charnock has a separate section¹ in which he answers objections to God's immutability. It is an interesting topic to explore. Scripture provides the fundamental resources for rightly affirming and understanding God's immutability, and therefore also for answering objectors. But we always run some risk of responding to objectors too much on their own terms, and perhaps then falling into problematic areas that are the product of false philosophy.

Drawing Near

Even before the specific section dealing with objections, Charnock does undertake to deal informally with one objection. He has an interesting paragraph in which he brings up a question whether God undergoes a "change of place":

Therefore observe, that when God is said to "draw near to us" when "we draw near to him," James iv. 8, it is not by local motion or

1. Stephen Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, in *The Complete Works of Stephen Charnock* (Carlisle, PA/Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2010), 1.397–406, § IV.

change of place, but by special and spiritual influences, by exciting and supporting grace.²

Is this language about God's "drawing near" a problem? We might wonder. Do nonacademic readers worry about it? Most probably they do not. Without thinking things through explicitly, they recognize a role for analogical expressions. The neighboring expression in James 4:8, "Draw near to God," offers us an analogy in which we picture ourselves as physically moving toward a location where God is especially present. But James is actually not focusing on outward, physical motion, but focusing on the motion of the heart, as it were. Every sensitive reader understands this. So by analogy, the expression "he [God] will draw near to you" does not offer us some kind of technical theory about the physical location of God, or about how God has a "change of place." Rather, the text offers a vivid picture using analogy.

Responding to James 4:8 as if it were a problem text runs the risk of ignoring analogy and variation and the power of distribution in the expression "Draw near." Or, to put it another way, it does not adjust to the fact that the language about "drawing near" is anthropomorphic.

Charnock rejects "local motion" or "change of place" because he knows that God is unchangeable, and also because he knows that God is omnipresent, not confined to one place. This reasoning makes sense. Yet we could wish that Charnock had enriched the discussion. One of the issues is the usual one about how we describe God in language that also, in other contexts, applies to creatures. For example, we picture another human being as drawing near to us in order to hear us or help us or care for us. The other human being has a circumscribed spatial location for his body. His body moves toward us, and that is what Charnock means by "local motion." As a human being draws near, he also changes his location or place. God is omnipresent

2. Charnock, *Existence and Attributes*, 1.391. A similar objection is refuted in Thomas Aquinas, *The "Summa theologiae" of St. Thomas Aquinas*, 2nd rev. ed. (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1920), 1.91, [1a] Q. 9, art. 1, obj. 3. The objection quotes James 4:8.

and does not have a body.³ So we know that he does not change his location in a way that a human being does.

Thus, when applied to God, the language of “drawing near” is anthropomorphic language or language of creaturely comparison. With all such language we should affirm an analogical use when we are speaking of God. As usual, we can see at work contrast, variation, and distribution. We have a definite meaning of “drawing near” that contrasts with other meanings; we have variation when we use this meaning to apply to God or to man; we have distribution when we consider the literary and real-world contexts for the affirmations about drawing near.

Scripture sometimes represents this kind of drawing near in terms that evoke a picture of motion in space. The Lord “came down” on Mount Sinai (Ex. 19:20). The cloud of glory “settled” on the tabernacle (40:35). “The LORD came down in the cloud,” spoke to Moses, and distributed the Spirit to the seventy elders (Num. 11:25).

When Solomon built the temple, he confessed God’s unlimited presence: “Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built!” (1 Kings 8:27). Solomon understood that the omnipresence of God was in harmony with his ability to choose a special, localized place, either his heavenly dwelling or the temple on earth, where he would manifest himself intensely in covenantal intimacy. Ezekiel 1 in a vision shows us one form of localized presence. Then in Ezekiel 10:18–19 and 11:22–23, we see the glory of God moving from one place to another.

When we read passages such as these, one danger is that we might refuse to recognize analogy or anthropomorphism. We might think that God is confined to a particular location in exactly the same way as a human being’s body has a particular location. That would be a mistake. But there is an opposite danger as well. We might minimize this kind of representation of God. We might say that it is “merely” anthropomorphic, or that it is merely the language of creaturely comparison. So, we might think, it need not be taken seriously. We

3. After his incarnation, Jesus has a physical human body. His body belongs to his *human* nature, not his divine nature. Here we are talking about God in his divine nature, the same nature that belongs to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. All this is mysterious.

think of the technical terms for attributes as the high point in truthful description; every other kind of language about God is degraded in comparison.

But the technical terms for attributes are also entangled with anthropomorphism and creaturely comparison and various kinds of analogy in the way that they were originally crafted. There is no avoiding it. So it is better to pay close attention to the representations of God in Scripture, rather than degrade them.

As we have already seen, the appearance of God and of the glory of God in Ezekiel 1:26–28 is fulfilled in Christ and his glory. We have a Trinitarian structure at the root of theophany.⁴ The Trinity is the ultimate foundation for God's ability to manifest a reflection of himself in theophanic imagery. The divine Son is the original Image. The image in human form in Ezekiel 1:26 is an image derived from this archetypal Image. God can manifest himself locally because there is an archetype of such manifestation in the divine Son and his relation to the Father as the original. Moreover, divine presence is not an undifferentiated presence, but has its archetype in the indwelling of persons in the Trinity. God the Father is present through indwelling his Son. This indwelling is mysterious. This archetypal indwelling is the foundation for God's special presence when he appears to Ezekiel. (See fig. 34.1.)

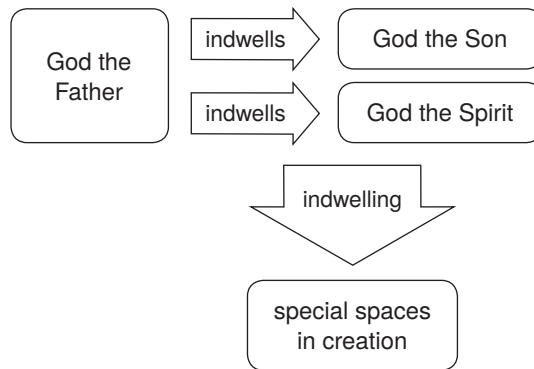


Fig. 34.1. Indwelling

4. Vern S. Poythress, *Theophany: A Biblical Theology of God's Appearing* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), chap. 17.

The Son as the Image of the Father is mysterious as well. It is all mysterious. But it is the foundation for a differentiation in God's presence in particular creational spaces, such as the space of Ezekiel 1, once God has made the created world.

All three persons of the Trinity—the Father, the Son, and the Spirit—are omnipresent. At the same time, we can also see a differentiation. It is the Spirit who preeminently manifests the intense presence of God by indwelling us. The differentiation between persons in the Trinity is the foundation for a differentiation in aspects of presence.

Charnock does not invoke the Trinity. But he does acknowledge a reality in God's drawing near. The structure of his sentence has the phraseology "it is not by . . . , but by" An attentive reading recognizes that he actually affirms that God draws near, but in a particular manner: "by special and spiritual influences." Charnock is correct. But by not explicitly discussing the analogical nature of the expression "draw near," he still runs the risk of seeming to advocate an interpretation in which "drawing near" fundamentally means a literal, spatial kind of motion. Since, in Charnock's view of immutability, such motion is impossible for God, Charnock must find some substitute, namely, the motion of the "special and spiritual influences."

Charnock could also go on to observe that God is *present* in these influences, preeminently in the person of the Holy Spirit. "The Spirit of God [was] descending like a dove" at Jesus' baptism (Matt. 3:16). Charnock does not provide at this point a discussion of God's presence, or a movement of his presence. It is difficult to put things that way without having some kind of differentiation between a universal presence of God, filling all things (Jer. 23:24), and a particular presence, when the Holy Spirit is "descending." If that differentiation in modes of presence does not have any kind of foundation in God, due to the differentiation of the persons of the Trinity, it is difficult to see how it could be real rather than a mere manner of speaking.

Charnock has really not dissolved the mystery, because there is mystery in the very fact that God sends "special and spiritual influences." How can this kind of change in the world take place unless God brings it about? God acts. And when we observe God act, we can in some respects differentiate his action at a particular time in history from what God *always* is.

Charnock continues by giving an illustration to show how God sends “influences”:

As we ordinarily say, the sun is come into the house, when yet it remains in its place and order in the heavens, because the beams pierce through the windows and enlighten the room, so when God is said to come down or descend, Gen. xi. 5, Exod. xxxiv. 5, it is not by a change of place, but a change of outward acts, when he puts forth himself in ways of fresh mercy or new judgments.⁵

The analogy with the sun may appear to help, at least temporarily, but it is not really apt. Why not? In a more precise description of the room, the sun’s “beams” or its rays come into the room. The sun itself remains stubbornly far away. To say that the sun comes into the room is an instance of metonymy. A metonymy uses “the name of one thing for that of another . . . with which it is associated.”⁶ The sun is associated with its beams. So we substitute “the sun” for its beams. But we understand that at a technical level, only the beams, not the sun itself, come into the room.

If we press too hard on Charnock’s analogy with the sun’s beams, it suggests that God himself is far away, but can metonymically be described as drawing near merely because some effects that he has set in motion *do* draw near. This picture is impersonalist in its view of how God relates to us. God stays away, but he sends effects that come near and touch us. Charnock as a Christian and as a pastor does not believe it. (See fig. 34.2.)

Unfortunately, the illustration with the sun suggests a faraway God. The illustration is attractive because it appears to provide an answer and to provide relief. We are tempted by the illustration, because without a robust, Trinitarian-grounded grasp of unchangeability, we can go after something that protects a defective view of unchangeability. We then end up compromising the reality of God’s intimacy through the Holy Spirit.

5. Charnock, *Existence and Attributes*, 1.391. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, uses the same illustration with the sun (1.93, [1a] Q. 9, art. 1, reply obj. 3).

6. Merriam-Webster online, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/metonymy>, accessed June 5, 2018.

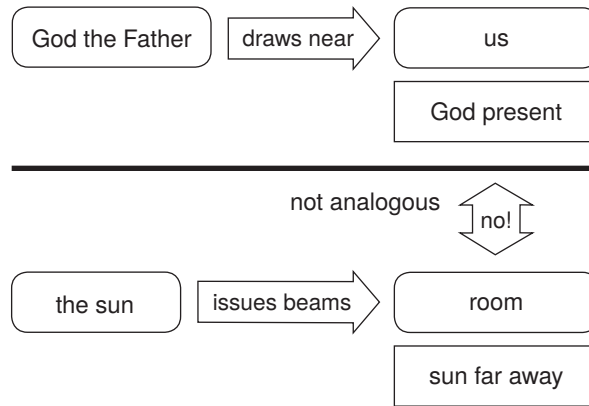


Fig. 34.2. God's and the Sun's Drawing Near

Fortunately, Charnock supplements the analogy with his own additional description: “he [God] puts forth himself.” This language, which Charnock chooses in order to describe God’s drawing near, is in tension with the picture he gave us with the sun. The sun stays stubbornly where it was; only its beams, its effects, go forth. By contrast, God “puts forth *himself*,” not *merely* effects that get detached from God in the process of going out to their destination. How can God put forth *himself* if he is always the same?

The very language Charnock uses has underneath it a Trinitarian foundation. The ultimate case of God’s putting forth himself is found in the Father’s eternally begetting the Son, which can also be reexpressed by saying that God speaks his eternal Word.⁷ Charnock’s language presupposes the reality of activity in God, not merely in earthly effects that would allegedly be detached from God. And it presupposes a differentiation between the God who puts forth and the God who is put forth, between the Father and the Son. The eternal putting forth, in the persons of the Trinity, is the archetype for God’s putting forth his word in creating the world.

And then, in redemption, the Father “puts forth” his Son in the incarnation and the resurrection. Jesus while on earth states, “For I

7. Vern S. Poythress, *Knowing and the Trinity: How Perspectives in Human Knowledge Imitate the Trinity* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2018), chap. 24.

have *come down* from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me” (John 6:38; similar expressions occur several more times in John 6). The Father “sent” the Son. We must be able to use this kind of language about sending and coming down. It depends on there being a distinction between the Father and the Son who comes down. The Father also sends the Spirit through the Son. In this way he “puts forth himself” in application of redemption to us. (See fig. 34.3.)

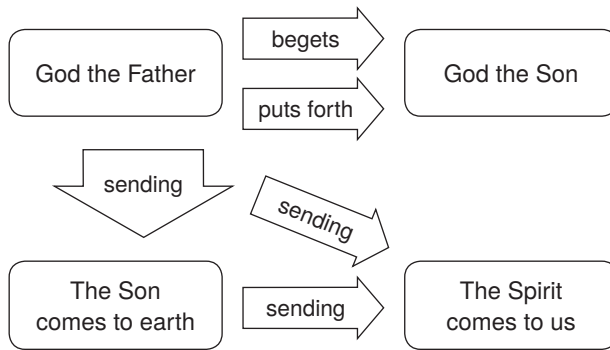


Fig. 34.3. Sending the Son and the Spirit

But in his own choice of phraseology, Charnock appears to withdraw from his bold affirmation about God’s putting forth himself. He says: “When good men feel the warm beams of his grace refreshing them, or wicked men feel the hot coals of his anger scorching them.”⁸ The word *beams* alludes to Charnock’s earlier use of the same word with respect to the sun. So here now, are we to conceive of God’s grace as issuing in “warm beams” that are merely the effect of his initial energy, but do not manifest his presence? Are they detached from God or not? The text does not provide a clear answer; it has found no way to differentiate kinds of presence and still affirm with robust fullness the unity of God.

At root, Charnock’s problem is the same as what we noted earlier with Turretin’s discussion of unity and diversity in the attributes. He has found no way both to differentiate and yet to affirm robustly the fullness of the unity of God. But if that is the case, he has not

8. Charnock, *Existence and Attributes*, 1.391, incomplete sentence in original.

integrated the doctrine of the Trinity into his conception of the unity of God.

Charnock continues:

God's drawing near to us is not so much his coming to us, but his drawing us to him; as when watermen pull a rope that is in one end fastened to the shore and the other end to the vessel, the shore is immoveable [*sic*], yet it seems to the eye to come to them, but they really move to the shore.⁹

Charnock wants to say that the language of “God’s drawing near” really means “his drawing us.” Of course, the Bible does use the language of God’s drawing people to himself—for example, in John 6:44: “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me *draws him*.” But that thought is found in John 6:44, not in James 4:8. The question at hand is how we deal with the language in James 4:8. Of course, because of the unity of God and the unity of the Bible, the meaning of James 4:8 must be in harmony with the meaning in John 6:44. But that does not mean that we *substitute* the meaning of John 6:44 for the meaning of James 4:8. We have to pay attention to what James 4:8 actually says. This verse in James displays a symmetry between our drawing near and God’s drawing near. One corresponds to the other. (See fig. 34.4.)

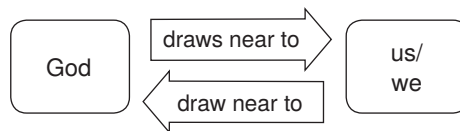


Fig. 34.4. Reciprocal Drawing Near

To change “he will draw near to you” to “he will draw you near” undermines this correspondence.

To help us, Charnock here uses another illustration, that of watermen. It involves both anthropomorphism and creaturely comparison (the latter because of a larger environment in which boats move

9. Charnock, *Existence and Attributes*, 1.391.

through the water). Charnock as a pastor wants to use vivid imagery, rather than pure abstraction, because he is trying to communicate.

But the comparison fails. Let us see why. Charnock says, “It seems to the eye to come.” But this appearance of things is in contrast to *reality*: he says, “But they *really* move to the shore.” When we take these two points together and apply them by analogy to God, God’s “drawing near” is degraded to a mere appearance, a mere seeming. Are we going to say, “It seems to the eye that Jesus has come down from heaven, but really he did not”? No.

We must not be too hard on Charnock. After all, he is only suggesting an illustration. He knows, and we know, that any such illustration is limited. Nevertheless, it is appropriate for us to consider this illustration carefully, in order to appreciate the challenges that can arise in trying to understand God’s unchangeability.

Now, if Charnock’s illustration were right, that God’s drawing near only “seems to be” motion, we might logically expect that Charnock would be forthright in his conclusion: God does not draw near to us; he merely appears to the eye to do so. But Charnock cannot bear to go there. With pastoral sensitivity, Charnock shrinks back from the full consequences of the destination to which he appeared to be heading. He says “not so much his coming to us, but . . .” Charnock with the expression “not so much” puts his weight on the description in which God draws us to himself. And yet the expression “not so much” leaves a measure in which it is still the case that God draws near. God is still coming to us. To his credit, Charnock is not going to encourage parishioners to believe that biblical instances describing God’s coming are mere “seeming” to come. Or, worse, that Jesus in coming down from heaven only seems to come.

Charnock has not eliminated the difficulty, but merely deferred it. Even the language of God’s “drawing us” suggests that God is active in a way that is not simply deducible by human rationality from his eternal, unchangeable nature. How can he “draw us” without actually sending out some influence? And is this influence merely an effect, which would be completely detached from God himself, or is this influence manifesting the presence of God? What happens if we press this illustration of the watermen? We might ask, “What, if anything, does the rope stand for?” Is it some impersonal “force” that God

sends, or does God himself send Jesus, who is God? And does God attach himself to us, so to speak, by the presence of the Holy Spirit? And if God is there with us, how did he come to be with us in this way without putting forth himself?

The trouble once again has at its root the Trinitarian mystery. Without having a root in the doctrine of the Trinity, we cannot make sense of the possibility of Trinitarian-based differentiation in modes of presence and modes of coming and remaining the same.

Charnock is locked in the horns of a dilemma, according to which God either moves (and so it may be alleged that he changes) or does not move. Charnock knows by the doctrine of unchangeability that God does not move. He has no choice but to represent God by the fixed shore rather than the moving boat, or the rope thrown out to draw the boat.

We might express two concerns about his choice of illustration.

First, do we have in James 4:8 a genuine difficulty with biblical language? Or is the difficulty generated by the fact that Charnock thinks he ought to respond to an objection that would come from a wooden understanding of “drawing near” and a philosophically refined conception of immutability? Charnock has been saying that immutability is immutability in God’s “essence.” Or with a less loaded term than *essence*, we might say that God is unchanging “in his character” or the “fundamental features of his character” or “his attributes.” Mystery remains, no matter what phrases we choose. But this unchangeability in character is narrower than the idea that just about any kind of activity could count as a genuine change. Charnock himself may have a reasonable understanding of unchangeability. But there are other, more rigid conceptions of unchangeability, and they are potential sources of problems.

To see the point, let us consider another analogy between God and man. Most people would not think that just because a human person comes across the room to greet them, he is thereby changing some fundamental aspect of his character. By analogy, would not something similar be true of God? Why should he not be able to draw near without changing fundamental aspects of his character? Why should we interpret immutability as some philosophical conception that excludes the idea of drawing near?

Charnock's starting point for his whole chapter on immutability is with Psalm 102. But Psalm 102 itself contains language about God's activity as well as his being "the same" (v. 27). Verse 13 says, "You will *arise* and have pity on Zion." *Arise* is a verb indicating motion. Must we throw this verse out, or degrade it, because of verse 27? Verse 16 continues:

For the LORD *builds up* Zion;
he *appears* in his glory.

The "appearance" suggests a spatially localized appearance somewhere in Zion. We find many other verses with vigorous divine activity (Ps. 102:17–25). Should we not interpret verse 27, which is about immutability, in harmony with the rest of the psalm?

Or has *immutability* in Charnock's discussion now become a technical term? And in actual practice, does this technical term sum up Psalm 102? Or does it rather sum up what philosophers have speculatively thought would be true of a most perfect being? If the latter, then in practice is Charnock's exposition ignoring the context of Psalm 102:27, in order to assure us that the Bible itself supports a philosophical conception that has been built initially using the resources of human reason?

Our questions here are not meant to pin on Charnock a false philosophical concept that he does not want. Rather, they are intended to show that more explanation would be useful, and that the illustrations and the phraseology that Charnock has chosen are not always ideal.

The second concern is for the issue of God's Trinitarian nature. If God is the Trinitarian God, the Father can *send* the Son into the world. Jesus can *come down* from heaven. And this sending and this coming down are not changes in the character of God, but a reflection of the eternal begetting of the Son. It is very mysterious indeed. But mystery is better than explanations that do not see the mystery.

We must allow for this differentiation, which is seen in the sending of the Son and his coming down. This differentiation must be built into our conception of immutability. The explanations without mystery too often tiptoe up to the temptation to depreciate some of the language of Scripture as mere "seeming" or "improper." In Psalm 102, verses 13–25

can become demoted in our minds on account of a certain philosophical conception that allegedly belongs to verse 27. Even the term *anthropomorphic*, which makes a legitimate point, can be misused to depreciate almost any language with which we are uncomfortable.

Creation

Now let us turn to Charnock's section responding to objections. The first objection he mentions concerns the creation of the world. How can God remain the same and also act to create the world and then have a relation to it?¹⁰

Once again, one question that we might raise about this objection is whether it represents a genuine problem. Or is it rather an artificial problem generated by philosophical conceptions of immutability? Do most Bible readers really have a difficulty here? Do they not rather think that because God is all-powerful, and his will irresistible, there is no difficulty in God's creating the world? It is precisely because he is who he is that he can create. The act of creation does not change who he is, but is rather the product of who he is.

Once again, an anthropomorphic analogy can illustrate how most people think about creation. A human being, Abbie, made in the image of God, has the ability to prepare food, let us say vegetable soup. She decides in the morning to prepare soup for supper. Later on, she actually makes the soup. She has *made* something. Would most people suppose that something fundamental about her character has changed because she made soup? By analogy, has something fundamental about God changed because he made the world? The answer is so clearly no that it makes one wonder how anyone other than a philosopher could think that God's creating the world was a difficulty that would threaten to undermine his immutability.

Or consider Psalm 102 again, the starting point for Charnock's meditations. Right before the key verses on immutability, verses 26–27, comes verse 25: "Of old you laid the foundation of the

10. Charnock, *Existence and Attributes*, 1.397–99. Later, we discuss instances of God's activity at later times in history. The difficulty is fundamentally the same. It is convenient to use later instances as well, for the sake of more clearly understanding where Scripture leads us.

earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands.” We can imagine how a philosopher might object to this verse. The philosopher says that immutability contradicts the idea of God’s doing anything such as laying the foundation of the earth or working to make the heavens. He claims that God “changes” if he lays the foundation of the earth. But this philosophical objection is artificial. How could an ordinary believer suppose that verse 25 was in tension with the immutability in verses 26–27? Rather, the noneternal character of heavens and earth in verse 25 gives testimony to the wonderful nature of the immutability of God in verses 26–27.

Charnock, of course, *does* think that God’s act of creation is compatible with the immutability of God. But he undertakes an elaborate discussion in order to demonstrate that compatibility. Why did he not simply appeal to Psalm 102:25 instead?

Well, Psalm 102:25 might not be enough to persuade some people. Psalm 102:25 is not convincing if, in fact, someone has already committed himself to a philosophical conception of immutability. This philosophical conception, in the details of its texture, does not actually match the full texture of Psalm 102 as a whole. Rather than directly challenging this erroneous conception, Charnock goes in other directions. And those other directions can then too easily be interpreted as endorsing the philosophical conception.

At an early point in his response to the objection, Charnock stresses the unchangeability of the will of God, which includes his eternal decree, which in turn includes the decree to create. Charnock rightly affirms the unchangeability of God’s decree (Isa. 46:10–11; Eph. 1:11). He distinguishes the decree and the will of God, which are eternal, from the event of creation itself, which is in time (or at the beginning of time). So far, so good. But his distinction does not yet answer the opening objection about creation. The objection focuses not on God’s decree or his will, but on the act of creation, and the subsequent situation in which God has a relation to the created order. According to an ordinary way of human speaking, the work of creating is new, and the relation is new. Charnock himself says concerning the work of creating the world, “The work was new.”¹¹ So do these new aspects represent a “change”?

11. Charnock, *Existence and Attributes*, 1.398.

One part of Charnock's answer is to say that the change is in creation, not in God.¹² Yes, that is true. But we also need to be careful to inquire as to what *kind* of change we are discussing. Are we talking about a change in fundamental aspects of God's character? No, there is no change in God's character. That ought to be enough. But from an ordinary human standpoint, something new arises, in God's *acting*. God does a new act when he actually creates the world in accord with his eternal plan.

Now, we need to be cautious about how we understand language about "new" events. For some people, the word *new* can still stir up difficulties when we have it in the same sentence as the word *God*. Certain ways of speaking might wrongly suggest that God himself changes, not just that there is a change in the world.

Let us illustrate. God acted to create plants on the third day (Gen. 1:11–12). His act of creating plants is "new" when we look at it along the timeline in which we see other acts of God taking place at other times. There were no plants before the third day. When the plants spring up on the third day, what happens is *new*. The description is from the point of view of an imagined human observer. From this kind of language, we cannot rightly deduce that God is subject to time or captive within time, or that he "has his own timeline" or "experiences time" in the same way that a human being does. Rather, the description in Genesis 1:11–12 is similar to the way that we describe all kinds of other events in time. We are looking at it from a human point of view.

God himself, when he speaks in Scripture, typically speaks this way in order to help us understand. "Behold, I am doing a *new* thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert" (Isa. 43:19). The act to which Isaiah 43:19 refers, the act of making "a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert," is "new" in comparison to other, previous points in time. It is "new" with reference to ordinary human experience and understanding of time. It does not, however, surprise God, because he planned it from the foundation of the world. When it happens, it does not result in any "new" knowledge for God. That is to say, "newness"

12. "The creation was a real change, but the change was not subjectively in God, but in the creature" (Charnock, *Existence and Attributes*, 1.397).

describes how it fits into a timeline of other events, all of which are planned by God to take place in a particular sequence. God knows comprehensively how any human being perceives anything new. But all this does not imply that God himself “experiences time” in the way that human beings experience time. To think so is to ignore the fact that he is the Creator, not a creature. God is not man (Num. 23:19).

Charnock provides his own anthropomorphic illustrations about an artificer constructing a house or a temple, or a rich man building a hospital.¹³ Let us explore these illustrations in order to see their implications. With both the artificer and the rich man, we see a distinction between planning and acting. The artificer or rich man has a plan from years beforehand. But there comes a moment when he begins to work in power in order to execute the plan. And that moment involves, in some sense, something “new.” This new something involves new actions on his part, as well as, eventually, a new product in the form of a house or temple or hospital.

Do these illustrations help us by analogy to understand God? We can see that the illustrations are not going to carry over with their full value in an application to God unless there is some kind of distinction between God’s constancy of character and the bringing to pass in the world of plans that he already had. We have already seen what are the roots of that distinction. The Father is preeminently the planner, and the Son is preeminently the executor. But without such a distinction, rooted in the Trinity, there is a difficulty in moving beyond the plans into the phase in which a person executes the plans. A god without any distinctions *at all* is a god who cannot actually *do* anything in the world. He cannot perform acts that happen in the world at particular times. There are just eternal plans, but no real change in the world. (If the act were in any way distinct from the plans, that would be a kind of distinction in God, and would undermine a philosophical conception of the simplicity of God.)

Charnock then goes on to make a claim about a *relation* to creation: “Nor is there any new relation acquired by God by the creation of the world. There is a new relation acquired by the creature.”¹⁴ Why

13. Charnock, *Existence and Attributes*, 1.398.

14. Charnock, *Existence and Attributes*, 1.399.

this kind of wording? Does the discussion once again lie in the realm of artificial problems produced by artificial philosophical reasoning?¹⁵ Does an ordinary person suppose that a relation between God and creation implies a fundamental change in God? No. It is a *relation*, not a change in God's character. Otherwise, all the changes in the created order mentioned in Psalm 102:25–27 would threaten to become changes fundamental to who God is, and would destroy the point of verse 27 about the immutability of God. Once again, Charnock could have appealed to Psalm 102:25–27, but does not. This is not an ideal strategy for his readers. His readers need examples of solving their problems from Scripture, rather than trying to answer, by abstract reasoning, philosophical conceptions that are developed in virtual independence of Scripture.

A Relation as “Lord”—No “Gain”

Charnock continues, “God gained no new relation of Lord or Creator by the creation.”¹⁶ What does Charnock mean? It is not so easy to see.

15. Specifically, Charnock's manner of speaking would make sense if relations were being treated not in their own right, but as a consequence of “relatives,” one of Aristotle's ten categories. In Aristotle's system of categories, “a relative” (category iv) is treated as being “in” a substance. The same, in fact, holds for all the categories except substance itself (Paul Studtmann, “Aristotle's Categories,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta [Fall 2017], § 1, ¶ 2, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/aristotle-categories/>). Predication using one of the categories other than a substance is equivalent to the predicate's being in the subject. In the particular case of a relative, the relative by being in a substance indicates how the substance relates to something else. Aristotle deals with relations between things not directly, but by means of his conception of category iv (see Studtmann, “Aristotle's Categories,” § 2.2.3). Aristotle's metaphysical view of relations gives rise to the question whether a relative is actually “in” God or only in our idea. Within the arena of Aristotle's metaphysics, a change in a relation “in” God is also automatically a change *in* God. See Earl Muller, “Real Relations and the Divine: Issues in Thomas's Understanding of God's Relation to the World,” *Theological Studies* 56, 4 (1995): 673–95 [678].

16. Charnock, *Existence and Attributes*, 1.399. We find a similar issue arising in Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, pt. I, QQ. 1–26 (1.67, [1a] Q. 6, art. 2, reply obj. 1): “Now a relation of God to creatures, is not a reality in God, but in the creature; for it is in God in our idea only.” Aquinas's statement leads to some questions. How

Let us proceed slowly. We may begin by focusing on the word *gained*. And earlier, Charnock used the expression, “Nor is there any new relation *acquired* by God,” using the word *acquire*.¹⁷ As usual, these are analogical expressions. We understand them by analogy with human beings.

To explore this analogy, let us think of human beings who gain or acquire something. Human beings can “gain” or “acquire” a piece of property, or “gain” a new friendship. For human beings, either of these acquisitions can represent a genuine surplus in comparison to their previous life.

In the usual case, we would not say that a particular person had changed his fundamental character just because he acquired a piece of property or a friendship. But sometimes an acquisition can produce a weightier kind of change. We may picture a man who gets a new car and is happier and more self-satisfied because of it. It seems to him to fulfill his existence. Charnock’s concern may partly be to guard against the conclusion that God “acquires” something that is an enhancement to his being or character.¹⁸

Charnock’s concern is legitimate. In contrast to mankind, God does not need to fulfill his existence. From all eternity, he is already perfectly fulfilled in the love and knowledge and communion in the persons of the Trinity. The same is true when God has what we might call a “new” possession in the form of the created world—new from the point of view of our standpoint in time. Or he has a “new

is the relation “in God in our idea only,” when a relation is *between* two things? Might it be the case that the relation itself is not actually “in” either one of the two things, but rather *between* them? Does the difficulty for Aquinas arise because Aristotle treats “a relative” as one of the categories (chap. 21, category iv) that attach to substances, so that in some way a relation is “in” the substance (see previous footnote)? We can also ask whether, if the relation is “in our idea only,” it is in the end an illusion. Aquinas brings up issues that we have seen in other places about whether some things that appear on an ordinary level are actually illusory, when considered from the allegedly deeper point of view offered by a philosophical analysis. But if so, is the difficulty actually with the category system presupposed by the philosophical analysis, rather than with the nature of the world? See also Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1.165–68, [1a] Q. 13, art. 7; 2.16, [1a] Q. 28, art. 1, reply obj. 3.

17. Charnock, *Existence and Attributes*, 1.399.

18. Or, worse, is Charnock constrained to respond to a difficulty stemming from Aristotle’s category iv, “a relative”?

friendship" in the form of a relation to Abraham, who is called "a friend of God" (James 2:23). These events do not add a "surplus" that would allegedly "help" God reach a supposedly new level of self-fulfillment.

God is self-sufficient. He does not have needs (Acts 17:25). He does not *need* possessions outside himself, and he does not *need* relations with things outside himself (Job 41:11; Ps. 50:12; Rom. 11:36). From this point of view, we want to say that God does not "gain" anything when he creates. He "has" everything he needs already, namely, himself. Or we could say that he has no needs. That is another way of saying that he is self-sufficient.

But in addition, we know from the mystery of Trinitarian teaching that God has in himself a wonderful fecundity or creativity, which we see in the Father's eternally begetting the Son, and eternally speaking the Word, and eternally imaging himself in the eternal Image, who is the Son. There is no "gain" in time in such activities because they are eternal activities. They always belong to who God is.

These eternal activities are the foundation for God's producing on a lower level things outside himself in the created world.¹⁹ There is an ultimate pattern in God, namely, in the eternal generation of the Son, for God to "gain" things outside himself, without undermining his completeness. But there is also mystery because creation is completely distinct from God. It is not an emanation that would allegedly participate in him. The word *gain* or *acquire*, however, is not a good word to describe creation. It too easily suggests a need in God. Could we say that there "arises" a relation between God and the created world?

We should be cautious here. There is always mystery when we talk about God and his actions. God is always the same (Ps. 102:27). In addition, the Bible indicates that he produces all kinds of effects in the world, at different times, and he establishes relationships with creatures who are in time. The Bible customarily describes how God acts in time in a way that makes sense to human beings who are themselves in time. At one time, God created light. At a later time, he created Adam and Eve. At a still later time, he banished Adam and Eve from the garden of Eden. In harmony with this way of talking

19. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 2:332–33.

about God's actions, we might talk about relations. As soon as God creates the world, he has a relation to the world that he has created. The relation arises because God himself has both brought the world into being and established the relation.

Charnock is right to guard against the idea of enhancing or fulfilling what was previously unfulfilled. But the way in which he does so is not ideal. The general formula, "no new relation is acquired by God," could easily imply that God is not involved—a deistic god. Charnock cannot mean that, but the formula can still lead there. The minds of some readers may bring to this formula an abstract philosophical conception of immutability.²⁰ Immutability as a philosophical conception might be virtually equivalent to paralysis and total uninvolvedness, because involvement would imply relationships. We will comment further on this philosophical conception in a later chapter.

Charnock offers another illustration to help us:

As when a man sins, he hath another relation to God than he had before; he hath relation to God as a criminal to a judge; but there is no change in God, but in the malefactor. The being of men makes no more change in God than the sins of men.²¹

In this illustration, Charnock is using an anthropomorphic analogy. He compares God to a human judge. So let us first consider the human side of this analogy. We imagine a situation in which a man breaks the law and thereby becomes a malefactor. When the man breaks the law, he comes into a new relation to the local judge. There is a change in relation. The criminal changes, in that he has broken the law. And this change in the criminal results in a change in his relation to the judge. On the other hand, the judge does not change in his character. So by anthropomorphic analogy, the sinner changes and God does not. So far, so good.

But Charnock has not tackled head-on the issue of a relation that

20. And in addition, they could also have an Aristotelian concept of relations in the background.

21. Charnock, *Existence and Attributes*, 1.399.

is *two-sided*. If we focus on the question of *two-sidedness*, we find a difficulty. On the human side, the criminal comes into a new relation. After he commits a crime, he has “another” *relation*, a new relation, “as a criminal to a judge.” Would we not also say that the judge relates as a judge to the criminal? The relation looks like a two-sided relation. The criminal is responsible to answer to the judge, and conversely the judge relates to the criminal *as judge* by judicially evaluating the case and pronouncing a sentence, leading to punishment. The relation that the judge has toward the criminal is a relation between the judge and the criminal. The relation involves both parties. It is, moreover, a relation that the judge did not have with the criminal until the criminal committed his crime.

Suppose now that we apply this illustration to God, using the anthropomorphic analogy that Charnock has set up. The analogy seems to imply that God does not change, but that he *does* have “another” relation to the sinner than he had before the sinner committed sin. This result is the opposite of what Charnock wants. He wants a new relation for the sinner *only*. Likewise, with respect to the act in which God creates the world, Charnock wants a new relation in creatures *only*.²²

In the subsequent sentences, Charnock makes an attempt to defend the idea that God does not gain a relation of Lord or Creator:

As a man may be called a skilful writer though he does not write, because he is able to do it when he pleases; or a man skilful in physic is called a physician though he doth not practise that skill, . . . so the name Creator and Lord belongs to God from eternity, because he could create and rule though he did not create and rule.²³

How do we evaluate this reasoning? Charnock's positive point is, of course, valid. God always has the capabilities to create and to rule.

But Charnock's analogy with a writer or a physician also shows up a gap in his reasoning. The writer has the ability to write, but

22. Once again, we must avoid thinking that the word *new* forces God to be captive within time. The word *new* describes an event with reference to the timeline of developments within the world.

23. Charnock, *Existence and Attributes*, 1.399.

something new happens when he actually writes. Let us say that he writes a novel. From then on, he has a relation to the novel. The relation consists in the fact that he is the author of the novel. From then on, he is not merely an “author” in general. He is the author of something, namely, the novel. In addition, the novel has a relation to him, in that it is authored by him.

Charnock has introduced his appeal to a writer or a physician with the intent of making an anthropomorphic analogy with God. So let us see where the analogy leads when applied to God. Suppose we view God’s acts from our viewpoint as creatures within time, which is similar to how the Bible itself typically describes these acts. (It describes things *for our benefit*.) When God actually creates the creation, something is happening, namely, that he creates. From then on, he has a relation to the creation, in the fact that he is the Creator of that creation. (See fig. 34.5.)

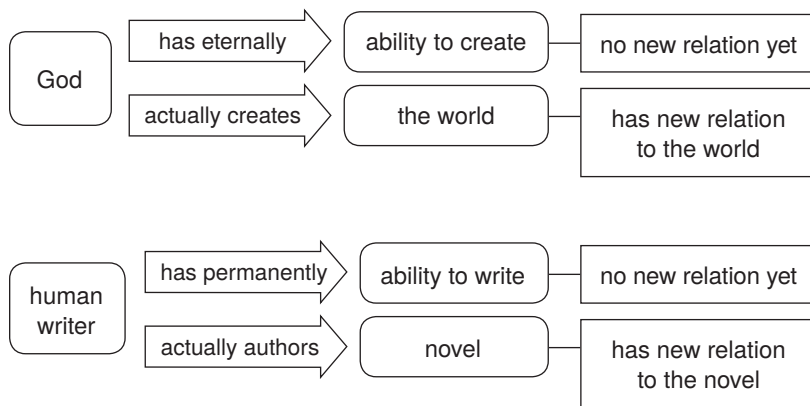


Fig. 34.5. God Compared to a Writer

Suppose that, for the sake of argument, we grant that the expression “God is Creator” *could* mean merely that he has the capability of creating. Still, when he actually does create, he is not a “creator” merely in general. He is the Creator of *this world*. He has a relation to the world that he did not have until he created it. (As usual, we are speaking about later and earlier times, according to the usual way that human beings talk about events taking place at various times.) Similar observations can be made about his being Lord of the world.

Charnock's anthropomorphic analogies do not actually support his conclusion, the conclusion that there is no change *in relation*.

Charnock seems to realize that his reasoning may not be persuasive, so he makes a concession that maybe it could be done another way:

But howsoever, if there were any such change of relation, that God may be called Creator and Lord after the creation and not before, it is not a change in essence, nor in knowledge, nor in will; God gains no perfection nor diminution by it, his knowledge is not increased by it; he is no more by it than he was and will be if all things ceased.²⁴

Properly understood, what Charnock says here is consistent with biblical teaching. Charnock, by using language such as “after the creation” and “not before,” is speaking in a common human way. It is also a common way that the Bible speaks about what takes place before and after various events in time. Charnock is describing God's acts in time from the perspective of what it looks like from a human point of view. The language is adapted to human beings. And so is Charnock's comparison of God to a writer or a physician. From this standpoint, it is right to say, “God gains no perfection.” He gains no new attribute. And yet this truth is compatible, according to Charnock, with there being a “change of relation.”²⁵

So why did he earlier deny any “change of relation”? What concern was behind his earlier reasoning? It would have been clearer and easier for him to say that there *is* a change of relation, but that it is consistent with immutability, properly understood.

Nevertheless, Charnock clearly *prefers* the position that there is “no new relation of Lord or Creator.” The textual material beginning with

24. Charnock, *Existence and Attributes*, 1.399.

25. Compare Turretin's formulation: “Now when God *became the Creator*, he was not changed in himself (for nothing new happened to him, for from eternity he had the efficacious will of creating the world in time), but only in order to the creature (because a new relation took place with it)” (Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison Jr., trans. George Musgrave Giger [Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1992], 1.205 V, italics mine).

“But howsoever” is hypothetical: “*if there were any such change . . .*.” The position that there is no new relation makes sense if Charnock is being influenced by a philosophically driven conception of immutability that generates a very strong pressure to admit no change at all, no change of any kind, period. Let us call it *the philosophical principle of no change*. Charnock himself does not actually hold to this philosophical principle. But it may be one factor that influences his choice of wording.

Denying That God Changes

This philosophical principle does not follow from the Bible. Again, consider the analogy with human action. Abbie’s actions in the world change things out in the world. In ordinary circumstances, however, we do not say that such actions change Abbie. If she prepares vegetable soup, it does not imply that anything changes about her character. So with God, by anthropomorphic analogy. His actions are perfectly consistent with the fact that he himself does not change.

Now, in a minute analysis, we could qualify the picture with Abbie. Let us suppose that Carol watches Abbie carefully as Abbie is preparing the soup. Carol could say, “See, I saw her move her arm. See, I saw her fingers come together to hold a knife. I can also infer that things happened in the neurons of her brain, sending out signals to her muscles. Things happened mentally as she paid attention to what she was doing and controlled the various steps in cutting up the vegetables.” So if Carol were disposed to fight, she might claim that there are changes in Abbie. She declares triumphantly, “See, Abbie changed!”

But even this kind of observation does not affect what is true concerning God. For one thing, the focus on technical detail is not how we ordinarily deal with human action. If Carol told someone, “Abbie has changed,” without explaining a technical context and the unusual way in which she is using the word *changed*, she would be misunderstood. By analogy, in communicating about God, we should put a premium on being understood.

Moreover, we have already stressed that the relation between God and Abbie is one of analogy. God does not move physical arms and

fingers. God does not have physical neurons in a physical brain. God is eternal and infinite, so that the mysteries concerning his mind and thoughts are inconceivable to us. When we see God act in the world, we cannot infer technical “details” about some alleged “process” in God. If we stretch our word *change*, we might talk ourselves into believing that we can say that the very fact that God acts means that he “changes.” But that is to invite miscommunication and misunderstanding. We are in danger of being wise in our own eyes.

God's acts are mysterious. But that does not prevent us from following the pattern of Scripture in what we say. God does not change (Ps. 102:27; Mal. 3:6). God does act, in numerous ways, in the world. He speaks to us, he judges, he brings miracles. He raised Christ from the dead *on the third day*. All of this, of course, we are saying from a human point of view. We are creatures in time, and we see one act of God after another, unfolding in time. We use anthropomorphic language to describe what God does. The Bible itself talks this way, and there is nothing wrong with it. God himself, by speaking this way in the Bible, endorses this way of describing him. It is true description.

The Incarnation

Next, Charnock takes up an objection related to the incarnation. The question is whether the incarnation involves a change in God. Charnock holds to Chalcedonian Christology (which is the biblically justified view). Very briefly, Chalcedonian doctrine says that as the divine Son, the second person of the Trinity exists forever and is unchanging in his divine nature. But in the incarnation, he assumed a human nature. Since the moment of incarnation, he is one person, the Son, Jesus Christ, with two natures, a divine nature and a human nature.

Charnock presupposes this view. He rightly answers the objection related to the incarnation by saying that there was no change in the divine nature of the Son at the incarnation, but an addition of a human nature to the Son.

But Charnock could have gone on from there to make further observations about the incarnation. The incarnation shows us that the nature of God, and the nature of the divine Son, is in harmony with

the fact that at a particular time the Son “assumed human nature”—Charnock’s own wording.²⁶ (See fig. 34.6.)

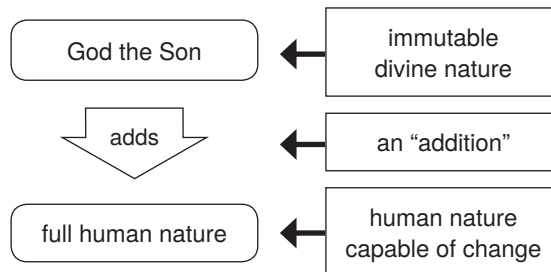


Fig. 34.6. Immutability and Incarnation

The doctrine of immutability needs to be reinspected to make sure that we think of immutability in harmony with this spectacular fact about the Son. Note that something is “added” to the Son, or “assumed” by the Son, namely, human nature. The Son remains the same as the divine Son. But he adds human nature. This fact is a barrier to any simple, one-level philosophical reasoning that would try to make the meaning of immutability transparent.

God is immutable. Since the Son is God, the Son as God is immutable. The fact that the Son assumed human nature should lay to rest speculation about immutability. From the incarnation, we know that immutability is compatible in principle with at least one kind of “addition,” namely, the assumption of human nature. If so, then by analogy it is compatible with adding a new title “Lord” or “Creator,” or adding a relation (in this case, a relation to the human nature that is assumed). It is also worthwhile to emphasize that these additions are eternally planned in the counsel of the Lord. God’s eternal plan includes many references to things that will happen within this world at particular times.

It is also worth reminding ourselves that the incarnation itself has a deeper basis. It is not a mere accident that the Son became incarnate, instead of the Father or the Spirit. The incarnation took place as one aspect of God’s program for redemption. But it is in harmony

26. Charnock, *Existence and Attributes of God*, 1.399.

with the fact that the Father is always the Father in relation to the Son. The Father-Son relation, in the context of the love expressed in the Holy Spirit, is an eternal relation, not something that is added as a result of creation or in the course of history. An eternal relation in which the Father begets the Son is the archetype for the event in time in which the Son becomes incarnate: “And the angel answered her, ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; *therefore* the child to be born will be called holy—the *Son of God*’” (Luke 1:35). All this is mysterious and incomprehensible.

In sum, the archetypal background for God’s acting in history in the incarnation is a Trinitarian background. This background is the “ontologically basic” background for dealing with the difficulties in understanding God’s relation to creation and to time. Charnock had the example of the incarnation in front of him. But he did not follow the path of using it as a significant clue to the broader challenge of understanding God’s attributes.

The Attributes in the Light of the Resurrection of Christ

We may add that in principle Charnock could also have used the resurrection of Christ as a fruitful starting point. As we have pointed out, the resurrection involves the Trinitarian action of God, with distinctive participation for each of the persons of the Trinity. It is the hinge of history, and so it is a particularly fruitful focus when we are dealing with God’s immutability. God is indeed immutable. He shows himself to be that in the event of the resurrection. But the event also shows the harmony between his immutability and his robust action in bringing about events in time and space.

Key Terms

analogy

anthropomorphism²⁷

attributes

27. Key terms in bold are defined in the glossary at the end of this volume.

change
Charnock
creation
creaturely comparison
immutability
incarnation
new
omnipresent
philosophy
relation

Study Questions

1. How does Charnock undertake to answer objections to the immutability of God?
2. What key illustrations does Charnock use?
3. What are some of the limitations of the illustrations?
4. What philosophical conception of immutability might be in the background?
5. How is the doctrine of the Trinity relevant to understanding how God acts in the world at particular times?

For Further Reading

Charnock, Stephen. *The Existence and Attributes of God*. In *The Complete Works of Stephen Charnock*. Carlisle, PA/Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2010. 1.397–400.

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Prayer

Our God, we thank you for the life and work of Stephen Charnock and his faithfulness in trying to set forth your attributes. We thank you for his pastoral care. We thank you for the ways in which his book on divine attributes is a help and encouragement to many, up to this day, to worship you with the awe and reverence that you

deserve. We pray that you would continue to use his book, but also, where there are deficiencies, to enable people to grow in understanding your Word. May they in their own knowledge of you surpass even what he has written.

PART 7

DEALING WITH CHALLENGES

We consider how to respond to the influence of Aristotle's system on classical Christian theism.

Avoiding Dangers in Thinking

HOW MIGHT WE best move forward, given what we have seen in our brief selections from the history of theology (chaps. 25–34)?

Assessing Turretin and Charnock

We may begin by continuing to look back, in order to see whether there are lessons to be learned. We may remember that Francis Turretin had to avoid two errors, which we called simply error 1 and error 2: (1) do not overdistinguish the attributes; and (2) do not underdistinguish them. Overdistinguishing the attributes leads to the temptation to divide God up among the attributes, and disintegrates the unity of God. Underdistinguishing the attributes leads to the temptation to collapse all their meanings into one, and dissolve meaningful knowledge of God or meaningful ways of speaking about God that are actually true. In error 1, we assimilate God too easily to our own thinking about the world. We fall into a form of non-Christian immanence. In error 2, we collapse all the meanings into one, and then we scarcely find a good way to talk about God at all. We fall into a form of non-Christian transcendence.

Charnock is dealing with some of the same issues. He too steers himself between these two errors. But there is something more to note. In analyzing Charnock, we began to focus more on how a philosophical conception of immutability can corrupt the biblical teaching about immutability, such as what is found in Psalm 102. Now, we want

to be charitable to Charnock. He starts with Psalm 102. He does not *want* to be corrupted by unbelieving philosophy. And we may hope that, in his own personal piety, he was not. But his writings organize the discussion by using classical technical terms for God's attributes. That presents not only a positive opportunity to link ourselves with the wisdom of the past, but a danger of being corrupted by the corruptions of the past. Moreover, in answering objections, it sometimes appears that Charnock is answering objections that come more from a philosophical concept of immutability than from Psalm 102.

Where the Two Errors Lead

So let us think a little more about philosophical concepts of immutability. The principal danger is that we let our reasoning ignore the guidance of Scripture, with overconfidence in our ability to deduce what God is like. We loosen our tether with Scripture, even if it is still somewhere there in the background. Where could this lead?

The Path of Results of Error 1

Let us begin with error 1. Let us imagine a person, Alice, who strongly feels the pull of error 1. In her eyes, the ways in which God is like man grow large and threaten to overwhelm the distinctions between God and man. As Alice begins to assimilate God to man, she might tell herself, "Just get it over with and deny that God is immutable." If she still wants to appeal to Scripture to justify her views, she can focus on anthropomorphic language that describes God as personal, in terms similar to how we would describe a human person. If she presses this language, especially with an autonomous, one-level conception of what it means to be personal, she ends up with a god who is a larger version of the best of mankind. In practice, god has been brought down to size. He is thoroughly and unashamedly part of the world. He is subject to the limitations imposed by the world, and he is right there struggling with us. He may be Alice's friend and her helper, but he is not really worthy of her awe, her worship, and her complete submission. He is in a relation of mutual give-and-take with her.

Let us call this end point *mutuality theology*.¹ What Alice has is a finite substitute for God. God is close to her, as a friend, but not transcendent.

Error 2

Now consider error 2. We imagine another figure, Bob, who feels the pull of this error. He reasons that immutability, when pressed, using a purely abstract idea of perfection, must mean “perfect” immutability, maximal immutability, that would be incompatible with any suggestion of change of any kind. The god he might picture is a god that cannot interact with the world. He cannot create. He cannot make friends with his people. He cannot establish a relation to his people, for “establishing a relation” would be a change. He cannot act to do anything or cause anything in the world, for such an act would be a change. The only god that would work to satisfy an abstract perfection of this kind would be a god of total isolation and total paralysis, total inactivity.

An abstract concept of simplicity, untethered to Scripture, can have further effects. Each attribute is identical with the essence of God, to use a common formulation. In particular, God’s knowledge is identical with his essence. Therefore, all his knowledge is necessary.² Since creation is not necessary to God, his knowledge cannot include knowledge of creation or a plan for creation. Creation is impossible. This is non-Christian immanence, determining by human reasoning what it allows God to do.

Moreover, each attribute of God is identical also with all the other attributes. Therefore, we do not know the meaning of any of them.

1. James E. Dolezal, *All That Is in God: Evangelical Theology and the Challenge of Classical Christian Theism* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2017), 1, has a similar label, *theistic mutualism*. I have chosen a slightly different label because I want to designate the *end point* of a theological tendency, rather than designate a group of theologians.

2. Theologians sometimes distinguish *necessary knowledge*, God’s knowledge of himself that belongs to him by nature, and *free knowledge*, knowledge of the world based on the free decision to create the world. That distinction is ultimately based on a biblically rich conception of God, and is inconsistent with a purely abstract, autonomous conception of simplicity, which would eliminate all distinctions in God.

So knowledge of God is impossible. This is non-Christian transcendence. God is described in a way similar to Leibniz's conception of a *monad*. In Leibniz's philosophy, a *monad* is a basic unit of the world, with "no windows." It is isolated.

We may consider this extreme conclusion artificial. But something very like it has actually been advocated in the history of philosophy, by the Neoplatonist Plotinus, whose god was "the One."³

Let us call this end point *monadic theology*, because the conception of oneness, the *monad*, has swallowed up every other feature.⁴ (See table 35.1.)

Table 35.1. Two Errors

Error 1	Error 2
non-Christian immanence	non-Christian transcendence
God just like man	God distant from man
God changeable	God inactive
God subject to created order	God distant from created order
God reduced to human knowledge	God unknowable
mutuality theology	monadic theology

Attractive Centers

These two extremes, mutuality theology and monadic theology, have not only attractions for unwary Christian pilgrims, but repulsions. If a Christian sees one extreme and becomes aware of its

3. John M. Frame, *A History of Western Philosophy and Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2015), 78–80; Lloyd Gerson, "Plotinus," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Fall 2018), § 2, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2018/entries/plotinus/>. Plotinus's version of god was "the One." In his view, the One had necessary emanations, rather than being totally isolated. But is that not inconsistent with pure unity?

4. Herman Bavinck perceives both dangers: "a God who is nothing but an enlarged version of a human person and a cold abstraction that freezes and destroys the religion of the heart" (*Reformed Dogmatics* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004], 2:47).

dangerous error, he can react by unwittingly moving closer to the other extreme. We can picture the two errors as being like two suction pools on two sides of the pilgrim's path. Each pool has attractive suction. In the end, the suction is that of autonomous reason, reason in rebellion. Reason is being twisted as it was when Adam and Eve took the forbidden fruit. But it can sound plausible. For alert pilgrims, already trained in the Scripture, each pool also produces repulsion. Pilgrims want to stay clear, and warn fellow pilgrims to stay clear.

We may give fanciful names to the suction pools. The suction pool of error 1 is quicksand. The person who falls into it cannot get out because his god is too small to get him out. His god is caught in the same quicksand that he is in. The suction pool of error 2 is a black hole. No light comes out of it. The god of suction pool 2 is pure darkness, about whom nothing is known and who cannot reveal himself. The quicksand suction pool is a form of non-Christian immanence. The black-hole suction pool is a form of non-Christian transcendence. Both pools are grim and frightening. They threaten the spiritual life of the people of God. (See table 35.2.)

Table 35.2. Two Suction Pools

Error 1	Error 2
mutuality theology	monadic theology
quicksand	black hole

The Task of Avoiding the Suction Pools

Aquinas and the Reformers and Turretin and Charnock functioned as Christian leaders in their own day. They all had familiarity with the Scripture. They knew God, so they knew enough to try to keep themselves and fellow pilgrims away from the two suction pools. In their pastoral moments, in their moments guided by Scripture, they did.

But we need to reckon with the challenges of life in the present age, life before the second coming of Christ. The two suction pools cannot simply be dredged up and permanently removed from being hazardous to pilgrims. Fallen human nature is corrupted, and reason

is corrupted. Moreover, we have behind us a history, in which people have sometimes fallen into one of the two pools, but sometimes also whirled and whirled around the edge, not reaching the point of no return, but still enticing others to come in as far as they are in.

The task of pilgrimage is not easy, and guiding pilgrims is not easy. None of us pilgrims, wounded by sin in the mind, can claim to be completely free from more subtle seductions or suctions from one or both of the pools.

Moreover, different situations, different cultures, and different parts of the church may have strengths and weaknesses at different points. Twenty-first-century America is becoming addicted to the cult of authenticity, the cult of self-affirmation, the cult of worshipping one's own dreams and feelings. In such a context, the quicksand is close at hand. The message is "Make god after your own image."

But this same context can also flip people easily to the other pool. New-age mysticism grows. And one form of that is wanting union with the One. The black hole becomes a promise for final authenticity. This suction says to pilgrims, "Find the mystical darkness of the divine within you."

Evaluation of Classical Christian Theistic Terminology

The heritage of classical Christian theism, as we have examined it particularly in Francis Turretin and Stephen Charnock, still bears fruit today in bringing us into a robust understanding of the transcendence of God. He is awesome. He is infinite. His understanding is unsearchable. He is incomprehensible. Isaiah 40 brings us a ringing affirmation of the majesty of God. We deeply need this truth in an age of shallowness, meaninglessness, and ignorance of God.

But if we have to evaluate these writings from the past, we can, amid many gems, find difficulties. In the wording, if not in the intentions of the writers, there are sometimes drifts toward the black hole. The texts do not fall completely into the black hole, never to escape. They keep themselves back from the full flights of autonomous reason. But the drift toward abstract terms and abstract reasoning can lead people into a feeling of remoteness. Is God still a personal God for them, a God who draws near and befriends them?

How are the pastors going to convey the tender care of God?

He will tend his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms;
he will carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead those that are with young. (Isa. 40:11)

In each generation, the pastors, who are themselves undershepherds (1 Peter 5:2–4), will use the anthropomorphic language and the language of creaturely comparison common in Scripture. If they are wise, they will do so unapologetically. They will not rely mostly on technical terms. Those terms have their value and their uses, as we have seen. But they are quick summaries, pointing to the larger richness, indeed the infinite richness, of who God is.

It is striking, is it not, that the tender picture of the shepherd in Isaiah 40:11 stands immediately preceding a longer section magnifying the majesty and infinity of God (vv. 12–31). The infinite capabilities of God, displayed in creation and providence, support our confidence in him as Shepherd. Precisely because he is infinite, he is competent to care for all our needs, and to know and acknowledge and touch all the intimate details of those needs. And conversely, precisely in the experience of receiving his tender care, we see his infinity manifested in the infinite depth and wisdom of that care.

We understand God's infinity not primarily by staring at the technical term *infinity*, nor by letting our reasoning powers loose to see what we can deduce from our conception of infinity without the aid of Scripture. Rather, we understand God's infinity primarily by reading Isaiah 40:12–31, Genesis 1, Psalms 102 and 104, and the other passages that unapologetically present the greatness of God in poetic and also ordinary language.

It is he who sits above the circle of the earth,
and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers;
who stretches out the heavens like a curtain,
and spreads them like a tent to dwell in;
who brings princes to nothing,
and makes the rulers of the earth as emptiness.

Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown,
scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth,
when he blows on them, and they wither,
and the tempest carries them off like stubble. (Isa. 40:22–24)

A technical term for God's attributes summarizes these teachings under a single label. But it is not a substitute that displaces the Bible.

C. S. Lewis's Advice

C. S. Lewis, with his literary sensitivity, understood the dynamics of growing in communion with God:

But you must admit that Scripture doesn't take the slightest pains to guard the doctrine of Divine Impassibility. We are constantly represented as exciting the Divine wrath or pity—even as “grieving” God. I know this language is analogical. But when we say that, we must not smuggle in the idea that we can throw the analogy away and, as it were, get in behind it to a purely literal truth. All we can really substitute for the analogical expression is some theological abstraction. And the abstraction's value is almost entirely negative. It warns us against drawing absurd consequences from the analogical expression by prosaic extrapolations. . . . I suggest two rules for exegetics. (1) Never take the images literally. (2) When the purport of the images—what they say to our fear and hope and will and affections—seems to conflict with the theological abstractions, trust the purport of the images every time. For our abstract thinking is itself a tissue of analogies: a continual modelling of spiritual reality in legal or chemical or mechanical terms. Are these likely to be more adequate than the sensuous, organic, and personal images of scripture—light and darkness, river and well, seed and harvest, master and servant, hen and chickens, father and child? The footprints of the Divine are more visible in that rich soil than across rocks or slag-heaps.⁵

5. C. S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1964), 51–52. I thank Jack Collins for drawing my attention to this passage.

The Resurrection of Christ and the Two Suction Pools

The resurrection of Christ has a relevance for the challenge of the two suction pools. The resurrection of Christ declares the majesty of the God who rules all history for the sake of his Son, and who raises him to comprehensive rule (Phil. 2:9–11). That pushes us away from the quicksand. The resurrection also has relevance for the black hole. The resurrection is a specific event, in time and space, with personal benefits for us. Christ invites us to trust in him and receive resurrection life ourselves. The invitation is personal. The concreteness and specificity keep us free from the black hole.

Key Terms

anthropomorphic⁶ language

Charnock

immanence

monadic theology

mutuality theology

suction pools

transcendence

Turretin

Study Questions

1. What are the two main errors that theologians struggle to avoid in setting forth the doctrine of God?
2. How do these errors distort the biblical teaching on God's transcendence and immanence?
3. How does the Bible help us in steering clear of these errors?
4. Why do the errors have both an attraction and a repulsion?

6. Key terms in bold are defined in the glossary at the end of this volume.

For Further Reading

Frame, John M. *The Doctrine of God*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002. Chap. 7.

———. “God and Biblical Language: Transcendence and Immanence.” In *God’s Inerrant Word*, edited by John W. Montgomery, 159–77. Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1974. <https://frame-poythress.org/god-and-biblical-language-transcendence-and-immanence/>. Accessed February 28, 2020.

Prayer

Dear Lord, please keep us free from fundamental errors in our understanding of you—from the quicksand and the black hole. Enable us also to begin to guide others faithfully about these issues.

The Issue of New Relation

GIVEN THE DANGER in the two suction pools, let us now inspect more closely the issue Charnock raised (chap. 33) about whether a new relation can arise between God and the world, or between God and a person in the world. The principle that Charnock advocates is that no “new relation is acquired by God.”¹ There are some unclear aspects about Charnock’s understanding. We might hope that Charnock’s whole purpose is (1) to avoid the idea that God “acquires” something new that enhances his existence; and (2) to avoid the idea that God is subject to time, captive in time, just like a human being. If he were just like a human being, it would follow that he experiences something “new,” and does so the same way we do. These are both worthy concerns. But by itself, Charnock’s wording can also suggest to readers a broader philosophical principle, which we earlier called the philosophical principle of no change.

This principle is problematic. Disaster overtakes us when we try to apply this principle not to creation, but to a covenant. Let us see how.

God’s Covenant-Making

Consider the covenantal language of the Old Testament. God in covenant says, “And I will be their God, and they shall be my people”

1. Stephen Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, in *The Complete Works of Stephen Charnock* (Carlisle, PA/Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2010), 1.399.

(Jer. 31:33; compare Lev. 26:12; Ezek. 36:28). To most readers of the Bible, that wording certainly sounds as if it is speaking about a relation—a covenantal relation—between God and his people. It certainly sounds as if the relation runs in both directions. God is “their God,” and they are “my people.” (See fig. 36.1.)

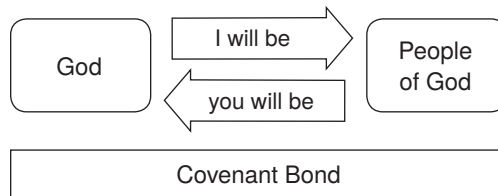


Fig. 36.1. The Covenant between God and His People

When do these events take place? Jeremiah 31 prophesies concerning a future time of restoration and blessing, when God will make “a new covenant” with his people (v. 31). God will renew their hearts (v. 33; Ezek. 36:26). The fulfillment is inaugurated in the new covenant about which Jesus and Hebrews speak (1 Cor. 11:25; Heb. 8:8–13). For our purposes, the main point to notice about Jeremiah 31:33 is that at some future time, God creates a new covenantal relation with his people. As usual, the word *new* describes the dawning of the covenantal relation with reference to the timeline in which human history unfolds.

But now picture an advocate for the philosophical principle of *no new relation*. Let us call him Ted. How does he advise us? For the sake of a philosophical understanding of immutability, Ted says that the relation is totally on one side. God has no new relation, but his people do. Is this intelligible? What is God saying when he says, “I will be their God”? Is that the part that gives us a new relation to him, but he has no new relation to us? Yet he is *committing* himself. He is making a promise. He did not do it before, and now he is doing it. It looks for all the world as if he is active.

God also says that “they shall be my people.” This part is even more a problem for Ted’s philosophical principle, because it looks as though God is adding what we might call a *possession*. He is claiming the people as his possession. Of course, he possessed them as

creatures of his before. But he is not simply acknowledging that fact. He is saying that he will possess them in a new mode, a new dimension, with a new intimacy.

Christ Our Husband

Now we come to Christ as the husband and the church as the bride, as expounded in Ephesians 5:25–27 and Revelation 19:7–9. How do we understand these passages? We know that marriage is a covenant (Mal. 2:14). Surely Christ's commitment to his bride is also a covenant. That is to say, the analogy of marriage is one way of looking at the new covenant in Christ's blood. (See fig. 36.2.)

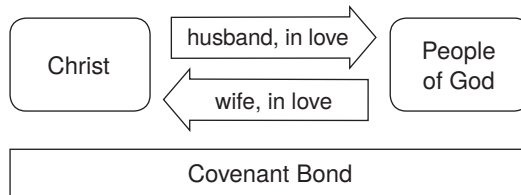


Fig. 36.2. Christ as Our Husband

Now, do we believe that husband and wife both make a commitment to the other? Surely we do. Do we believe that they both enter into a new relation to their spouse? Surely we do. But Ted forbids us from saying that Christ has a new relation to us. Really? This conclusion, which follows from the philosophical principle, is an attack on the reality and intensity of Christ's love and commitment.

Well, Ted could try to escape by postulating that the covenant is between the church and only the human nature of Christ. That way, he hopes, he can protect his conception of the immutability of God. It will not work. Christ's covenant is the fulfillment of the Old Testament commitment in which *God* says, "I will be their *God*." Already in the Old Testament, God presents himself as the husband of his people (Isa. 54:5; Jer. 31:32; Ezek. 16:8; Hos. 2:16; etc.). To say that we do not receive *God's* commitment and God's love in Christ, but just a *human* commitment, is to begin to evaporate the heart of the New Testament.

A New Picture of God's Relation to the World

Ted now tries another way to escape. He postulates that since God is “outside time,” all relations are eternal from his point of view. There is no new relation ever. On our side, we experience relations as something new in time. Does this postulate rescue his philosophical principle?

We know from the Bible that God is the one “declaring the end from the beginning” (Isa. 46:10). God knows all things. He acquires no new knowledge. Nothing takes him by surprise. He is the eternal God. His relation to time is mysterious. So we want to be careful not to suggest that he is immersed in time, subject to time, limited to time. We cannot assume that he “experiences” time in the way that we as human beings have experiences. What God does is not the same as a man, and is not parallel to human experience. A word such as *new*, which is a time-related word, must be used with caution when we are thinking about God.

But all along, throughout the Bible, God talks to us in terms that we can understand. And Charnock too, in his use of the Bible and in his appeal to various human illustrations, is adopting this point of view. He compares God to an artificer, a writer, a physician, a judge. Literally to have God's “point of view” is impossible for anyone except God himself. So one issue would be what Ted actually means in talking about God's point of view.

For the sake of argument, let us suppose that Ted could present a plausible explanation of how things might look from God's point of view. Ted says that the description of a relation as *new* is appropriate only on our side. In fact, Ted's explanation does not provide us with any real progress with the central difficulty. To see why, we have to return to the covenantal language in the Old and New Testaments.

Biblical promises such as “I will be their God” (Jer. 31:33) have *tense* to them. They speak about events happening at particular times. They do not directly speak to a point of view that only God has; they speak to *us*—we who are in time. From the standpoint of the original readers of Jeremiah 31:33, a new relation is being promised, and that new relation will actually arise at some time in the future. And when Christ at the Last Supper speaks of the “new covenant” (Luke 22:20;

1 Cor. 11:25), a new relation is being established, either right then or at the time of his death. This new relation is a marriage relation, according to Ephesians 5:25–27, though it is not consummated until Revelation 19:7–9. God through the Bible is addressing us in terms of our location in time. In this marriage relation, both husband and wife actively participate.

Of course, we should *also* observe that God has an unchanging plan. God had a plan for salvation and a plan for the work of Christ even before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4; 1 Peter 1:20; Rev. 17:8). The plan never changes. But new events unfold in time when God executes the plan.

Now, the central issue is not actually whether, hypothetically, Ted can explain how it all looks from God's point of view "outside time." The central issue is whether what the Bible says is true. If it is, then, to be sure, it gives us truth expressed in terms that we can understand. These terms may not be the only possible way of expressing the truth. But it is nevertheless the truth that we are hearing. It is truth from God's own mouth. Therefore, we have authorization from God to believe and affirm what God says. Consequently, we can confidently say that there *is* a new relation, which includes both Christ and us, when he is espoused to us in the new covenant. Ted's philosophical position contradicts this truth. Therefore, the philosophical position is wrong. It may try to retreat to a hypothetical heavenly viewpoint. But this just amounts to papering over its denial of Scripture.

Ted's response might be to say that our perception of a new relation between Christ and us only *appears* to be a new relation with respect to both parties. It is not, actually. Ted claims that what we have in Scripture is anthropomorphic language, accommodated language.

What do we think? We have seen this kind of move before. What Scripture gives us is indeed anthropomorphic language. In this case, it is the language comparing Christ to a human husband and the church to a human wife. It thereby uses an analogy between God and human relations. The language is "accommodated." That is, God speaks in a way that takes our human capacities thoroughly into account.

But Ted says something more. He degrades this language by saying that it only *appears* to be a new relation. This claim undermines Scripture. Scripture does not tell us that Christ merely appears to have

a new relation to us. It tells us that he has such a relation, namely, in being our husband. The covenant is the “*new covenant*” (1 Cor. 11:25; 2 Cor. 3:6). The word *new*, as usual, functions with reference to the passing of time—time within the created world. The relation is new along the timeline that God himself controls completely. What is happening is indeed real. The Bible with the term *new covenant*, and we ourselves in our explanation of the new covenant, uses the term *new* in the context of our human knowledge of time. God is not man. But what he says to us is true when he conveys truth to us in terms that we as humans understand.

What Ted’s philosophy has done is to offer us esoteric knowledge beyond the surface level of Scripture. According to Ted, what Scripture really implies is hidden from the multitudes of ordinary Christians, and revealed only to special, philosophically enlightened adepts. Scripture appears to imply that a covenantal relation is new, but underneath this surface, Ted knows better. The surface merely addresses appearances.

We have seen this approach to truth before, when we considered the analogy of a two-story house (chap. 28). The house has no front stairway, but does have a hidden back stairway that can be used only by the manager of the house, who is qualified by his philosophical skill. This approach is akin to gnosticism. It despises Christ and his teaching in favor of its own vision of superior truth.

In addition, pastorally, we *must* describe God’s covenant with us, and Christ as husband to us, in terms that actually convey to us the sweetness and grace and intimacy that God bestows on us in Christ. It is not the responsibility of a pastor to flirt with speculations about God’s point of view, in a way that makes our own relation to God in our own time a fog.

Ted’s philosophical principle is just that—a philosophical principle. It is an anti-God principle because it attacks God’s promises and undermines the faith of the people of God.

Pastor Charnock does not go there, if and when he comes to preach on Ephesians 5:25–27. I am glad that he was a conscientious, Spirit-filled pastor. But at one point in his exposition, when he introduces a principle of no new relation, he slips. He momentarily becomes unclear. What he says *could* sound like a form of Ted’s

principle. I do not think that he intended it that way, but it could sound that way.

Now, we must take into account the context of Charnock's larger exposition. The anthropomorphic illustrations that he uses in the context do help. The anthropomorphic analogies remind us that God is personal. And that means that he can personally speak and establish covenants and give gifts to people on earth. We can have a relation to him, a relation of personal intimacy. The anthropomorphic analogies all picture God from our human point of view in time. But as we have seen, these illustrations do not actually harmonize with a principle of no new relation. When we put a claim about no new relation into this anthropomorphic context, it undermines the point about personal intimacy. Charnock does not intend it, but his textual wording could be understood in a way that introduces a spiritual poison that is capable of taking apart the whole faith.

That ought to make us pause. How could such a thing ever happen? How could it happen in the words of such a godly man?

Proto-Gnosticism and Modern Variants

It could happen because of what God, speaking through the apostle Paul, calls *philosophy*. It is worthwhile seeing the word *philosophy* in context:

Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

See to it that no one takes you captive by *philosophy and empty deceit*, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and *not according to Christ*. For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority. (Col. 2:6–10)

Paul in his day saw a form of proto-gnosticism offering its wares to the Christians in Colossae. It offered secret, deep “truths,” going beyond the simple level of Christian initiation.

Christians put their faith in Christ. The gnostic teaching does

not directly oppose the simple Christian, but rather tells him to come deeper, into esoteric knowledge. But Paul tells us the reality. The alleged “wisdom” of philosophy is “empty deceit.” So also is the “wisdom” of Ted’s philosophical principle. We know that it is empty deceit because it draws us away from Christ our husband.

We may better see the problem with Ted’s position by showing its consequences in interpreting Psalm 102:25: “Of old you laid the foundation of the earth.” But, says Ted’s principle, actually God only eternally willed to lay it. He did not actually lay it, for that would be for God to be connected with a changing world, through an act actually touching the world and coming into a relation to the world. The next line of the psalm is “and the heavens are the work of your hands.” But, says Ted’s principle, God did not actually do the work of making the heavens. God merely eternally willed for them to exist.

And then we come to verses 27–28 of Psalm 102:

but you are the same, and your years have no end.
The children of your servants shall dwell secure;
their offspring shall be established before you.

Ted’s reading interprets verse 27 as implying Ted’s philosophical principle, the principle that God can have no new relation.

But let us look carefully at Psalm 102:27. The first half says that “you are the same.” In context, it invites us to note a contrast between God on the one hand and the heavens and the earth on the other hand (vv. 25–26). At an early point in his exposition of Psalm 102, Charnock rightly observes that the psalmist chooses to focus on the heavens and the earth, which are among the most stable things within the created world.² But *even* they do not compare with the stability of God. Eventually, they “perish”; they “wear out” (v. 26).

By contrast, God is the same. However long a period of time we picture, even from the laying of the foundation of the earth until its dissolution, “you are the same.” God is the same at the end of the period as he is at the beginning. But this declaration of sameness achieves its meaning by connecting points in time. It presupposes that

2. Charnock, *Existence and Attributes*, 1.375.

we can have a picture in which God at an earlier time has a relation to the foundation-laying, and at a later time has a relation to the dissolution. God is the same at both points. If within this exposition in the psalm we dissolve the relations to the various times, the meaning dissolves.

The second half of Psalm 102:27 says that “your years have no end.” This expression involves anthropomorphism.³ God is compared to a human being who lives many years. For example, Isaac lived one hundred eighty years (Gen. 35:28). But that is nothing in comparison to the years spanned by God’s existence. Once again, the idea of years involves relations to different points on a timeline. Both halves of the verse therefore involve comparisons in time, and both involve anthropomorphism or creaturely comparison or both. Something more has to be done in order to obtain a philosophical concept of immutability. It is not actually directly there in the verse. We have to reason from the verse to some concept. What will Ted use to get there? Scripture? Ah, but Psalm 102:27 has failed to get where Ted wants to go. What is happening is that he infers a philosophical concept from a verse that does not directly proclaim it.

For the sake of argument, let us suppose that Ted now has his philosophical concept. Will it help him with the rest of the psalm?

What happens to verse 28 of Psalm 102? The security of the children is intended to be based on the immutability of God in verse 27. But according to Ted’s principle, God cannot have a relation with a new generation because it would be a *new* relation. So Ted’s philosophy weakens the guarantee for the promise that the children will be secure.

The problem here is with the philosophy, not with the Bible. If we actually start with Psalm 102:24–28, we have ample guidance in forming a conception of immutability that stays away from Ted’s distorted conception.

Charnock read and studied Psalm 102. As a pastor, he knew all this, and it was precious to him. But he slipped at one point and introduced an unclear wording. We should not be overly hard on him. But we should be hard on the philosophy. It is spiritual poison.

3. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 2:161.

It is empty deceit. The fullness is in Christ, “in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col. 2:3).

A Foothold for Ted’s Principle: Absoluteness

How did Ted’s principle ever gain a foothold in the history of theology? The principle is so bad that it makes one wonder. But of course, deceitful philosophy never comes to us with a calling card openly announcing that it is deceitful. Satan’s way is to make it sound good and plausible.

So let us consider its plausibility. One aspect of plausibility is obvious. It appeals to people’s desire to affirm God’s absoluteness. He does not “gain” a new relation that fulfills his allegedly unfulfilled existence. But the proper answer is to say that God acts with respect to the created world by speaking, by ruling, by working miracles, by making covenants, and so on. These acts involve relations between God and the world. He does all his acts in a way that harmonizes with his all-sufficiency. His all-sufficiency—along with everything else that he is—is the foundation for his acts.

Perfection

A second contribution to plausibility comes from the idea of perfection. God is perfect:

This God—his way is *perfect*;
the word of the LORD proves true;
he is a shield for all those who take refuge in him. (Ps. 18:30)

The law of the LORD is *perfect*,
reviving the soul;
the testimony of the LORD is sure,
making wise the simple. (Ps. 19:7)

In the verses above, his perfection is expressed in anthropomorphic and covenantal language. We have comparisons between God’s words and human laws, human words, human testimony. But in the

history of philosophy, human reason has tried to figure out what we can deduce about the attributes of a perfect being. This approach can sound attractive. It sounds honoring to God to affirm his perfection. The trouble with this procedure is the usual one. We can go astray because our ideas about perfection may not actually match God.

In particular, what does it mean for God to be perfect in his sufficiency? Rather than reading the Bible to find out, Ted can read his own reason, so to speak. He reasons that sufficiency means having no needs. So nothing can be added to God. So he is unchanging (so far, legitimate conclusions).

Ted reasons that God must be unchanging to a *perfect* degree. If he did change, even in the minutest way, he would change either for the better or for the worse. If the former, he was not perfect before. If the latter, then he has ceased to be perfect. And anything that could cease to be perfect is not as perfect as that which is perfect and is in no danger of ceasing to be perfect. Therefore—by abstract logic, not by Scripture—the most perfect being (whom we will call *God*) is unchanging. (And we might add that certain people in the stream of Greek philosophy thought that the unchanging was superior to the changing. So whatever is perfect must be unchanging for this reason too.)

Then Ted says to himself, if God is perfectly unchanging, he is also *maximally* unchanging. Any falling short of maximality is an imperfection in comparison with maximality. He is unchanging in every way and at every level. Ted extends his principle to include relations between God and the world. Ted infers that God has no changing relation to anything else.

In fact, he is a solitary unit with no windows. Or we may vary the analogy. He is an eternally frozen pond, frozen to the bottom, with no fish in it. Nothing happens. Contrast this picture with the God of the Bible, who is the living God, who is eternally speaking the Word, who is eternally begetting the Son, and in whom the Holy Spirit is eternally proceeding.

Moreover, the frozen-pond god does not reveal himself (that would be to build a relation). Nothing can be known about him. He is a blank. We are seeing another form of the black hole of monadic theology.

Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite

Though this solitary unit of Ted's has no windows, the history of theology did, unfortunately, open some windows by which something akin to Ted's philosophy could enter into theology. One window⁴ was Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, who wrote four treatises and ten letters that entered the stream of theological discussion.

The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy summarizes:

Dionysius, or Pseudo-Dionysius, as he has come to be known in the contemporary world, was a Christian Neoplatonist who wrote in the late fifth or early sixth century CE and who transposed in a thoroughly original way the whole of Pagan Neoplatonism from Plotinus to Proclus, but especially that of Proclus and the Platonic Academy in Athens, into a distinctively new Christian context.⁵

Pseudo-Dionysius "transposed" Proclus, who was head of the Platonic Academy in Athens from A.D. 435 to 385.⁶ Proclus built on Plotinus, whose metaphysical ultimate was "the One." We met Plotinus in the previous chapter. He was a representative of the black-hole suction pool. Though Proclus was critical of Plotinus at some points, the idea of "the One" as the final source continues in Proclus.⁷ Thus, the black-hole suction pool travels from Plotinus to Proclus to Pseudo-Dionysius.

Pseudo-Dionysius has the title he does because he wrote under the name of Dionysius the Areopagite, an early convert to Paul (Acts 17:34). Unfortunately, for centuries after he wrote, theologians believed that they were reading writings from Paul's early convert. Accordingly, they paid great respect.

4. Yet forms of non-Christian thinking about God's transcendence threatened the church even earlier. See John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002), 107–10.

5. Kevin Corrigan and L. Michael Harrington, "Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Spring 2015), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2015/entries/pseudo-dionysius-areopagite/>.

6. Christoph Helmig and Carlos Steel, "Proclus," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Fall 2019), § 1.1, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2019/entries/proclus/>.

7. Helmig and Steel, "Proclus," § 3.1.

So successful was this stratagem [using the pseudonym] that Dionysius acquired almost apostolic authority, giving his writings enormous influence in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.⁸

So what kind of ideas came in with Dionysius? A variation on Plotinus and his divine ideal of “the One” came in. Dionysius even uses the terms *darkness* and *unknowing* to describe a deep mystical level in relation to God.⁹ It is black-hole theology, and the church got sucked in by it.

Dionysius’s writings have a kinship to what is called the *way of negation* (Latin *via negativa*). Using this way, we talk about God by saying only what he is *not*. Dionysius was one source.¹⁰ And then there is the way of superexcellence or eminence (*via eminentiae*), some of whose roots can also be found in Dionysius.¹¹ We ascribe positive characteristics to God in a superlative mode. This is similar to ascribing perfection.

A lot depends on just how we understand the way of negation and the way of eminence. At a minimum, the way of negation might mean merely that we follow Scripture in affirming that God is not like man

8. Corrigan and Harrington, “Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite,” § 1. See also Paul Vincent Spade, “Medieval Philosophy,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Winter 2017), § 4.3, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2017/entries/medieval-philosophy/>. A search through Thomas Aquinas, *The “Summa theologiae” of St. Thomas Aquinas*, 2nd rev. ed. (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1920), shows quite a few references to Dionysius’s writings.

9. “But then he [Moses] breaks free of them, away from what sees and is seen, and he plunges into the truly mysterious darkness of unknowing” (Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid [New York/Mahwah: Paulist, 1987], 137; original Greek in J.-P. Migne, *Patrologiae Graecae* [1857] [PG], 3.1001A [Dionysius, vol. 1, *De Mystica Theologica*, chap. 1, § 3]). “The good cause of all is both eloquent and taciturn, indeed wordless. It has neither word nor act of understanding, since it is on a plane above all this” (Pseudo-Dionysius, *Complete Works*, 136; Migne, PG, 3.1000C). See Corrigan and Harrington, “Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite,” § 3.4. Note also that Dionysius in his work *On the Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* sets forth a hierarchical view of the church, degrading the laity’s ability to access God: “the monks and laity . . . have no capacity for direct intelligible contemplation” (Corrigan and Harrington, “Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite,” § 3.5).

10. Spade, “Medieval Philosophy,” § 4.3. For example, Pseudo-Dionysius, *Complete Works*, 141; Migne, PG, 3.1045D, 1048A–B.

11. Spade, “Medieval Philosophy,” § 4.3.

in a number of ways: “God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind” (Num. 23:19). We affirm, then, that God never lies or changes his mind. But with Dionysius, this way of negation is understood in a way disconnected from the positive affirmations of Scripture. So it could lead to a “god” of pure darkness, about whom we can produce only negations. Similarly, the way of eminence could mean merely that we follow Scripture in making affirmations within an overall anthropomorphic context. God knows everything, more than any human knowledge (John 21:17). But it could also be used in a way independent of Scripture, using a merely human idea of perfection.¹²

So, for example, we might reason as follows: God is not changing. In fact, he is not changing in a superlative or perfect degree. We can see how this could lead to Ted’s philosophical principle of *no change* in any way, including no new relation.

As we have said, Ted’s principle has an attraction or *suction*. It sounds as though it is honoring God by affirming an absolute distinction from all creatures (“not changing”) and also affirming God’s perfection in the fullest possible way. But this “fullest possible way” is still a way tainted by autonomous reason. When we follow Ted, we reason up to a superlative, perfect picture of God. But without realizing it, we have a perfection that is of our own devising. It is monadic, not Trinitarian.

It feels good. We like the picture that we have made because it is “perfect” and because at the same time it harmonizes with our reason in a satisfying way. But in that “liking” there is concealed the poison of the serpent. There is concealed a pride, a self-satisfaction, and a knowing superiority to ordinary Christians who have not achieved such heights of reverence for the Almighty. What is worse, what we have made is a corrupted concept of God. The corruption of our understanding of God corrupts true worship.

An additional problem arises if we begin to look around in the history of philosophy. It appears that different philosophers have

12. See Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology: Prolegomena and the Doctrines of Revelation, Scripture, and God*, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2007), 323–24.

different conceptions of what they would like in a perfect being. For example, the deists might argue that a perfect being would create the world with such a degree of perfection in its own workings that he need not “interfere” ever again. The world just goes on its own, and the perfect being needs no contact with it. Or process philosophers could argue that a perfect being is one who is vulnerable and interactive, rather than aloof. So they produce in their minds a god who is finite and who needs the world even as the world needs him. Or another person produces a god who is perfect love, and could not send anyone to hell. In fact, people can produce an indefinite number of variations on the idea of *perfection*. Why should we believe one account rather than another? Why should we commit ourselves to one particular account derived from abstract reason, when we live in a fallen world where everyone’s concept of *perfection* is in fact corrupted by sins of the mind?

The problem is that such expectations and intuitions fed by a pre-Christian concept of God can sometimes contradict what Christians believe God has revealed about himself.¹³

That is one reason why we need Christ, and that is why we need Scripture. We need God to teach us who he is.

A Gentler Version of the Principle of *No New Relation*

Before we close our discussion of Ted’s principle, let us consider a gentler version of it. The earlier version, discussed above, tries to *displace* and correct any biblical pictures that give rise to a two-sided relation in which God and man are the two parties. We can also imagine a gentler version. The gentler version positively *affirms* the ordinary language concerning personal relations, that is, the anthropomorphic language of Scripture, including the language about the new covenant and Christ our husband. This version is certainly better. But

13. Jay Wesley Richards, *The Untamed God: A Philosophical Exploration of Divine Perfection, Immutability and Simplicity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 40.

this version still claims to supplement or enrich the anthropomorphic language with *other* language that highlights the distinctiveness of God's role in comparison with any human role.

Of course, it all depends on what *kind* of language Ted might use. Perhaps Numbers 23:19:

God is not man, that he should lie,
or a son of man, that he should change his mind.
Has he said, and will he not do it?
Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?

This language is just as appropriate and just as important as the language comparing God to a husband. It is needed to help people not to use autonomous reason and fall into the quicksand in which God is supposed to be just like us. The Bible does give us enough teaching, particularly about God's majesty, to enable us to realize that God is not captured in time, and that his relation to time is mysterious.

But dangers arise if, as generalized formulations—outside the contexts given by passages in the Bible—we produce language that virtually appears to contradict the language in the Bible. Suppose that Ted says that all the language about “new” things is true from a human point of view, but not from a divine point of view. Suppose that Ted speculatively produces a specific “picture” of God, and how God deals with time. Would a picture of this kind actually do us any good?

It may appear to do us good by dissolving mystery and assuring us that God's point of view and man's point of view can be harmonized. But no matter what might be the details of Ted's picture, it involves four dangers. First, acknowledging mystery at appropriate points is in fact a positive aspect of our religious worship. An inappropriate dissolution of mystery is secretly destructive. Second, Ted's new view is speculative. That implies that we do not need it to live our lives for God. The Bible already gives us what we need. The introduction of speculation can lead to confusion about what we actually need. Third, it tempts those who adopt it to take pride in their superior insight, in comparison with ordinary believers. Fourth, it still threatens to undermine biblical language by suggesting that Ted's other type of language is “deeper” and gives a “more

ultimate analysis.”¹⁴ Since God’s view is so different from a human view, it may suggest that the human view is not merely limited, but deficient—in the end, wrong. These attitudes threaten to undermine our confidence in Scripture.

Key Terms

anthropomorphic¹⁵ language
covenant
covenantal relation
new relation
philosophy
Pseudo-Dionysius

Study Questions

1. What is the philosophical principle of *no new relation* or *no change*, and how does it differ from the biblical teaching concerning God’s immutability?
2. How is the philosophical principle of *no new relation* in tension with God’s covenantal relations?
3. How did unbelieving philosophy find a foothold in the church?
4. Who is Pseudo-Dionysius?

For Further Reading

Poythress, Vern S. *Knowing and the Trinity: How Perspectives in Human Knowledge Imitate the Trinity*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2018. Chaps. 20–21.

14. It is worth reminding ourselves that Ted’s preferred terminology and his descriptive language come as one part of God’s gift of language to us, just as much as overtly anthropomorphic language. It is all “accommodated.”

15. Key terms in bold are defined in the glossary at the end of this volume.

Prayer

Lord, have mercy on us, have mercy on us, for the sake of your steadfast love and faithfulness. Wash us and cleanse us through the blood of Christ, that we may know and worship you and be freed from the deceits of idols and the deceits of our own minds. Teach us how to receive your Word with all reverence and submission, so that we may follow the biblical instruction to “be transformed by the renewal of your mind” (Rom. 12:2).

The Boundary between God and Man

WE CAN LOOK at the challenges of knowing God in another way: as challenges to grow in knowing God without trying to complete or perfect our knowledge by a feat of mastery.

Forms of Getting Mastery

If we feel a sense of mastery in knowing God, it is always an illusion. It is a form of non-Christian immanence, in which we feel that our knowledge is a perfect replica of God's, and hence can displace God as the standard. One form of mastery would be to be directly able to define God in our minds in a way that would eliminate all mystery. Or perhaps it would be a feat of partial mastery in which we think we have eliminated mystery in one special subdivision of our knowledge of God. (See fig. 37.1.)

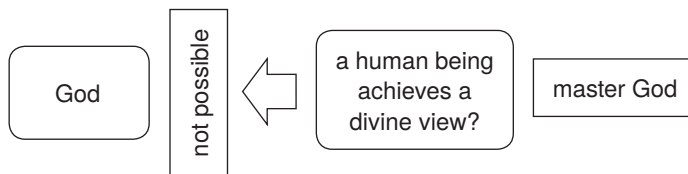


Fig. 37.1. A False Way: Trying to Master God

A second form of mastery would be indirect. Realizing that we cannot directly function as master for any area within our knowledge

of God, we try to master the *boundary* between God and man, or the boundary between God and creation, by eliminating mystery from our understanding of the boundary. So we do not claim to have achieved a masterful knowledge of God. But we think we have achieved a clear, mystery-free knowledge of how God *differs* from the created order. This approach has an affinity with Pseudo-Dionysius's way of negation: he negates the created order in order to describe God. (See fig. 37.2.)

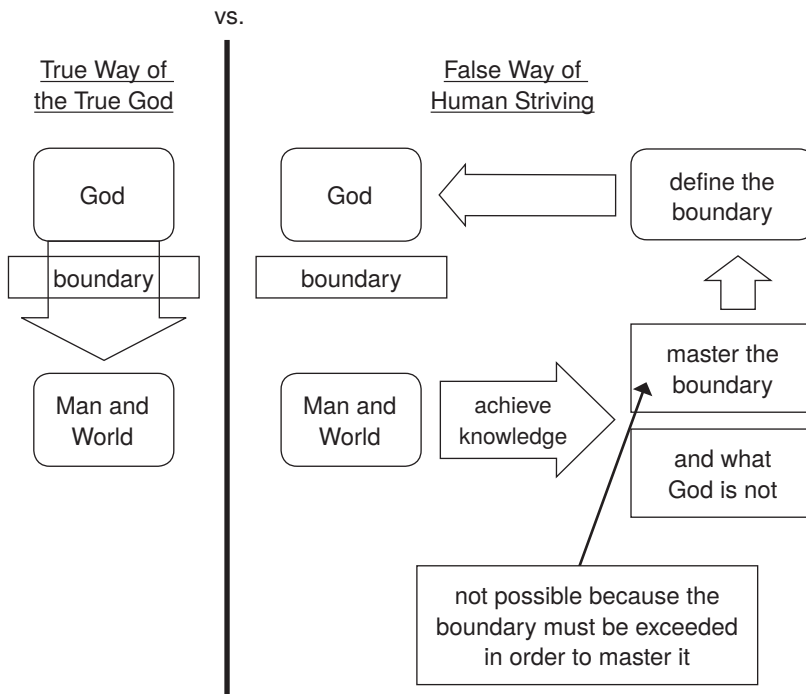


Fig. 37.2. A False Way: Trying to Master the Boundary

The Temptation to Frustration with Anthropomorphic Knowledge

The desire for mastery is the reverse side of a feeling of frustration with the knowledge that God gives us in Scripture. In Scripture we find widespread anthropomorphism. We encounter obvious anthropomorphism when biblical texts mention the eyes or the mouth or

the hand of God. We have anthropomorphism with terms of emotion ascribed to God, such as *anger*, *sorrow*, and *joy*. But anthropomorphism is much broader, because a whole host of terms for personal action apply both to God and to man. For example, when we say that God saves us or forgives us or raises Christ from the dead, these actions are analogous to those of a human being who saves someone from a fire, or forgives an offense, or raises up someone from a sitting position.

This kind of use of language is all over in Scripture. It provides us with genuine positive knowledge of God. We need only to realize that it is qualified by the differences between God and man, which are also affirmed in Scripture. God is the Creator and we are creatures. But even this affirmation of difference depends on the term *create*, which we use also for a human artist's "creating" a painting or a sculpture.

It is tempting to take refuge in technical terms for God, terms involving high-level abstraction. But as the quotation from C. S. Lewis in chapter 35 indicated, this kind of language still involves analogies: "For our abstract thinking is itself a tissue of analogies: a continual modelling of spiritual reality in legal or chemical or mechanical terms."¹ It is just that we have forgotten the analogies or are unaware of them.

Why might we be frustrated with the analogical language of anthropomorphism? Analogies involve both similarities and dissimilarities. Based on whatever else we know about God, we can confidently affirm some of the similarities. But confidence fades off, rather than dropping off a cliff at a single fixed point. We cannot specify *exactly* where the similarities end. We cannot specify exactly what is and is not the point of an analogy with respect to God. For that would be to move beyond all analogy into a realm of perfectly precise knowledge, masterful knowledge, at one point. Nowhere does the Bible, with its pervasive analogies, give us a divine platform on which to stand in order to be mentally free from our human limitations.

1. C. S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1964), 52.

How to Describe the Boundary

So the challenges in knowing God apply also to the challenge of understanding the boundary—the boundary between Creator and creature, and the boundary beyond which the analogies given in Scripture (or still other analogies we may use) cease to describe God well.

We can see this challenge at work in our previous survey of historical figures and their treatment of the attributes of God. In order to do justice to God's uniqueness, they describe him positively and also in terms of a distinct boundary. The boundary is found in God's distinctness in relation to every creature. The question, then, is whether this boundary has mystery. In fact it does, but does historical theology present it as though it did not?

The Boundary for Aquinas

Consider first Thomas Aquinas. One of his formulations for the distinctness of God is that in God, his essence is identical with his existence.² This reality about God contrasts with the reality for creatures such as dogs. The essence of a dog such as Fido is dogginess, we might say. Dogginess does not imply the existence of Fido or any other individual dog. But with God it is different, because his existence is a direct implication of his essence; or we might say that his existence is bound up with his being God. He exists necessarily.

Though Aquinas tries to achieve these results mainly from reason, we can see that they are akin to implications of biblical teaching about God's absoluteness. God does not need anything else behind him in order to be who he is. And he is also the source for all necessity and our concepts of necessity.

But there are several difficulties in Aquinas's way of doing it. One is that he is still using analogy, namely, an analogy with Fido and dogginess and other instances of creaturely existence. Second, he uses the term *essence*, which as we have seen has problems in an Aristotelian

2. Thomas Aquinas, *The "Summa theologica" of St. Thomas Aquinas*, 2nd rev. ed. (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1920), 1.35–36, [1a] Q. 3, art. 4.

context. In a Christian view, it is God who makes each thing, such as Fido, what it is. By analogy, God is also the one who makes God God.³ Saying it that way puts the accent on the personal nature of God, rather than putting the personal in the background with an abstract formulation about *essence* and *existence*.

The final difficulty is that it is not obvious that Aquinas's formulation is designed to have mystery in it and to affirm mystery at every point. Aquinas personally may realize that there is mystery. But what is the design of the argument? Within the sphere of the operation of reason, which Aquinas seems to conceive of as independent of divine revelation, the argument would make knowledge transparent. That does not set a good context for bringing in mystery later on. Rather, it suggests that we can grasp nonmysteriously and masterfully the boundary between God and man: God is the only being whose essence is his existence.

The irony is that though this formulation may have the "feel" of being nonmysterious, the term *essence* remains itself mysterious, because no one except God can say comprehensively what makes a dog a dog.

The Boundary in Scripture

How does the effect of Aquinas's formulation compare with the effect of reading Scripture? Scripture, with its repeated anthropomorphisms, does not clear up mystery. Instead, it may seem to some people who are philosophically inclined that Scripture is rather messy and naive and simple, in comparison with the insights of the philosophically minded. According to this view, Scripture speaks to simpleminded people. It speaks in accord with their capacity, which means that they need analogy and anthropomorphism. That approach may be all right for the simpletons, thinks the philosopher. But the philosopher wants to go beyond. And therein lies his temptation. The philosopher wants a back stairway. (See fig. 37.3.)

3. Clearly, we are speaking analogically. God always exists, so it is odd to talk about "making" in the context of who God is. We could say that God is God because he is God. No one else, no one who would allegedly be prior to him, "makes" him what he is.

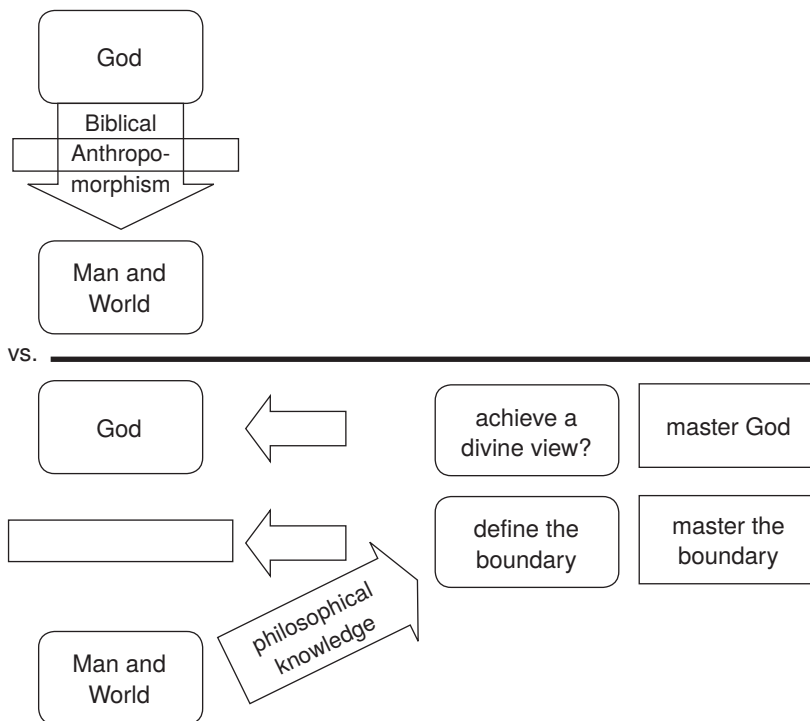


Fig. 37.3. Scriptural Anthropomorphism versus Philosophy

In addition, Scripture in a more thorough reading does have its own depths. The relation of God to creation is always mediated by the Son and the Spirit. The Son is the Word, and his person is reflected in the words that God speaks to create and to govern the creation (Pss. 33:6; 147:15–18; Heb. 1:3). The Spirit is present in creation and providence and in the spirit of man (Gen. 1:2; Job 32:8; Ps. 104:30). The Word and the Spirit are also at work whenever we read Scripture, which is the Word of God inspired by the Spirit. The “boundary” between God and man is the boundary of God’s mediation through the Word and the Spirit. The boundary is God himself, in one aspect of his resources. This boundary is full of mystery because the mystery is God himself, in his Trinitarian character and in his Trinitarian communication to human beings.

Abstract speculation about a boundary runs the risk of producing a substitute form of mediation.

Aquinas initially builds the doctrine of God primarily from the resources offered in Aristotelian metaphysics, which is the product of human reason. Aquinas does not self-consciously appeal to Trinitarian doctrine. Consequently, he does not have the resources to articulate the truth about the mediation of God's acts and interaction with the world through the Son and the Spirit. The temptation for readers, if not for Aquinas himself, is to think that his text provides abstract formulations for how the distinction between God and man is conceived. The abstract formulations are deliberately devoid of mystery, for the sake of conformity to a certain conception of reason. The real mediation, through the Son and the Spirit, is full of mystery. The reader obtains a false picture of God's relation to the world. (See fig. 37.4.)

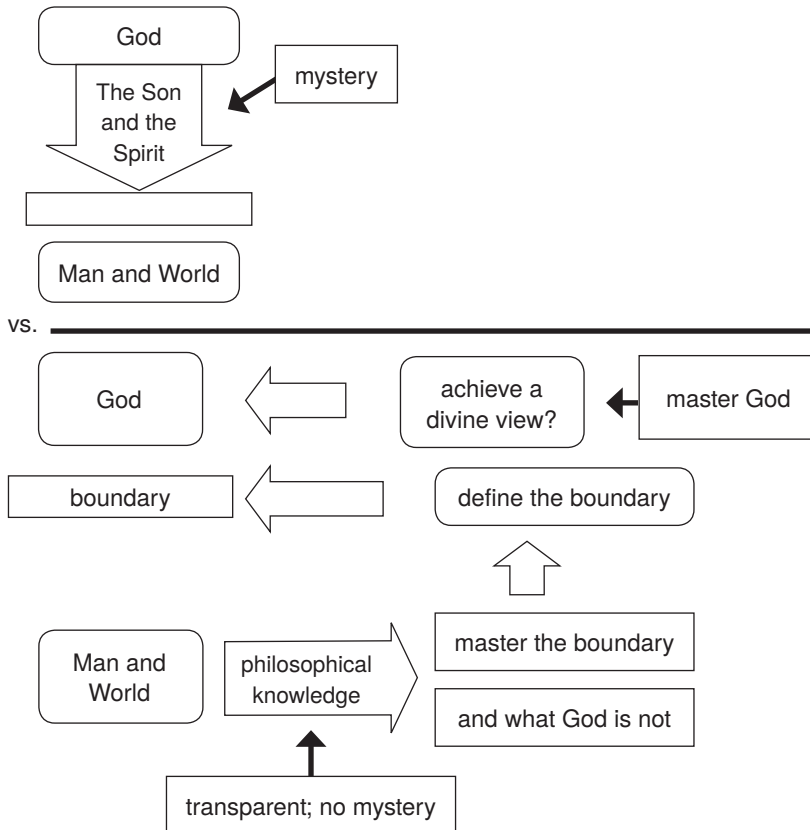


Fig. 37.4. Mystery in Mediation

The Boundary in Francis Turretin

Turretin's section⁴ discussing the unity and diversity in divine attributes has a similar difficulty with a boundary. The boundary is once again the boundary between God and all creatures. In Turretin's section, the focus is on how to conceive the unity of God in relation to the diversity of human conceptions of God's attributes. The unity is on the divine side of the boundary. On that side, Turretin says, all the attributes are identical with the divine essence. The diversity of conceptions is on the human side. How do we make a distinction to show that these two can relate to each other without contradiction? Or, to put it another way, how do we *mediate* conceptually between two affirmations that initially appear to be in tension? (See fig. 37.5.)

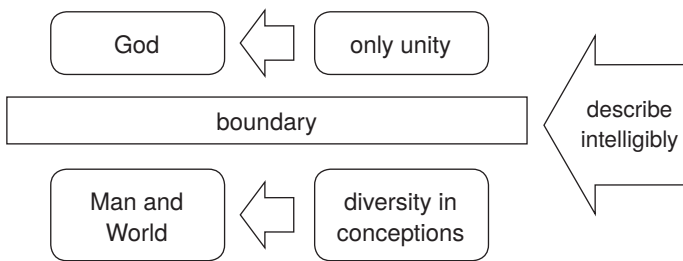


Fig. 37.5. Turretin's View of Unity and Diversity

Turretin has several pieces to help him. One helping piece is found in the three alternatives that he offers for different *kinds* of connections between things and concepts.⁵ The starting point for thinking about the connection lies with things such as Fido and Rover that are in the world. But the eventual end point will be to apply the insights to the case in which the thing is God, and the concepts are our concepts of the attributes of God. So Turretin is dealing with the boundary between God and man.

Turretin's category of an *eminent* distinction serves to mediate.

4. Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison Jr., trans. George Musgrave Giger (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1992), 1.187–89, III.v.

5. Turretin, *Institutes*, 1.188–89, III.v.9.

What he calls an *eminent* distinction is displayed in “objects and effects” on the creaturely side, and at the same time “has a foundation in the thing [in this case, God].”⁶ How this works in detail is not so clear. But the formulation is clearly concerned with how we understand the relation between the two sides. In particular, how do we conceive of knowledge or effects of God’s acts passing from one side to the other?

We have already noted some difficulties with Turretin’s formulation. But we may now add the following:

(1) Does mystery remain? To readers, it may appear that Turretin’s formulation has cleared up the difficulty concerning God’s attributes. As a result, mysteries have been solved. To be sure, there is still mystery in God himself, because God and God’s knowledge are incomprehensible. But at the end of Turretin’s explanation, the distinction between unity and diversity in attributes is now quite comprehensible. In fact, it may appear that the whole point of Turretin’s discourse is to vindicate the intelligibility of attributes before the bar of philosophical reflection. He does so by clearing out any mystery about the unity and diversity. Thus, whether or not Turretin intended it, the reader can come away with the impression that at the end of the day, there is no mystery with respect to the boundary between human conceptions and the character of God.

Turretin is somewhat on the horns of a dilemma—the dilemma of whether he undertakes to remove the mystery. If he does, then at the end the reader feels that he has satisfactorily comprehended, but the cost is the abolition of mystery and a false feeling of mastery. If Turretin does not undertake to remove mystery, what is the point? The value of making distinctions is that it is supposed to clear up difficulties through appropriate classification.

(2) What mediates between God’s unity and human conceptions? Turretin’s text, perhaps unwittingly, produces a rational mediation between God and man: rational human exposition explains the transition between unity in God himself and diversity in human conceptions concerning God’s attributes. But this mediation is a substitute for the Bible’s conception of mediation through the Son and the Spirit.

6. Turretin, *Institutes*, 1.189, III.v.9.

Instead of the rationality of the eternal Word, which is mysterious to us, we have the (apparently) nonmysterious rationality of our own minds. It is sufficient for our minds to work with distinctions based on analogies that start from three alternative kinds of distinctions that we can intelligibly make concerning Fido and Rover and our knowledge of them. (See fig. 37.6.)

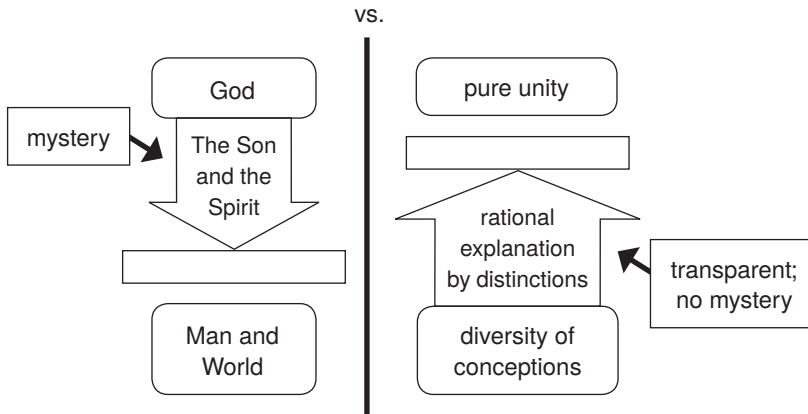


Fig. 37.6. Mystery versus Rational Mediation

(3) What is the status of Turretin's own explanation that he lays out in his key section about the nature of attributes (Third Topic, Q. 5)?⁷ Is Turretin's own language subject to the same limitations that he proposes concerning language about God's attributes? If so, then we have to apply a second level of analysis to the limitations of Turretin's language. And then we have a third level of analysis in which we consider the limitations of our second level of analysis. The eventual result is an indefinite regress.⁸ If so, mystery remains. Turretin's explanation has a mystery to its meaning, which we cannot dissolve. It may temporarily *appear* to dissolve mystery, until

7. Turretin, *Institutes*, 1.187–89, III.v.

8. This regress is analogous to the regress involved in human attempts to transcend limitations in the question for wisdom. See Vern S. Poythress, "The Quest for Wisdom," in *Resurrection and Eschatology: Theology in Service of the Church: Essays in Honor of Richard B. Gaffin Jr.*, ed. Lane G. Tipton and Jeffrey C. Waddington (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 86–114.

we consider the limitations involved in *any* explanation *from below*. Actual illumination comes from above, when God speaks.

(4) What is *essence*? Turretin uses the key term *essence*, with its problems. Part of its background is found in Aristotle. At least as an ideal, Aristotle pursues human comprehension of essence, without mystery. It does not set a good framework for Turretin's discussion.

The Boundary in Charnock

Stephen Charnock's exposition concerning immutability shows similar difficulties. Charnock wants there to be no "new relation . . . acquired by God" that would result from God's creating the world or from God's acts in the world. The endeavor to explain how there can be a new relation on the human side but not on the divine side is an endeavor to draw a boundary showing the distinction between God and man. The distinction exists with respect to one special issue: how do the two sides fare with respect to a new relation? Charnock endeavors to clarify the distinction. He has the same dilemma as Turretin. If he succeeds in clarifying, he eliminates mystery. If he does not succeed, what is the point of his endeavor?

He also has the same difficulty as Turretin with respect to the issue of alternative mediations. If he clears up mystery, he has shown how God interacts with creation. And he has done so in a way that has no need for the mediation of the Son and the Spirit. His explanation, however sober and insightful it may appear to be at first, cannot be right, because the mediation by the Son and the Spirit is the real mediation, and it involves mystery that cannot be eliminated or penetrated by human rational distinction-making. The ultimate level of distinction is between persons of the Trinity.

The Two Suction Pools

The difficulties that confront Aquinas, Turretin, and Charnock are exemplifications of a broader pattern, such as we have already seen with our picture of the two suction pools. The quicksand pool represents the suction of non-Christian immanence. This distorted conception of immanence brings God down to a human level and

eliminates mystery. One instance of this tendency is found in the temptation to eliminate mystery by rational distinctions that completely clarify the boundary between God and man.

Conversely, the black-hole pool represents the suction of non-Christian transcendence. This tendency puts forth its suction when we get frustrated with the sense of limitations in the anthropomorphic language in Scripture and the language of creaturely comparison. These, we feel, do not adequately clarify the boundary between God and man. But when we get frustrated, we loosen our hold on the true source of knowledge of God in Scripture. We search for a back stairway. We climb up into a world of abstractions that are difficult to process and difficult to relate to everyday life. God as described in the abstractions feels remote.

Paradoxically, both suctions can be at work at the same time. We tend to move beyond Scripture, seeking clarity through abstract distinctions. The move beyond can fall into non-Christian transcendence, which despises the verbal revelation of God in Scripture. After moving beyond, we may get a kind of illusion of achieving clarity. This is a form of non-Christian immanence. But we are unaware of C. S. Lewis's point that the abstractions still depend on analogies that we have not yet analyzed. At the same time, we actually lose clarity in our knowledge of God because the abstractions become remote from ordinary life. The remoteness expresses non-Christian transcendence.

Qualifications

It should be noted that all these dangers have to do with *tendencies*. Aquinas and Turretin and Charnock and others have much in their writings that is good and true. They may be personally pious men. We may hope that they had no intention of eliminating mystery at the key points, but only of partially clarifying ideas in the midst of mysteries. Yet for readers there are temptations, because it may *seem* to them that they have achieved mastery over the issue that they have studied. We need to be on our guard. (Lest there be any doubt, every point made in this book is filled with and surrounded by mystery, ultimately deriving from the mystery of the Trinity.)

The Resurrection of Christ Mediating the Knowledge of God

What can we learn by considering the resurrection of Christ? As we saw in earlier chapters, the resurrection of Christ climactically reveals God in his majesty and glory. Here, in his resurrection, we have the genuine mediation of knowledge of God, through Christ. And it is mediated through the Spirit of Christ. Christ sends his Spirit to dwell within us, in order that we may *know* and “understand the things freely given us by God” (1 Cor. 2:12).

Key Terms

analogy

anthropomorphism⁹

Aquinas

boundary (between God and man)

Charnock

mastery

mystery

suction pools

Turretin

Study Questions

1. What is meant by the *boundary* between God and the created world?
2. How do people seek to master the boundary? What is wrong with trying to master it?
3. How is the issue of the boundary present in the works of Aquinas, Turretin, and Charnock?
4. What is the biblically based answer to the problem of understanding the boundary?

9. Key terms in bold are defined in the glossary at the end of this volume.

For Further Reading

Frame, John M. *The Doctrine of God*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002. Chap. 7.

Prayer

Our Lord and Father, please keep us growing in God in the path of righteousness. Keep us from the subtle snares of superior knowledge. Enable us to see the ways in which you yourself are the mediation of your presence with us, from the Father, through the Son, in the Spirit.

The Central Challenge in Describing God

CLASSICAL CHRISTIAN THEISM deals with a deep challenge, an unfathomable challenge, namely, understanding the very nature of God. Some of the principal difficulties have to do with two poles. (1) God is not man. And (2) at the same time God has a relation to us. We are made in his image, and he undertakes to have covenantal communion with us. That communion includes verbal revelation showing us who he is and speaking truth to our hearts.

To put it in traditional terms, God is both (1) transcendent and (2) immanent toward us.

Simple Solutions

If we oversimplify, we may say that people have tried out three main deficient responses to the challenge of God's transcendence and immanence. The first response is to have only transcendence, only the emphasis that God is not man. Such a response flirts with black-hole theology, and some extreme forms of response of this kind actually fall into the hole. When people let transcendence stand alone, they are not submitting to the full spectrum of biblical teaching. Their understanding of transcendence tends to become a non-Christian form of transcendence.

The second response is to have only immanence, only the emphasis on the mutual personal relationship between God and human beings. Such a response flirts with mutuality theology, the pool of quicksand.

Open theism actually gets caught in the quicksand. According to this approach, God is temporal and changeable and does not know the future and experiences emotions just as we do. The understanding of immanence becomes a non-Christian form of immanence.

The third main response is to affirm both transcendence and immanence, side by side. But the two sides may still sit in an uneasy relation to each other. So an advocate of this kind of response might try to speak of God as both eternal in himself and temporal in relation to us; unchangeable in himself and changeable in relation to us; absolute in himself and manlike in relation to us.

According to one form of this view, God takes on additional characteristics or attributes when he creates the world and when he enters into personal relation to us. These additions are the way that he accommodates himself to our finite capacity.

Of course, we are generalizing. In the details, different theologians may try different variations.

The people with this kind of approach, without abandoning a sense of God's transcendence, have a strong desire to do fullest justice to the variety of biblical language and to the reality of God's intimacy and communion with us. So they make both kinds of affirmations, transcendence and immanence. But the two sides are uneasy with each other, even in tension. How can we do justice to God's transcendence and his unchangeability if we say that he takes on new attributes? (See table 38.1.)

Table 38.1. Defective Approaches to Describing God

Only Transcendence	Only Immanence	Transcendence and Immanence Side by Side, in Tension
God is remote	God is like us	God is remote and yet like us
non-Christian transcendence	non-Christian immanence	Christian; or combination of non-Christian transcendence and immanence?
tends toward the black hole	tends toward the quicksand	wants to avoid both extremes, but caught in tension

Classical Christian Theism

What about classical Christian theism? How does it fit into this picture? Classical Christian theism has a long history. It was not born yesterday. That long history has given the advocates time for their theology to marinate. The advocates want to avoid all three deficiencies in all three approaches above. Each advocate for classical Christian theism is in some ways the best representative for his own position. But we might suggest that often the main line of their response is to prioritize the absolute God, God in his transcendence. Immanence is then fitted in and adjusted to what we know of God by way of transcendence. (See table 38.2 and fig. 38.1.)

Table 38.2. Classical Christian Theism Prioritizing

Transcendence (given priority)	Immanence	Transcendence and Immanence Side by Side, Immanence Subdued by Transcendence
God is absolute	absoluteness redefines and qualifies immanence	mainly transcendent in theory; ordinary people practice immanence
		wants to avoid both extremes, but does tension remain between high-level abstract theory and common people?

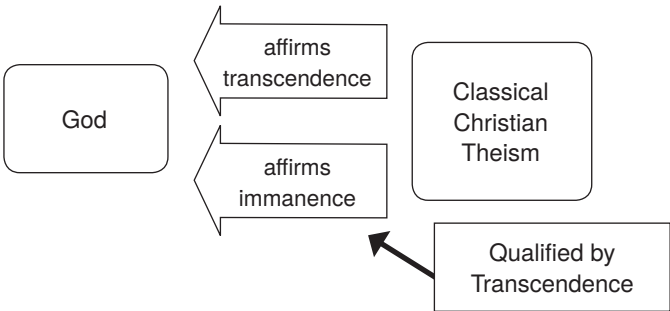


Fig. 38.1. Immanence Qualified by Transcendence

Why do it this way? There are at least two profound reasons. First, the tendency of fallen human nature is to bring God down to our human level. By starting with transcendence, we cut this tendency off at the root.

Second, the Bible itself teaches us that God exists eternally. The world came into being at his command. God has priority to the world. And when God alone existed, there was no “immanence” in the ordinary sense, because there was no world for God to be immanent in.

Should we say that before creation, God was only transcendent and not immanent? That would be awkward. In common use, the word *transcendence* expresses an aspect of God’s relation *to us*. God “transcends” our understanding. In that respect, the term *transcendence* suggests a comparison with *us*. It is naturally paired with *immanence*, which is also used to designate a connection to us.

By contrast, the term *absoluteness* is meant to apply to God independent of creation. Absoluteness belongs to God independent of his relation to us, before the foundation of the world. But when we focus on transcendence, we also focus on absoluteness. We understand God’s absoluteness by means of God’s revealing himself as the transcendent God.

There is always mystery here. We know the true God, and we know him only through his revelation, which *comes* to us and establishes a relation between us and God. At the same time, the God that we have come to know existed apart from his revelation to us. We may not get things right theologically unless our reasoning *starts* with God in his majesty and infinity, rather than in his relation to us as a covenant-making God. God’s absoluteness has a priority when we are thinking about ultimate foundations. In terms of the ordering of our reasoning in time, we could in a sense start with either pole, as long as we eventually did justice to the other pole. But starting with God’s relation to us runs the risk of importing into God things that belong to the creaturely environment.

Our sympathies, then, should be with classical Christian theism. It has good theological instincts about the challenges in knowing God.

And yet things have happened in the history of classical Christian theism that should give us pause. Three things in particular.

The first is Aristotle (and also Plato, here and there).¹ In practice, over the centuries, classical Christian theism has not in fact wholly and completely started with God. It has also taken on board the Aristotelian system of categories and the Aristotelian system of metaphysics. This appropriation threatens the very thing that classical Christian theism most treasures, namely, the absoluteness of God. In practice, God becomes dependent on a system that logically precedes anything that he has to say in Scripture.

The second is the back stairway. The back stairway undermines the absoluteness of God by giving people a secret way—a godlike way—of controlling the ultimate categories by which we decide how to mediate between the upper story and the lower story. (See fig. 38.2.)

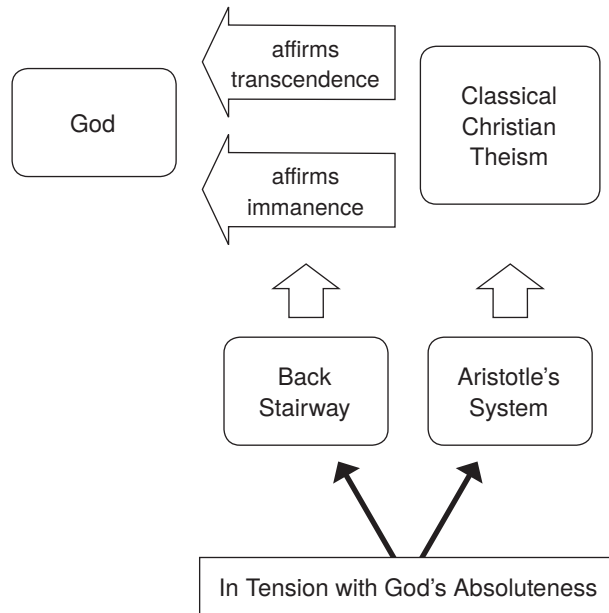


Fig. 38.2. Disturbances in Classical Christian Theism

1. On Plato, see John M. Frame, *A History of Western Philosophy and Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2015), 63–70. Note our earlier discussion in chapter 36 about the influence of Neoplatonism through Plotinus to Proclus to Pseudo-Dionysius. The influence of Plato on Christian theology starts in the early centuries of the Christian era.

The third thing, related to the first and the second, concerns the question of how we deal with analogical language about God in the Bible. The adherent to classical Christian theism may describe such language as *anthropomorphic*, which indeed it is. It represents an instance of accommodation.

In fact, God gives us the whole Bible in language accommodated to us and to our needs. This accommodation, which displays the wisdom of God, is a very good thing, and a necessary thing, in order that we may know and have communion with God. So far, so good. The crucial question is whether we may be tempted to misuse these truths in such a manner that we become dissatisfied with the Bible.

For example, would we go on to suggest that analogical language is *mere* “appearance” or *mere* “accommodation,” and to say so in a context that suggests that the language must accordingly be discounted as not really true? That would represent a fatal step. And then we would be tempted to search for some *other* language that would do greater justice to the nature of God. That other language would be either (1) the language of negation (the *via negativa*) that claims that we can say only what God is not and not what he is; or (2) the language and reasoning of philosophical abstraction. In the former case, we are drifting near to the black hole. It sounds as though God sends out only darkness, that is, only what he is not. In the latter case, we produce again the back stairway with its allegedly superior insight. (See fig. 38.3.)

The language of philosophy, though not directly given to us in the Bible, is part of human language that is a gift from God, and therefore also accommodated. To put it another way, the back stairway remains solidly on the lower floor. It goes only as far as the ceiling. It does not actually get us to the second floor. It has no special, privileged entrance to the second floor, a second floor that, in this interpretation, would represent an allegedly unaccommodated view, unencumbered by the limits of anthropomorphism and creaturely comparisons.

The language associated with the back stairway gives us the *illusion* that it reaches the second floor. That illusion has a secondary effect back on the first floor, because it makes us degrade the anthropomorphic language in Scripture. The language in Scripture is seen as

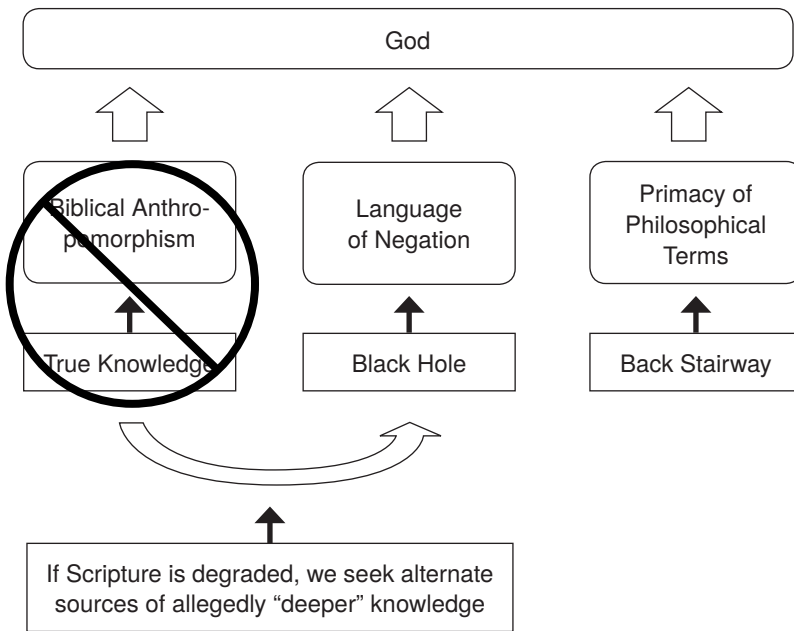


Fig. 38.3. Diminishing Scripture

merely “accommodated” and ultimately untrue, by comparison with the supposedly superior language that climbs up the back stairway.

The Central Challenge

Classical Christian theism needs enhancement, not merely reiteration, in order to go forward.

The central challenge is no less than this: how do we mediate between transcendence and immanence? Or, to put it in another way, how do we mediate between the second story of the house and the first?² In chapter 28, we introduced our picture of the two stories of the house and the hidden back stairway. God resides in the upper story and human beings in the lower story. But the two stories can also stand for the distinction between God’s transcendence and his

2. Francis Schaeffer used the illustration of an upper and lower story, but with somewhat different meaning and for a different purpose.

immanence. The upper story, where God exists, is also the story that represents God's uniqueness and his superiority to the creation. It represents God's transcendence. And the lower story, where human beings live, is also the story where God approaches human beings. And so it can represent his immanence.

How do we bring transcendence and immanence together in harmony? How do we mediate between them by having a conceptual scheme that tells us what detailed descriptions to give to each of the two stories in the house, and how to show the harmony between the two?

The first response described above has only transcendence and no immanence. It simply declines mediation by moving the second story to another planet. (See fig. 38.4.)

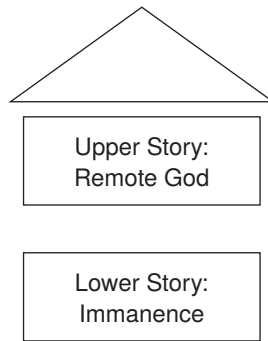


Fig. 38.4. God Becomes Remote

The second response, which has immanence but not transcendence, declines mediation by collapsing the two stories. (See fig. 38.5.)

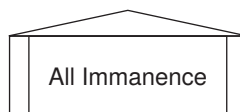


Fig. 38.5. Collapsing Transcendence

The third response affirms both stories, but still does not have *effective* mediation between them. The two stories simply sit there, one on top of the other. (See fig. 38.6.)

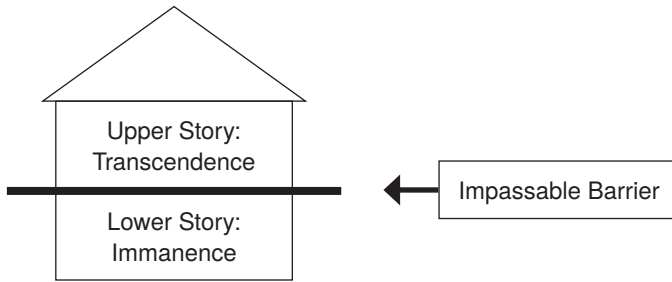


Fig. 38.6. No Connection between Transcendence and Immanence

The fourth response, classical Christian theism, attempts mediation by prioritizing transcendence, that is, prioritizing the second story. But to do this prioritizing, we must first have adequate knowledge of the second story itself. And so the back stairway enters the picture. (See fig. 38.7.)

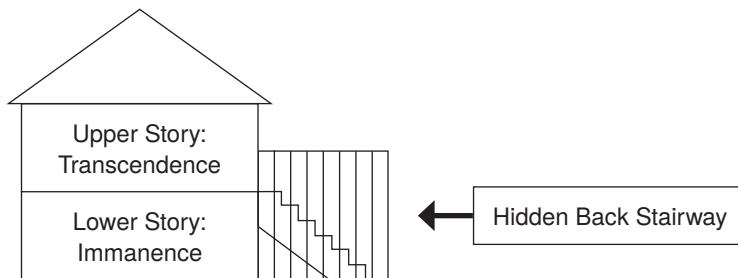


Fig. 38.7. Knowledge of God Using a Hidden Back Stairway

Trinitarian Mediation

There is only one way to achieve actual enhancement in such a situation: seek the proper mediation. “There is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 2:5). He became man for the sake of our sin, in order to bear our sins and reconcile us to God. In the preceding pages, we have tried to sketch some glimmers of these realities by repeatedly returning to the way in which the resurrection of Christ manifests the nature of God.

But even before there was sin, the Son was Mediator of creation

(1 Cor. 8:6; Col. 1:15–17). He is the divine Son and the divine Image of the Father. So in the broad sense of mediation, the role of the Son in mediation does not start with the need for redemption. The Son is involved in God's rule in providence (Heb. 1:3). As the eternal Word, he is present in the specific words by which God communicates to his people. Jesus gives to the disciples "the words that you [the Father] gave me" (John 17:8).

Classical Christian theism is right, as we observed before. Mediation must be supplied wholly from above, not from below. The mediation between God and man, and even such "mediation" as exists between God and the world that he created, must come wholly and exclusively from God. He is self-sufficient. He has all resources in himself. Any search for mediation from another source (Aristotle, anyone?) undermines the absoluteness of God. If the mediation were not wholly from God, then it would be partially controlled by the world, and God would become dependent on the world. No, that cannot be. Classical Christian theism is right to reflect Scripture at this point: "Who are you, O man, to answer back to God?" (Rom. 9:20).

The creation of the world is from the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 8:6; Gen. 1:2; Ps. 104:30). Or, to reexpress it, creation is from the Father, through the Word, in the breath of the Spirit. God supplies every aspect of his own mediation. The same is true in the mediation of redemption (Col. 1:18–20; John 14:23, 26). For example, Christ is the only Savior (1 Tim. 2:5), and the Holy Spirit enables us to be born again (John 3:5). That means that God is absolute, self-sufficient, eternal, unchangeable, infinite, omniscient, immense before and after creation. He is.

There can be a mediation toward the world because there is first of all one God. And there are three persons. The three persons have eternal activity in relation to one another. This eternal activity is reflected in the mediation toward the world. A unitarian god has no resources for mediation.³ An Aristotelian god has no resources.

3. "Without generation [of the Son by the Father] creation would not be possible. If, in an absolute sense, God could not communicate himself in the Son, he would be even less able, in a relative sense, to communicate himself to his creature. If God were not triune, creation would not be possible" (Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004], 2:420; also Robert Letham,

Classical Christian theism needs enhancement. And modern searches for alternatives need enhancement, to the degree that they do not yet treat the categories of God's attributes as completely Trinitarian, inside and outside. God's attributes are Trinitarian in God's knowledge and then derivatively and reflectively in ours. There are no attributes with unitarian structure. There are no attributes that are merely identical with the divine essence and not also differentiated by reflecting the differentiation of the persons of the Trinity. The essence does not exist except in the persons, and the persons in the essence.

This is a mystery, the mystery of coinherence. (See fig. 38.8.)

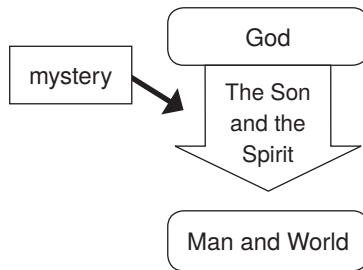


Fig. 38.8. True Mediation

Let us be in awe.

Key Terms

accommodation⁴

Aristotle

immanence

mediation

transcendence

The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship, rev. and expanded [Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2019], 9, quoting from Herman Bavinck, *In the Beginning: Foundations of Creation Theology*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999], 39).

4. Key terms in bold are defined in the glossary at the end of this volume.

Study Questions

1. What is the central challenge in describing God?
2. What are three deficient ways of responding to the central challenge?
3. What does it mean to prioritize transcendence or immanence?
4. How does classical Christian theism deal with the challenge of describing God? What might be the reasons for this approach?
5. What three things in the history of theology may cause concern to us about the tradition of classical Christian theism?

For Further Reading

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Frame, John M. *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*. Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987. Chap. 1.

Prayer

Lord, God of Abraham, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, we are in awe.

Making a Step

LET US TRY to make a step forward, in the light of who God is. Let us consider the issue of how God can do something new in the world when he himself is unchanging. (As usual, a particular work is “new” in relation to a timeline that human beings observe and experience within the world.)

The Trinity in Action

The issue of how God acts in the world is connected to the question of the boundary between God and the world. God, on the divine side of the boundary, is unchanging. The world, on the creature side of the boundary, is changing. How are the two related?

The deepest answer, as we have seen, is that God himself mediates the relation between himself and the world. The persons of the Son and the Spirit have mediatorial roles.

We can be more specific about the Trinitarian differentiation in action. How does God act in the world? By speaking. For example, “God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light” (Gen. 1:3). Something new comes into the world. The world changes because there was no light before, and now there is light. Why? Because God spoke.

How does God speak? His speech expresses a differentiation: we can differentiate between God and a speech that he makes. What is the foundation for this differentiation? God is always speaking, even before there was a world. “In the beginning was the Word, and the

Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). The eternal Word is to be differentiated from God who speaks the Word. At the same time, the Word is God. Now consider the speech of God that creates light. God says, “Let there be light” (Gen. 1:3). The light that God creates through his speech reflects on a creaturely level the God who is light (1 John 1:5).

John 1:1–3 alludes to Genesis 1:1. The Word is the Mediator of creation: “All things were made through him” (John 1:3). Thus, he is involved in what takes place in Genesis 1. God speaks eternally in John 1:1. This eternal speech is the foundation for particular speech, “Let there be light” (Gen. 1:3). God acts in the world in complete harmony with who he always is. The speech in Genesis 1:3 reflects and expresses the eternal speech who is the Word. God does not change. His speech does not change, but abides forever (Matt. 24:35). What we hear in Genesis 1:3 is the coming of his speech to bear on the world. It comes through the breath of the Holy Spirit. God mediates God to the world. (See fig. 39.1.)

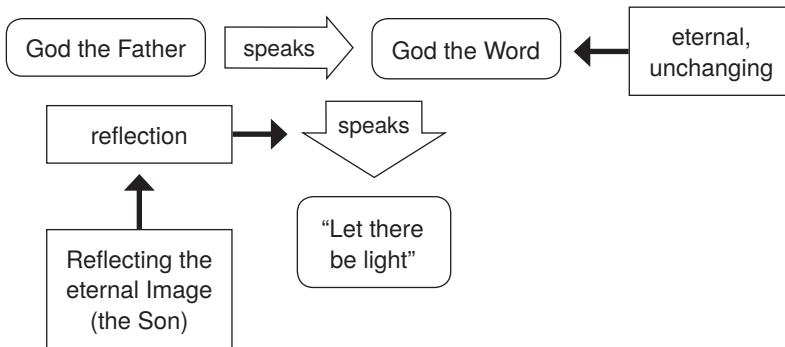


Fig. 39.1. God's Speaking

Do we understand it? No. It is a mystery. Then what is the benefit of bringing in the mystery of the Trinity?

One benefit is to say that though God is incomprehensible, and his relation to the world is incomprehensible, we can see that this incomprehensibility belongs to us and not to God. God does have resources for acting in relation to the world, even if we cannot as creatures master them.

A second benefit is that it reminds people inclined to philosophical reflection that they have limitations. If they cannot comprehend the Trinity, they should not *expect* to comprehend God's relation to the world.

A third benefit is that the fact that God mediates his relation to the world means that he does make himself known. What he reveals does actually reveal him, and is not a false or mistaken communication about who he is. The real God is not, so to speak, "hiding" behind a world and a revelation toward the world, as though the revelation misrepresented the real thing—the real God. The Son is God, fully God. The Spirit is God. We do not get something less than God when the persons of the Trinity interact with the world. As Jesus says to Philip, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9).

The Nature of Reflections

We have appealed to the idea that particular speeches, such as "Let there be light," reflect and manifest the eternal speech of God. In this appeal, it might seem that we have simply replaced one mystery with another, namely, the twin ideas of *reflection* and *manifestation*. Do not these ideas offer a kind of "mediation" between eternity and what is manifested in time? From where do the ideas of *reflection* and *manifestation* come?

The ideas of *reflection* and *manifestation* come from the Trinity. The Son is the eternal Image of God the Father. He reflects and manifests the Father. Within the world, we find some patterns analogous to this original case of an Image. For example, man is made in the image of God (Gen. 1:26). A child is like his human father. He "reflects" his father in some of his traits. The reflections that take place in the world follow the archetypal reflection that eternally exists in God.¹ God does not change when a reflection appears in the world. The reflection reflects the eternity of God, and the process of reflection reflects the eternal begetting of the Son.

1. Vern S. Poythress, *Knowing and the Trinity: How Perspectives in Human Knowledge Imitate the Trinity* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2018), chaps. 8, 11.

Do we understand it? No. It is a mystery. But in this mystery we see another instance of the principle that God does not need any resources outside himself in order to mediate between himself and the world.

Transcendence and Immanence Again

Though the Trinity is the most ultimate foundation for God's interaction with the world, we can also consider three other ways of answering the question of God's relation to the world. One way of considering the question is by moving from transcendence to immanence, because the two are coinherent. God is transcendent. He has all power. Therefore, he has power to make the world while remaining himself. Once the world is made, he has power to act in the world. In particular, he has power to be immanent in the world.

The coinherence between transcendence and immanence—their inner harmony—is real, but still mysterious. In the end, it is not a mystery separate from the mystery of the Trinity. We have earlier seen how distinctions among attributes are rooted in the more ultimate distinction among persons of the Trinity. The distinction (and harmony!) between transcendence and immanence, or between absoluteness and presence, is likewise rooted in the Trinity. We can say that the distinctions in attributes reflect or manifest the distinctions among persons.

Anthropomorphic Analogy

A second way of considering the nature of God's action toward the world is to use anthropomorphic analogy. We already did that at some earlier points. We considered what it would mean for a human person to acquire property or establish a new relationship, or for Abbie to make vegetable soup, or for a judge to come into a new relation to someone who has committed a crime (chap. 34). A human being does not change his character by doing such things. By analogy, neither does God change his character by making the world, by acting in the world, by establishing relations with human beings, or by judging people in the world. As usual, it needs to be said that these

analogies are all limited analogies because God is not man. But even with their limitations, they can help us to see that there is no contradiction in supposing that God's character remains the same and that he is free to act outside himself.

Once again, these analogies are rooted in the Trinity. As we observed earlier, the analogies between God and man have their basis in the fact that man is created in the image of God. And this imaging relation has its archetype, its ultimate basis, in the reality of the relation between the Father and the Son, in that the Son is the eternal Image of God (Col. 1:15; Heb. 1:3).

Variations in Meaning

A third route for considering God's relation to the world is to focus on analogical use of terms. Terms such as *unchanging* and *acting* and *having a relation* are used in describing God on the one hand and worldly realities on the other hand. The meanings in the two cases involve contrast, variation, and distribution. The two cases are neither completely identical nor completely isolated. That means that we can express truth while still maintaining that God is unique and unlike any creature.

As we saw in chapter 13, this analogical use of language has its roots in the Trinity.

Altogether, we have several ways of considering God's relation to the world. All of them derive from the ultimate mystery, which is the Trinity. (See fig. 39.2.)

Anger

Let us consider the anger of God and the anger of man. The anger of God is the anger of *God*, not of man. It is transcendent anger. But it is also the archetype reflected in the anger of man, particularly when a human being has *righteous* anger. Yet even unrighteous anger cannot escape being a perverse, twisted imitation of the God in whose image mankind continues to live.

There was no anger of God before the world was created because there was no sin or evil for God to judge in anger. Anger is a response

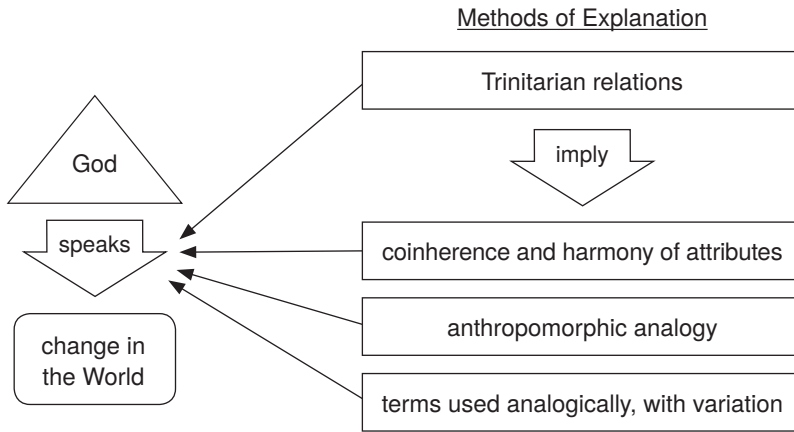


Fig. 39.2. Ways of Considering God's Relation to the World

of the Judge of all the earth, as the Bible indicates: “God is a righteous judge, and a God who feels *indignation* every day” (Ps. 7:11). So is anger something new that would involve a change in God?

The issue is again how we mediate between human anger and the archetypal anger of God. The two suction pools are there. The quicksand pool would say that God is angry in the same way as human beings get angry. Allegedly, his anger is one kind of change in him. The black-hole pool would say that anger cannot be ascribed to God. God is beyond all anger, and beyond all joy as well.

There is only one mediation by which we may know God, and this mediation is wholly from God. The Father loves the Son. Anger is the negative side of this love, once there is someone and something that does not submit to the Son. And the Son has anger as the negative side of his love for the Father, once there is someone or something that dishonors the name of the Father. The love of the Father for the Son is an eternal love. It is now as it always is and always has been and always will be. The anger of God is the reflection and manifestation of that love when God relates toward the wicked.

How is the reflection and manifestation possible? Because the Son is the Image, the reflection and manifestation, of God the Father. (See fig. 39.3.)

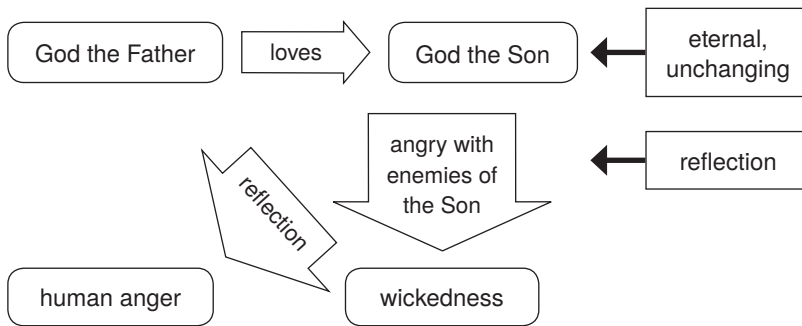


Fig. 39.3. The Anger of God and of Man

It is a mystery. God does not need to change in order to continue to be what he is, because he has all resources in himself, for every aspect of mediation with the world. We do not understand how.

We can also consider God's anger by using the other routes that we set forth when we considered God's relation to the world. One route is to consider the harmony among the attributes of God. Precisely because God is unchanging in being just and holy, he is angry with wickedness. His unchangeability is in harmony with his anger.

A second route is the anthropomorphic route. If a human being is mature and sanctified, he does not become angry and out of control just because of some personal slight. As he grows in maturity, the instances when he is angry become more consistently instances when he is angry at real injustice, when his anger is a form of zeal for God and zeal for justice. His anger is more like God's anger. When that is so, we can also see that his anger is not a change in his character and is not something that leaves him without self-control, but is something that is actually a manifestation of his constancy of character. Granted that the analogy is partial, such a person becomes a finite model that helps us to see how God's unchangeability is in harmony with his anger.

A third route is to focus on analogical use of language. And we do this when we focus on the word *anger* and observe that God's anger is not man's.

All these routes to explain God's anger have their ultimate roots in the Trinity. (See fig. 39.4.)

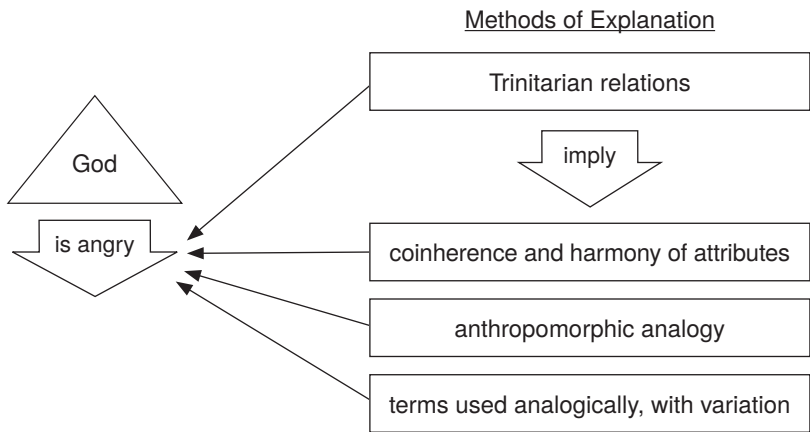


Fig. 39.4. Ways of Explaining the Anger of God

The Presence of God

Consider also the presence of God. How can God be present in the world without changing? He is present first of all to himself. The Father is *in* the Son and the Son is *in* the Father (John 17:21). The indwelling among the persons of the Trinity, their presence each to the others, is eternal. This presence then has a reflection and manifestation when God is present through the Holy Spirit in the world that he made (Gen. 1:2). God's immanence in the world is not an addition to God, but a manifestation to us of what he always is in himself, the God in whom the persons indwell one another. God's presence to himself is expressed in his presence to us. (See fig. 39.5.)

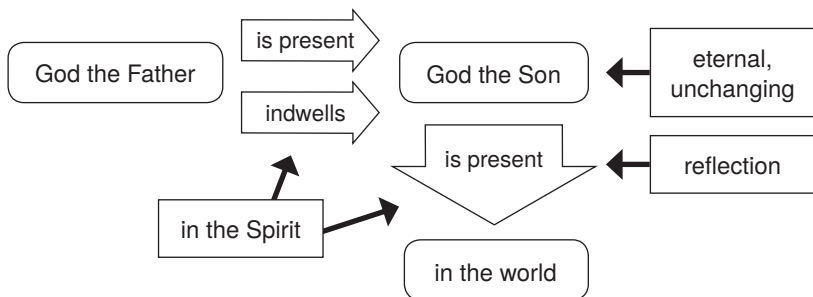


Fig. 39.5. God's Presence

Do we understand it? No. It is a mystery.

Once again, we can use more than one route to consider God's presence. All are ultimately based on the Trinity. (See table 39.1.)

Table 39.1. Routes for Considering God's Presence

Route Used	Reasoning within the Route
Trinity as Origin, reflected in God's actions toward the world	The presence of persons to one another, in mutual indwelling, is reflected in the presence of God in the world.
Harmony among attributes of God	God's transcendent power implies his ability to be present. Control over the world implies presence in the world.
Anthropomorphic analogy	Human beings are present to one another by speaking.
Analogical terms	The term presence is used analogically. The whole of God is present at each location, unlike physical objects that are extended in space.

An Advantage?

What we are suggesting by these examples is that the Trinity offers us resources that help to move beyond a polarization between classical Christian theism on the one hand and a non-Christian immanentism on the other. Classical Christian theism without a Trinitarian source for mediation either resorts to a back stairway or runs the risk of giving the impression that the biblically crafted language of God's involvement with his people is only a "seeming" or "apparent" involvement, an anthropomorphism. The language of immanence and of anthropomorphism is there in the Bible, but without the Trinity we may fail to express how it positively reflects who God is. The Son is the eternal Image. His being the Image is reflected in our being made in the image of God. The Holy Spirit is the eternal indwelling One.

At a deep level, alternatives to classical Christian theism wrestle with the same difficulty. Some of the alternatives may want to have the language of unchangeability and changeability side by side. This too can lead to a kind of inaccessibility for God, because we do not yet have a way for seeing the two opposite affirmations as harmonious. Both opposite affirmations can begin to feel unreal because each is canceled by the other. The suggestion of this book is to proceed with three moves simultaneously: (1) to avoid the language of God's being temporal or changing, (2) to use the language of classical Christian theism by saying that God is eternal and unchangeable, and (3) to enhance it with a Trinitarian foundation. The Trinitarian foundation shows us that God is sufficient to mediate for God. We do not need to add temporality or changeability to God to enable him to interact with creation. The doctrine of the Trinity enables us to affirm that God is active and involved and comes to us, and that this God is and remains the eternal God, whose actions toward us reflect and reveal who he really is forever. What we affirm remains also the deepest mystery.

What Is Ontologically Basic

As we have said, classical Christian theism is right to think that God has a priority in our thinking. God is ontologically basic. And Christianity must try to live by this reality. It would seem to be a formidable task to rethink the entire category system of classical Christian theism. But it has already in a sense been done, because God, the Trinitarian God, is infinitely present and infinitely manifest in the things that he has made. Analogously, he is infinitely present and infinitely manifest in the mind of every human being, and in the language and structures of language belonging to every language in the world. And then, with special centrality, he is infinitely present and infinitely manifest in speaking through the Son in Scripture. We have to read the Bible and be spiritually alert.

Of course, alertness can take place only through the power of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit dwells in every believer. Nothing more is necessary beyond that indwelling (1 John 2:20–27).

So we do not need a back stairway. But what can we have instead

of using Aristotle—or Plato or some other philosopher—as our foundation for categories and metaphysics? In some books already out,² a little bit has been done to rethink our system of categories and our system of metaphysics.

Could this book become another back stairway? That would be a misunderstanding. We should remember that there is only one stairway, one ladder to heaven, the Son of Man (John 1:51). This centrality of Christ also appears in his resurrection. Christ's vindication in his resurrection already implies that he will ascend to the Father (Phil. 2:9–11). The ascension of Christ is not only the ladder to heaven, the ladder to heavenly fellowship with the Father, but also the source of our salvation in union with Christ. Through Christ, we who trust in him are raised and enthroned with him (Eph. 2:6).

Key Terms

analogy

anger

change

creation

immanence³

mediation

presence

transcendence

Study Questions

1. What are some of the ways in which we may coherently address the issues of how God remains the same and interacts with the world?
2. How do these explanations have their foundation in the Trinity?
3. Why do we not need a back stairway?

2. Vern S. Poythress, *Redeeming Philosophy: A God-Centered Approach to the Big Questions* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014); Vern S. Poythress, *Logic: A God-Centered Approach to the Foundation of Western Thought* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013); Poythress, *Knowing and the Trinity*.

3. Key terms in bold are defined in the glossary at the end of this volume.

For Further Reading

Poythress, Vern S. *Knowing and the Trinity: How Perspectives in Human Knowledge Imitate the Trinity*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2018. Chaps. 20–21.

Prayer

Thank you, God and Father, for giving us the ladder to heaven in Jesus Christ. May we grow in knowing you in Christ.

God's Responding

LET US NOW consider the difficulty posed by the idea of God's responding to something in the created order.

How can God respond to something on earth, or deal in some personal way with people or events on earth? If we think that God is relativized by his relation to people on earth, we are denying his transcendence. If we think that God remains aloof, we deny his immanence. Either way, we seem to be in trouble. Turretin and Charnock both endeavor to find some kind of middle course, avoiding the suction pools of mutuality theology and monadic theology. Does the Trinitarian mediation of God's transcendence and immanence offer us any help?

The Question of Responding

C. S. Lewis, in the quote given in chapter 35, raises one aspect of the issue of God's responses by mentioning "Divine Impassibility."¹ He focuses on how we should interpret passages in which God is represented as angry or grieved. But the issue, in fact, is broader than a concern for emotions. God is described not only by using terms associated with human emotions, but also by using terms associated with human responses in a broad spectrum.

Let us begin by focusing on human responses. Particularly when human beings interact with other human beings, we find a huge range

1. C. S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1964), 51.

of responses to previous human action and to situations in the world. Human beings usually answer a question or answer a request with yes or no. After hearing someone, they may challenge the speaker to rethink what he has said. They evaluate someone. They endorse or repudiate; they praise or they condemn what they see. As parents, they may reward or chastise their children. They may interfere to rescue someone from an accident or a fight.

In the Bible, we can find passages where God does all these things. We can expect as much, because God undertakes to have a covenantal relation with his people corporately and with individuals who belong to his people. The relation is personal, intimate, complex, and ongoing. It involves many aspects.

As examples of divine actions, consider some of these expressions from Psalm 102:

Hear my prayer, O LORD. (Ps. 102:1: responding by hearing)

Incline your ear to me. (Ps. 102:2: responding by paying attention)

Answer me speedily in the day when I call! (Ps. 102:2: responding by answering)

You will arise and have pity on Zion. (Ps. 102:13: responding by pitying Zion)

He regards the prayer of the destitute. (Ps. 102:17: responding by attending to prayer)

He looked down from his holy height; from heaven the LORD looked at the earth, to hear the groans of the prisoners. (Ps. 102:19–20: responding by noting a situation on earth and by hearing groans)

Might There Be a Special Challenge with This Kind of Language?

The main concern of classical Christian theism is to make sure that we clearly maintain the transcendence of God. The Bible describes

God in language similar to what we use for human responses. But when God is the one who acts, the meaning of the act is never exactly the same as it would be with a human being's acting. God is God; he is unique. God is the Creator; we are creatures. God is the Lord; we are servants. The Creator-creature distinction has to be in our reckoning for all our interpretation of all our language about God.

Two Suction Pools Again

The language of response is a challenge because of the doctrine of God's absoluteness, his independence. This doctrine, which is biblically grounded, says that God is not dependent on the world or anything in it. But any kind of response could suggest that he is dependent on the item to which he is responding. In a situation of response, it might be alleged that he is "passive" in some bad way: it seems as though he would be forced along by something that impinges on him from outside. Part of the point of the expression *divine impassibility* is to warn us not to think that God is caught passively in the web of circumstances. In particular, we must beware of thinking that an emotion might come upon God as something that overwhelms him and leaves him out of control because of events outside him that stir up his emotions.

Consider an example. When human beings get angry, it often happens as something that feels as though it comes upon them without their really intending it. They may get angry even when they know they should not. So if the Bible says that God is angry, is his anger like that? Clearly not. If we use such a picture derived from human anger, we imagine God as being at least partly *under* the control of events, rather than as controlling events.

In contemplating this challenge, we can see the two suction pools. On one side is the quicksand of mutuality theology, which would make God subject to the same limitations that we experience. He gets pictured as being tossed about by outside influences. On the other side is the black hole of monadic theology, in which God seems indifferent, if not totally unavailable. He would never respond to us or our prayers or injustices or desperate situations. He would not respond because (allegedly) it would compromise his independence. (See table 40.1.)

Table 40.1. Bad Construals of God's Responding

Error 1	Something Intermediate?	Error 2
mutuality theology		monadic theology
(quicksand)		(black hole)
God's responding outside his control		God does not respond at all
God overcome by circumstances		God does not care

There is suction in both directions. But Christians also feel repulsion. They know that neither of these extremes can really be true, and that neither is endorsed by Scripture. So where do we go? What is the path?

Christ

The Reformers in their preaching go to Scripture. So they give us Christ, in his power over all things and in his union with us for our benefit:

the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things *to the church*, which is *his body*, the fullness of him who fills all in all. (Eph. 1:19–23)

This passage affirms both Christ's sovereign control and his care for the church. His care for the church involves response to her needs.

Later on in Ephesians, Christ's care for the church is expressed more fully and vividly in the comparison with a husband's care for his

wife (Eph. 5:26–27). The husband's care takes into account the wife's needs and her situation. The husband uses his knowledge about his wife, and is responding to what is outside him.

But now, how do we work things out in practice with particular verses of the Bible? How do we interpret passages involving the language of God's responding, such as the verses we cited earlier from Psalm 102? Each verse and each passage must be interpreted within its own context, within the immediately surrounding verses and within the whole book in which it sits. We earlier made an attempt with 1 Samuel 15. But perhaps we can also develop some broader guidelines.

Affirming God's Sovereignty

The problem with God's responding is that it may *seem* to compromise God's control. But actually a partial relief can be found right within the doctrine of God's control, the doctrine of God's sovereignty. The doctrine says that God controls all things, all events, from the beginning of history to the culmination in the new heaven and new earth, and even beyond that. He also controls all *connections* between events, such as when one event leads to or causes another (Prov. 16:33). Even minute connections, such as one billiard ball's hitting another and causing it to move, are under his sovereign control. He controls not only each event, but the connection between events, between the one billiard ball's motion and the other. His control is comprehensive.

And that means, when we read language involving response, that we must resolutely remind ourselves that it is *God* who is responding. He is the same God who brought about the events to which he is responding. So he can never be taken off guard or surprised by events about which he would allegedly just now be learning. He knows it all from the beginning. Hence, his responses to events do not subject him to their control. His responses are genuine responses because, as we said, he controls the connections between events as well as the events themselves. And among these connections are those between events and his responses. History is planned by God not as marbles in a line with no connection between them, but as a wonderful, meaningful whole, with causal connections and influences extending in many directions.

Among these connections are those between events and *human* responses to the events. When human beings respond, they are doing so as people made in the image of God. They are imitating the fact that God is the archetypal responder. And God, in his plan for the whole world, ordained that his own actions in history would include a connection of response to previous events that he brought about. That is one aspect of God's own plan for the connectedness of history. This kind of connectedness, the connectedness of response, is itself an expression of God's control over history.

The path here is the path of reinforcing perspectives.² We believe that God is in harmony with himself and that all his attributes are in harmony. God's control, as a perspective on history, is fully compatible with God's response because there is only one God. The two perspectives, the perspective of control and the perspective of presence, seen in his responses, coinhere. (See fig. 40.1.)

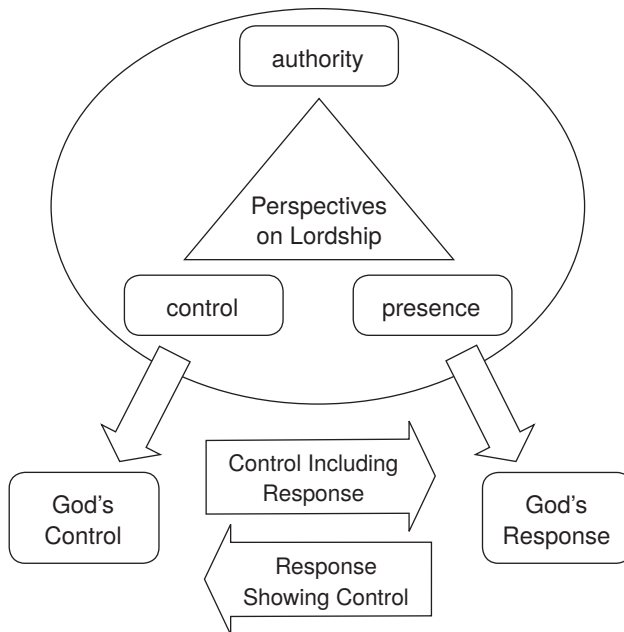


Fig. 40.1. God's Control and Response

2. John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002), 36–115.

Root in the Trinity

We may also inquire whether the pattern of God's work in history has an archetype in God. We already began to explore one of the archetypes when we saw God's acting in his Trinitarian nature in history. God the Father is preeminently the planner; God the Son is preeminently the executor; and God the Holy Spirit is preeminently the applier. In this pattern, the Son is not only working in infinite power, but also *responding* to the Father's plan. Jesus says, "I do as the Father has commanded me" (John 14:31). Similarly:

So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he *sees* the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise. For the Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing. And greater works than these will he show him, so that you may marvel." (John 5:19–20)

Similarly, the Holy Spirit is sent by the Father and the Son to dwell in believers and bring to them what the Son has accomplished. So in a broad sense, the Spirit is responding to the work of the Son. John 16:13 says concerning the Holy Spirit that "he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he *hears* he will speak." The Holy Spirit hears. That is a response to the Father and the Son.

The hearing that is in focus in John 16:13 is hearing the message of redemption, the same message that the apostles come to understand and then proclaim. But in doing this hearing, the Holy Spirit adds no new feature to his character. The Holy Spirit is unchangeable in his character. So we may infer that the Holy Spirit has *always* been hearing the voice of the Father and the Son. He hears the Word, who is God and who is with God (John 1:1). Is this mysterious? Yes. Is it incomprehensible? Yes. It is an aspect of the final and deepest mystery, the mystery of God himself.

Within God himself, then, there is an eternal activity that involves not only initiative, not only speaking, but also hearing, which is a form of response. All this activity in God is eternal, in full harmony with his eternal power and control and absoluteness. In fact, it is an

exhibition of his absoluteness. The speaking is the speaking of the fullness of the infinite Word, which implies absoluteness. The hearing is an expression of the infinite capacity of the Holy Spirit. Do we understand it? No. It is a mystery. (See fig. 40.2.)

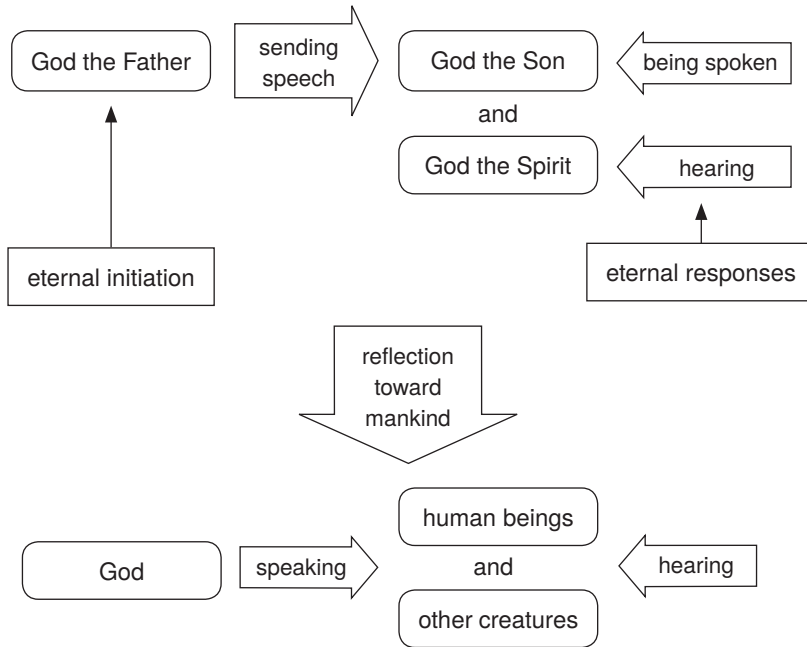


Fig. 40.2. God's Responding

God's Plan for the Goal

We may also consider God's role in evaluation. Let us begin by noting the triads in Romans 11:36 and Revelation 1:4:

For *from* him and *through* him and *to* him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen. (Rom. 11:36)

Grace to you and peace from him who *is* and who *was* and who *is to come*. (Rev. 1:4)

The expressions "to him" (Rom. 11:36) and "is to come" (Rev. 1:4) remind us that God stands at the consummation of history as well

as at its beginning. He is not only the absolute origin, but also the absolute goal.

"I am the Alpha and the *Omega*," says the Lord God, "who is and who was and who *is to come*, the Almighty." (Rev. 1:8)

The Almighty is sovereign over the end:

I am the Alpha and the *Omega*, the first and the *last*, the beginning and the *end*. (Rev. 22:13)

God's presence is overwhelming in the new heaven and the new earth. His glory fills the world. And at the end point that God depicts in Revelation 20–22, he is the absolute Judge: "Then I saw a great white *throne* and him who was seated on it" (20:11). His judgment looks *backward* over previous history: "And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they *had done*" (v. 12).

God is not only the initiator, but the consummate *evaluator*. The final judgment is also the final "application," the application of the work of Christ. If so, it implicitly involves the presence of the Holy Spirit. To believers, in union with Christ, judgment means final deliverance through the righteousness of Christ, to whom believers are united through the Spirit. To unbelievers, it means final judgment through the one who is both God and man: "the Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son" (John 5:22). And this judgment is a judgment with fire: "but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire" (Matt. 3:12, associated in verse 11 with the Holy Spirit; see Acts 2:3–4).

Now, how is this relevant to understanding the language of response? We have seen that in the eternal life of God, we have both initiation and response. The Holy Spirit responds by hearing the eternal Word. Now, in God's work in history, we have initiative and consummation. These works of God reflect who God always is.

In the consummation, God evaluates the past. In a broad sense of the term, he is giving a "response" to the past. God the Father does so through Jesus the Messiah (Isa. 11:1–5). The Messiah has "the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD" (v. 2). What a response

it is! It is a consummate response. It undoes all injustice and rights all wrongs. It gives all sins their just consequences. In this work of judgment, the Holy Spirit, as well as the Father and the Son, has a role. The Holy Spirit is present as rewarder (Eph. 1:14) and punishing fire (Matt. 3:11–12). (See fig. 40.3.)

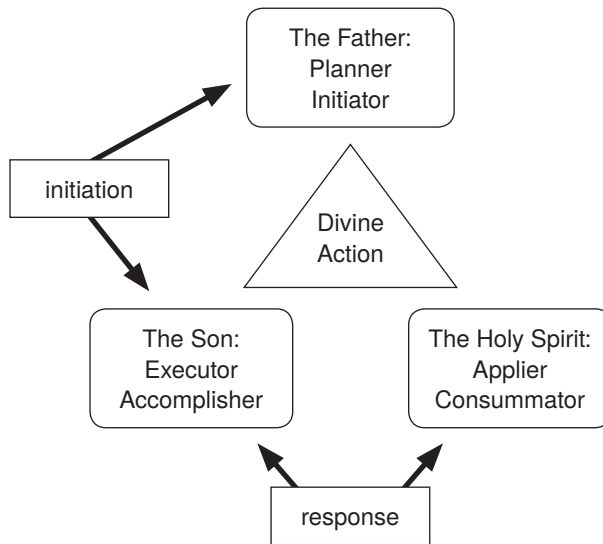


Fig. 40.3. The Holy Spirit as Consummator

Is God absolute? He is. If so, he is the absolute Judge. Far from being in tension with God's complete control, his judgments are a manifestation of his complete control. They include control over the evaluation of events. They give people justice on the basis of a completely penetrating knowledge and evaluation of all past history. This exercise of justice includes the salvation of all those who are united to Christ and thereby inherit his perfect righteousness. This judgment is what it means for God to respond. (See fig. 40.4.) Here we are using the principle that God's attributes are in harmony.

So we ought not to be afraid to affirm that God responds, as long as we understand God rightly and we understand his responses rightly. We still need to constantly remind ourselves of the quicksand threatening to suck us in on the left. We should resist bringing God down from his absoluteness until he is level with the creature, with

God's Responding

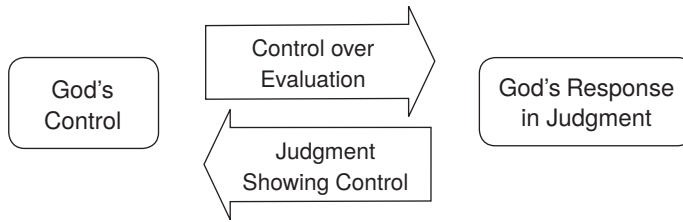


Fig. 40.4. Judgment and Response

human responses. But it is built into the logic of creation that God is the archetype and that human actions are ectypal reflections. They are never on the same level, and we can never equate the two. We can never simply project the finiteness of human action back onto the infinite God.

On the other hand, we need to be aware of the black hole on our right. We begin to slip into its pool if we think we must avoid robust language about God's activities that involve response. The suction of this pool tells us the lie that we are compromising God's absoluteness. But the opposite is true. We are compromising his absoluteness if we do not confess that he is the Judge of all the earth (Gen. 18:25).³

God's Wisdom

We can receive further confirmation of the importance of God's responses by focusing on God's wisdom. God's wisdom is, of course, the archetype for any human wisdom. One aspect of human wisdom is the ability to act in the world in a way that is morally principled and that is obedient to God. Such human action *also* appropriately takes into account the situation in the world. For example, the wise person responds to the fool in a manner that *takes into account* that he is a fool (Prov. 26:4–5). This "taking into account" is a form of response.

If we wished, we could say that the foolishness of the fool *influences* the response of the wise. But we do not mean that it is the kind of influence that pushes him *away* from who he is, or away from his

3. Matthew Barrett, *None Greater: The Undomesticated Attributes of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2019), 227–29.

wisdom. Rather, true wisdom takes account of the situation. The wise man does not go by a mechanical formula that produces the same formulaic response to each and every situation.

By analogy, we can say similar things about God. God is infinitely wise. It is in harmony with his character, rather than in disharmony, for him to take into account each situation in which he speaks and acts. And as we previously observed, the situations are all brought about according to his sovereign plan and his sovereign control. (See fig. 40.5.)

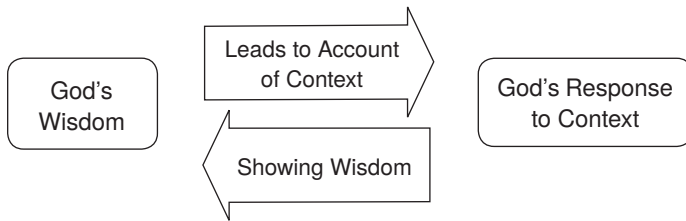


Fig. 40.5. Wisdom and Taking Account of Context

The archetype for this contextually sensitive action is found in God himself. Consider the truth that the Father loves the Son (John 3:35; 5:20). In this eternal act of love, the Father takes into account who the Son is—the Son's loveliness. His act takes place in the context of the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. Once the world is created, God's actions with regard to the created order reflect the pattern in God himself. He takes context into account.⁴ (See fig. 40.6.)

Response in the Resurrection of Christ

How does the resurrection of Christ reveal to us the nature of God in reference to response? Philippians 2:8–11 is a helpful passage with which to start:

And being found in human form, he [Christ] humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

4. Vern S. Poythress, *Inerrancy and Worldview: Answering Modern Challenges to the Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 87.

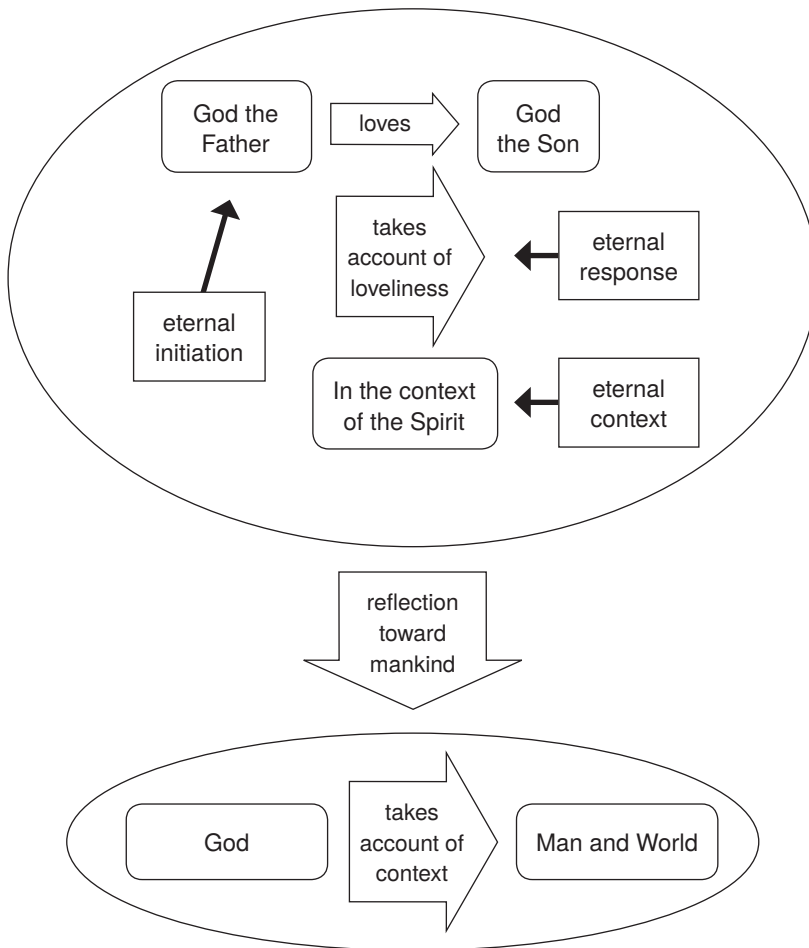


Fig. 40.6. Archetypal Context

Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Note the word *Therefore* at the beginning of Philippians 2:9. That word links us back to verse 8, which describes Jesus' willingness, in obedience to the Father, to suffer a shameful death, "even death on a

cross.” Then verse 9 describes an act of God the Father, in which he exalts Jesus and bestows on him the most exalted name. The word *therefore*, by linking the two verses, indicates that the exaltation is the reward for Jesus’ obedience in verse 8. The exaltation includes by implication his resurrection, because he died in verse 8. Thus, God the Father is functioning as the Judge. His judgment is a response to the Son’s obedience. His judgment embodies the principle that God is a responding God. And this particular response is at the heart of the events by which God achieves his entire purpose for the world.

The response from God the Father displays the infinity of God’s power, in the resurrection and exaltation, and the infinity of his justice, in vindicating Jesus and giving him the just reward for his death. God also manifests the infinite reach of his rule by the result that “every knee should bow.” God’s infinity is manifest *in* his response.

Key Terms

consummation

context

judgment

monadic theology⁵

mutuality theology

response

sovereignty

wisdom

Study Questions

1. Why might it appear to be the case that the idea of God’s responding is in tension with his sovereignty and control?
2. How do we harmonize sovereignty and ability to respond?
3. Why is judgment a key idea to consider in dealing with the idea of God’s responding?
4. How does God’s attribute of wisdom aid us in understanding his ability to interact with the world?

5. Key terms in bold are defined in the glossary at the end of this volume.

For Further Reading

Berkhof, Louis. *Systematic Theology*. 4th rev. ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939. Pp. 74–76.

Westminster Confession of Faith. 1647. Chap. 33, “Of the Last Judgment.”

Prayer

Our Lord, we thank you for your almighty power that you in mercy use on our behalf. Thank you for noticing us, for loving us, for understanding our circumstances, for dealing with our circumstances according to your infinite wisdom. Thank you for listening to our prayers and answering according to your wisdom. Thank you for coming to save us, when we did not even know how to pray, and you loved us.

Interpreting Passages about God's Responses

WE CAN BRIEFLY consider some ways in which God's Trinitarian character in his responses throws light on other passages. We consider some selected passages one by one.

Genesis 1:4

Let us begin with Genesis 1:4: "And God saw that the light was good." The word *saw* describes a kind of response on God's part. Seeing leads to an evaluation, that "the light was good." We do not always think of it, but this act is one of response to the light and an evaluation of the light. God is acting in a manner that expresses his ability and his authority to judge. Similar things could be said about the other instances in Genesis 1 when God "saw that it was good." On the sixth day, "God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good" (v. 31).

God is the initiator, who initiates by speaking, "Let there be light" (Gen. 1:3). The word he speaks is a reflection and manifestation of the eternal Word. And then, after making the light, he evaluates it, in his role as Judge and consummator, in the presence of the Holy Spirit (v. 2). (See fig. 41.1.)

Genesis 3:9–11

The narrative of the fall in Genesis 3 contains a section with pointed responses:

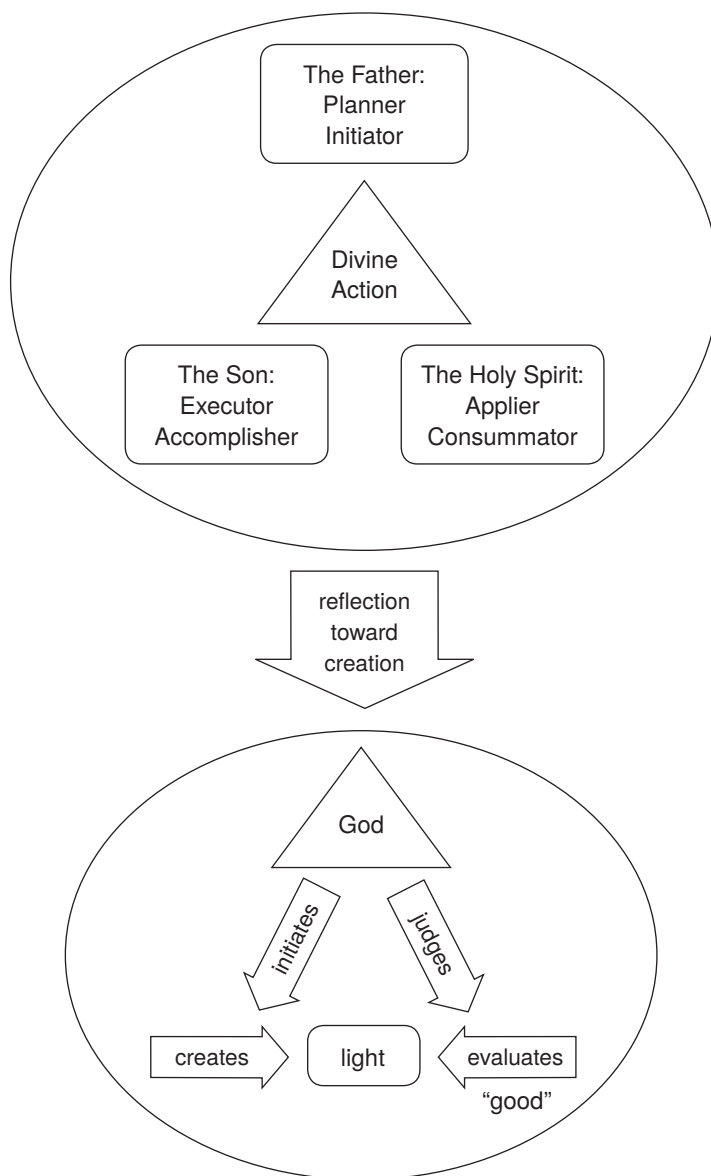


Fig. 41.1. God as Judge in Genesis 1:4

But the LORD God called to the man and said to him, “Where are you?” And he said, “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself.” He said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” (Gen. 3:9–11)

Some interpreters have claimed that the questions in Genesis 3:9–11 show limitations in God’s knowledge. Allegedly, God does not know where Adam has gone. Nor does he know how Adam came to recognize that he was naked. But such a flat reading ignores the context. It misses the fact that the questions in this passage function as judicial interrogations. God is questioning in order to bring Adam to acknowledge the truth, and to face his sin and his guilt. (See fig. 41.2.)

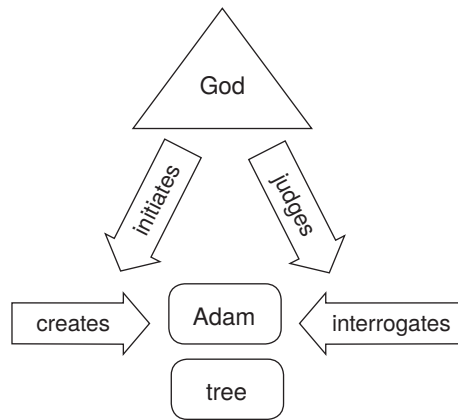


Fig. 41.2. God Evaluates Adam (Gen. 3:9–11)

It is as though a mother catches her son with his hand in the cookie jar and asks: “What did you do?” “What is the rule?” “What is the consequence?” She knows the answer to each question very well. She is posing the questions for the sake of the son.

Genesis 6:5–7

We can see a similar role in evaluation later on, in passages that offer a greater challenge.

The LORD *saw* that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the LORD *regretted* that he had made man on the earth, and it *grieved him to his heart*. So the LORD said, "I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens, for I am *sorry* that I have made them." (Gen. 6:5–7)

The first sentence begins the judicial evaluation with an inspection of the evidence. The Lord as the omniscient Creator knows all the facts. But in this passage he is considering these facts in his capacity as the Judge.

In the second sentence we have the evaluation. He regretted. And the regret embraces the events all the way back to the creation of man, because the human race has gone astray and deserves judgment. The words "regretted" and "grieved him to his heart" are strong expressions. As we observed before, God is not man, and the expressions apply to God analogically. They show the depth in which the course of the world is in rebellion and in antagonism to the very heart of God, his character. God is roused, as it were, to deep reaction by the depth of the deeds, which rouse the depth of his moral revulsion. Here we are speaking about God anthropomorphically. But we need this kind of language. The judgment that will come is extremely serious, thoroughly deserved, and in accord with who God is and will always be.

And who will bring the judgment? The same Holy One who made them. The regret looks back in an evaluation. In context, it does not imply that the Lord changed his mind in the light of better knowledge. He had knowledge of the future from the beginning. But in this passage he is evaluating the events as events that happened earlier than the time at which he pronounces judgment.

The third sentence draws the conclusion, as is indicated with the opening word *So*. The Judge speaks the sentence: "the LORD said, 'I will blot out man . . .'" (Gen. 6:7).

Together, our observations do not solve all the difficulties and challenges that the passage presents. God is mysterious. His judgments are mysterious. His Trinitarian character is a mystery. But

we can make a beginning by standing in awe of his mystery. (See fig. 41.3.)

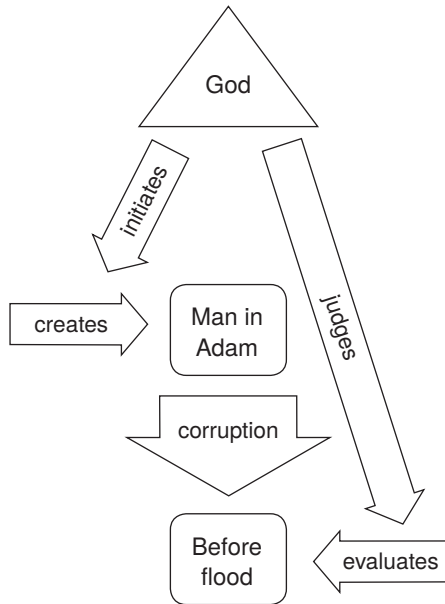


Fig. 41.3. God Judges Mankind before the Flood

Genesis 11:5

In the story of Babel, God “came down to see”:

And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of man had built. (Gen. 11:5)

Did God not know until he came down? Of course he did. The context is one of judicial evaluation. In the next verse, Genesis 11:6, God speaks. He sets out information about the situation. This information functions like information leading to an indictment. Then in verse 7 he pronounces a punishment, which is like a judicial sentence. The context helps us to see that verse 5 is quite consistent with understanding that God is the Lord and Judge of all the earth. (See fig. 41.4.)

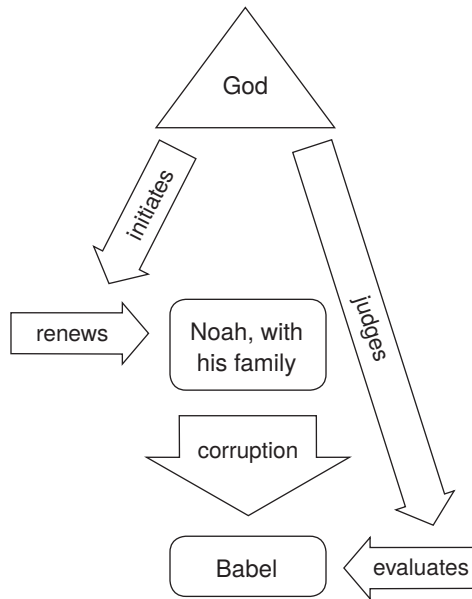


Fig. 41.4. God Judges Babel

Genesis 18:21

Genesis 18:21 involves a similar setting, but this time with Sodom and Gomorrah:

Then the LORD said, “Because the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great and their sin is very grave, I will go down to see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me. And if not, I will know.” (Gen. 18:20–21)

“The outcry” is probably a reference to the cries of people who have been oppressed. As with all human claims, their cries may or may not fully correspond to the truth. The expression “if not” acknowledges the fallibility of human testimony. In a manner analogous to a human judge, God listens to the human cries for justice, and then considers the facts of the case.

The context of judicial evaluation helps in understanding. Given this context, “I will know” does not have merely the flat meaning

“I will know facts, the bare factual truth about the situation.” It means, rather, “I know for the purpose of executing justice, pronouncing sentence, and meting out punishment.” God in his omniscience already knows all the facts. But he proceeds to act as Judge.¹ (See fig. 41.5.)

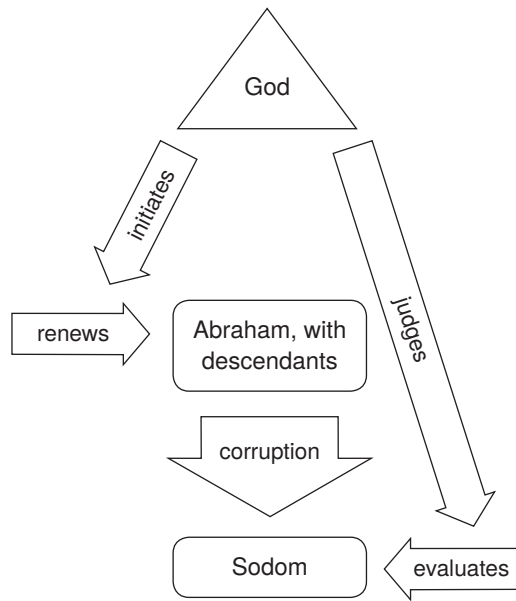


Fig. 41.5. God Judges Sodom and Gomorrah

That means *dealing* with the whole situation. We must allow that God can act in the world in ways spread over a period of time. That is an implication of his sovereignty.

Genesis 22:12

In the story of the sacrifice of Isaac, at the crucial point, the narrative runs:

1. Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison Jr., trans. George Musgrave Giger (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1992), 1.212, Q. 12, XXVII: “he [God] performs the part of a good and exact Judge.”

He said, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I *know* that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." (Gen. 22:12)

The story starts with the introductory remark, "After these things God *tested* Abraham" (Gen. 22:1). The whole narrative sequence is a test. Its phase of resolution is found in a judicial evaluation. And that is what we have in verse 12.

Some interpreters have inferred that God did not know beforehand. But the passage does not say that. To make the inference is to make the mistake of woodenly treating God as though he were a man—ignoring Genesis 1 and much else. To make the incorrect inference is also to miss what is actually happening. It is not an addition to factual knowledge, but a judicial evaluation. The "knowing" is the knowing aspect of evaluation. (See fig. 41.6.)

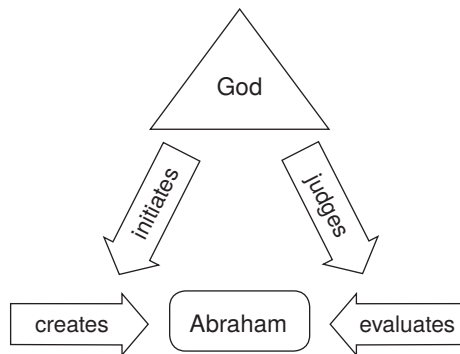


Fig. 41.6. God Evaluates Abraham

Later verses spell out the results of the evaluation more fully:

By myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, *because* you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely *bless* you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, *because* you have obeyed my voice. (Gen. 22:16–18)

First Samuel 15:11, 35

The word of the LORD came to Samuel: “I regret that I have made Saul king, for he has turned back from following me and has not performed my commandments.” (1 Sam. 15:10–11)

And the LORD regretted that he had made Saul king over Israel.
(1 Sam. 15:35)

First Samuel 15:11 and 35 also involve an evaluation of an event in the past, namely, the past of Saul’s kingship, as we have shown earlier in our discussion of 1 Samuel 15. Here we can confirm the judicial flavor of both verses. In verse 10 we have an introduction, “The word of the LORD came to Samuel.” As in the case of Eli in 1 Samuel 3, the word turns out to be a judicial pronouncement. Verse 11 has two parts. The first, the regret, is the conclusion of the judicial examination of Saul’s kingship. The second half, beginning with the word *for*, sets forth the grounds for the judgment. God is acting as the Judge of all the earth, as declared by Abraham (Gen. 18:25).

In 1 Samuel 15:35, we do not find the same fullness of explanation as in the earlier verse 11. But verse 35 largely repeats verse 11, so we can infer that it is a summary of the same point: God acts judicially. Then, right after verse 35, comes the beginning of 1 Samuel 16, where God has Samuel anoint David as the succeeding king. This act is an expression of judgment on Saul’s kingship, and a confirmation of the judicial function of 15:35.

In between verses 11 and 35 of 1 Samuel 15 are other signs of judicial evaluation. Consider verses 23 and 26:

Because you have rejected the word of the LORD,
he has also rejected you from being king.

For you have rejected the word of the LORD, and the LORD has
rejected you from being king over Israel.

Both verses offer us versions of the principle of *lex talionis*, “eye for eye and tooth for tooth” (Ex. 21:24). The broader principle is “As you

have done, it shall be done to you; your deeds shall return on your own head" (Obad. 15). This principle is intended in biblical contexts not as an incitement to individual vengeance, but as a guide to judicial judgment. It is a principle of justice by which judges operate. The Judge of all the earth is the God of justice, and his own justice is expressed in his rejection of Saul. (See fig. 41.7.)

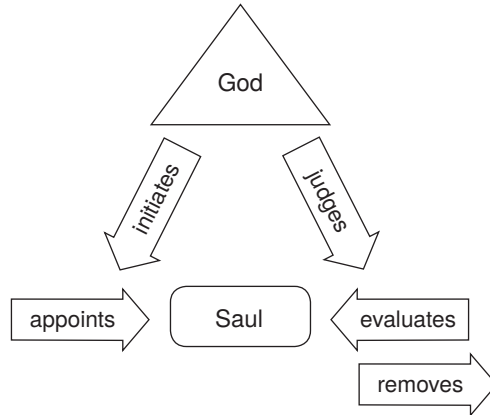


Fig. 41.7. God Judges Saul

Regret in the Resurrection of Christ

How might the resurrection of Christ throw light on the language of regret? The resurrection of Christ is the manifestation of the beginning of the new order, the new creation, the new world.² Christ is the “firstfruits” (1 Cor. 15:23). He is also the “firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent” (Col. 1:18). First Corinthians 15 contrasts Christ with the failure of Adam, the first man. And in between Adam and Christ are the contrasting figures of Saul and David. The rejection of Saul and the establishment of David is like the movement from the failure of Adam to the righteous rule of a righteous king. But David himself is not perfect in his righteousness; he is a shadow of Christ, who is to come. So the ultimate case in which God rejects one person and turns from him to another is the case with the first man, Adam, and the last Adam, Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 15:45).

2. See the discussion of *new* in chapter 36.

If we were to use the phraseology of 1 Samuel 15:11, we would say that God regrets that he has made the first man, Adam. Why? “For he has turned back from following me and has not performed my commandments” (v. 11). God evaluates him judicially as a failure. Because Adam failed, his rule over a larger world was also a disaster. God removes him from final kingship. He turns away from him to another, to Jesus Christ. The consummate case of God’s regret is the establishment of Jesus Christ in his resurrection as the new Lord of the world (Phil. 2:10–11). (See fig. 41.8.)

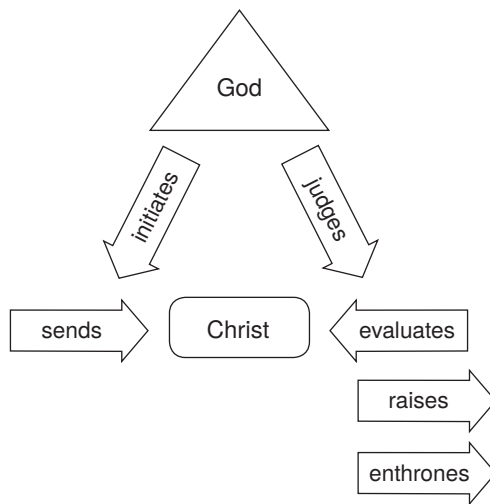


Fig. 41.8. The Resurrection of Christ as Evaluation

Terms for Emotions

These principles have relevance for a broader class of verses in the Bible, verses that use terms for emotions and apply them to God. So God may be described as angry, sorrowful, grieving, burning with wrath, pitying, having compassion, rejoicing, having delight, taking pleasure, and so on. These emotional terms do not usually occur in formal judicial settings. But they are still responses that represent an evaluation of a situation.

We might say that though they are not *judicial* evaluations in a narrow way, they are yet *personal* evaluations. They show that God’s

own holy character is the ultimate basis for his personal responses. God's character, rather than legal rules that would be outside him and that would be produced independently of him, results in the fact that terms for emotions are appropriate.

As usual, God is not man. We still need to remember that he is not captured or controlled by an outside situation that he did not anticipate. There are no surprises for him. Every verse with emotional terms invites us to see an analogy between God's response and human emotional responses. The analogy is real and appropriate. But it is an analogy, not an identity. The *way* in which emotional terms apply to God is not the same as the way in which they apply to human beings. It is always qualified by his uniqueness. Of course, this lack of identity leaves us with mystery. But that is appropriate.

God's response always expresses the fact that he is the perfect consummator and evaluator, as well as the perfect planner and initiator. All of God's responses and evaluations are expressions in full harmony with everything he is—in full harmony with his unchanging character. *Not* to respond would be out of character with his being the evaluator of all things. "From him and through him and *to* him are all things" (Rom. 11:36).

Is this mysterious? It is, deeply. Can the mystery be eliminated or surpassed? No. It is derivative from the mystery of the Trinity.

Key Terms

analogy
judgment
response

Study Questions

1. In what way do we find the atmosphere of judicial decision or evaluation in biblical passages about God's responses?
2. In the Bible, how is the language of emotions or affections ascribed to God? How is such language similar to and also dissimilar to what happens with human emotional life?

For Further Reading

Berkhof, Louis. *Systematic Theology*. 4th rev. ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939. Pp. 74–76.

Westminster Confession of Faith. 1647. Chap. 2, “Of God, and of the Holy Trinity.”

Prayer

Dear Lord, enable us with wisdom and humility and faith to interpret what you say in hard passages. We thank you that you know how to communicate to us according to your truth and our needs.

Presuppositional Arguments

WE MAY NOW briefly consider a different sort of argument in favor of the attributes of God that are set forth in classical Christian theism. This kind of argument reflects on what must necessarily be true in order for us even to think about and talk about who God is. This kind of argument should be considered as a confirmation of biblical teaching (to which we appealed in chapters 3–9), rather than something independent of biblical teaching.

God's Eternity

As an example of reflecting on what must be true, consider the question of God's eternity. Is God eternal? Or is he temporal? Or is he both, in different respects? And what do we mean by *eternity* and *temporality*? We argued in chapter 6 that God is eternal. But we should admit that God surpasses our comprehension. His relation to time is mysterious. So saying with precision what we mean by *eternity* and *temporality* is not possible. In accord with Scripture, we should believe that God acts in time. For example, he created light on the first day; he sent Noah's flood; he appeared to Abraham; and he sent the ten plagues on Egypt. But that is *not* to say that "God is temporal." This last expression sounds as though he is a creature of time, that he is subject to time in more or less the way that we or any other created thing is subject to time.

We should recognize that people who use language about

temporality in relation to God may qualify what they say by context. And what they really want might be primarily to affirm that (1) God acts in time, by sending the flood of Noah, by speaking to Abraham, and so on; (2) God in his comprehensive knowledge understands comprehensively each human experience of passing time. But saying that “God is temporal” is confusing. So it should be avoided. Instead, we need to speak in the way that Scripture itself does: God sent Noah’s flood, spoke to Abraham, and so on.

We can consider an indirect argument for God’s eternity. Suppose that Alice claims that God is temporal. Or suppose that she simply says that God acts in time. Alice’s claims make sense only if she and those to whom she communicates have a sense of time. Our sense of time presupposes our human ability to reflect on the meaning of time and its passage. We are not merely confined to being immersed in the present, in a way similar to what animals appear to experience. Alice and the rest of us have to be able to reflect on the meaning of our experience. We think about the relation of our memory of the past to our present experience of a world around us, and then also a relation of both past and present to the future that we still expect. In a limited way, we do a kind of “survey” of our life and a survey of time. In fact, the survey can extend in our minds far beyond our own earthly lifetime. We think about the far past, as recorded in the Bible, or the far future, the new heaven and the new earth.

When we use language about a creature’s being *temporal*, we presuppose this kind of background in our understanding. And in this understanding we make a mental step backward from our being “embedded” in time. We might picture time as though we were standing above a timeline of history and looking down on the actors in history.

This kind of thinking represents a kind of human *transcendence* over time. We may call it *mini-transcendence* because it is not the same as the transcendence of God. We are still creatures. But we have a capability, given by God, to imagine what it would be like to have a kind of godlike knowledge “from above.” We have that capability because we are made in the image of God. As we have repeatedly observed, we are not God, but we are like God. Our transcendence over the immediacy of a moment reflects on a human

level God's transcendence, which includes *his* ability to survey time from above.

How do we know that our own mini-survey, our mini-transcendence, is not a mere illusion, a mere excess and disintegration of imagination? We have to presuppose a more ultimate vision on God's part, as the underpinning for our own thinking. God's transcendence over time is the ground for our mini-transcendence.

Now, for Alice to say that God is temporal is self-defeating. It is self-defeating because it undermines the condition that Alice needs in God himself in order to understand time. Let us be more specific. The claim concerning temporality presupposes that we can tell ourselves what temporality is. And we can do this only by temporarily, in our imaginations, transcending the narrow limits of the immediate present. Whatever more precise definition of temporality we might use, we must have a ground or basis for our vision in God, who exceeds temporality, in order to know and define it. God's eternity is a *presupposition* for all our thoughts about time. (See fig. 42.1.)

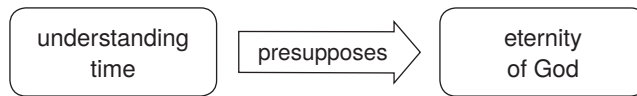


Fig. 42.1. Eternity as the Presupposition for Time

Instead of focusing on our thinking, we could focus on our language. Let us recall that language and thinking are closely related. So we could conduct an analogous argument about language concerning time. In order to use language about time, we must have language and meanings supplied by God. The meanings in language must enable us to talk about time in a way that grasps it as a coherent whole, and thus our meaning itself transcends the limits of the time period to which the meaning refers. The meaning of time presupposes the eternity of God, who has crafted our language. Truth about time is truth that is forever true.

This kind of argument about presuppositions for meaning and for thought is also called a *transcendental* argument because it looks for the transcendental framework necessary for meaning and thought.

Such an argument has affinities with the presuppositional apologetics set forth by Cornelius Van Til.¹ This presuppositional apologetics is also called *transcendental apologetics* because it uses a “transcendental” method by analyzing the basic conditions necessary for us to have meaning and thinking and to have a world that exists around us. God is the basic condition. God must exist in order for the world to exist and for us to be able to think and for anything to have meaning. But we are using this kind of apologetics not in the context of affirming the existence of God to an atheist or agnostic, but in the context of *confirming* what the Bible tells us.

It might be claimed that the preceding argument about God’s eternity is merely philosophical. Is it the work of autonomous reason, just like what we find in Aristotle? It is true that it could be taken out of context and interpreted as a product of autonomous reason. But based on the Bible, we can understand the argument in another way. The argument is best construed as a way of considering some of the implications of the biblical teaching about the second person of the Trinity, who is the Mediator of meaning. The second person is the Word, who is the archetype for language. It is impossible to have language or meaning apart from him as the archetypal source. And that archetype is eternal, existing before the world began. In addition, it is impossible to have thinking or reasoning apart from him as the archetypal source because we are made in the image of God, after the pattern of the Son, who is the archetypal image of God.

When we think of the divine Son as Mediator of language, we are building on John 1:1. When we think of him as Mediator of creation, we are building on Colossians 1:15–17 and 2:3, which show the centrality of the Son in the entirety of the created order. He is therefore also central in the constitution of all human language and all human thinking. Our concept of temporality, either in language or in thought, presupposes his eternity.

So it is self-defeating for Alice to say that God is temporal and not eternal. What if she says that God is eternal in himself and temporal in relation to us? That still does not make sense, because God’s

1. For example, Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, ed. K. Scott Oliphint, 4th ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008).

eternity does not have meaning only in relation to God. It has to be there for Alice, in order for Alice to have meaning and structure for her language and thoughts about temporality. In other words, God's transcendence, and specifically his eternity, has to be right there, immanently, through the Son, who is the Word. It is there in a way that is tightly connected with everything Alice is: she is a person who can think about time and who can exercise mini-transcendence. God's eternity is *relevant*.

So, then, it does not work for Alice to say that God is eternal in one respect and temporal in a second distinct respect. God is eternal. Whatever acts he accomplishes in time, through the Son, the Word, and in the power of the Holy Spirit, are consistent with his eternity. These acts express or display his eternity, and necessarily constitute the basis for Alice's own experience of temporality in her own created humanity. So in my view, language about God's being temporal is confusing. It is not consistent with the *kind* of God that God is, and the kind of God that God is *for Alice*, in that he supplies the necessary transcendental foundation for her meanings concerning time. God is the author and crafter of every specific aspect of time, however minute, or such an aspect does not exist at all.

Since God is absolute, he must be the absolute source for time as well as the one who transcends time and "inhabits eternity" (Isa. 57:15). As Creator, sustainer, and providential governor, he is Lord of everything in the entire creation, including all aspects having to do with the passage of time. As we saw earlier, events in time reflect the eternal begetting of the Son by the Father, and the eternal speaking of the Word by the Father. God governs the entire world through speaking, as illustrated in Psalms 33:6, 9 and 147:15–18. The words governing creation and time reflect, express, and manifest the eternal speaking in the Word. God's eternity in speech is the transcendental foundation for time and temporality.

Shall we, then, say that God is *atemporal* or *timeless*? Such terminology is sometimes used by advocates of classical Christian theism. Maybe they mean merely to affirm God's superiority to time. And such an affirmation is true. But to some people's ears, such language can sound as if God is totally uninvolved with anything that happens in time. He is aloof from time. He is the negative of time. And then

we are once again in trouble in trying to affirm the reality that he acts in time, again and again. Let us try to be careful with our language.² We cannot dissolve mystery.

We may illustrate by using the resurrection of Christ. As we saw in chapter 6, the resurrection of Christ manifests the eternity of God because it displays the eternal plan of God for the salvation of the world. At the same time, it is an event in time. Christ's resurrection body is a transfiguration of his preresurrection body. The eternity of the Father's plan coinheres with the fact that Christ acted at specific times, to accomplish God's plan in the world, through the power of the Holy Spirit. He stood trial when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea (Matt. 27:2; Luke 3:1).

God's Immutability

We may explore a similar argument concerning God's immutability. His immutability is closely related to his eternity, so the two arguments fit together.

Suppose that Alice claims that God is changeable. Or suppose that she simply says that God brings about changes in time in the world (which is true). Alice's claims make sense only if she and those to whom she communicates have a sense of change. Our sense of change presupposes the stability of our own consciousness and the stability of some things around us, a stability that forms the background for our detecting change.

2. We can imagine someone with a taste for logic complaining that we should make up our minds. Either God is temporal or he is atemporal (or timeless). It is true that the word *atemporal* or *timeless* could be used with the intention merely of denying that God is temporal. And that would be acceptable (depending, of course, on an understanding of what is meant by "God is temporal"). But when we use ordinary language, words such as *atemporal* and *timeless* are not merely blank counters in the simplified context of formal logic. They may have additional connotations. And the connotations may sometimes vary, depending both on the speech context and on the hearers. We need to make room for a richer conception of language, meanings, and logic (Vern S. Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language—A God-Centered Approach* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009]; Vern S. Poythress, *Logic: A God-Centered Approach to the Foundation of Western Thought* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013]).

For example, the dog Fido changes if he learns from his master how to respond to a command to fetch a ball or a stick. We know that Fido has changed because we can compare a stable memory of the past with what we observe in the present. Or if we were not there in the past, we can at least listen to a description from Fido's master, and we picture for ourselves a pattern of change. In this process we rely on stability. We have the stability of memory. We have the stability of language such that we can understand the master's description. And, significantly, we have the stability of Fido himself. If there were no stability in Fido at all, we would not have Fido but some other dog or mere flashes of color or complete chaos. To say that Fido has changed presupposes *some* continuity in Fido, and thus presupposes stability.

Stability in the world does not have its ultimate foundation in itself. That would be to make world stability into a second god. The foundation is, as usual, in God the Creator, sustainer, and providential controller. The relative stability in the world has its guarantee in the ultimate stability of God. Our memories are *relatively* stable, and Fido as a dog is relatively stable, but beyond this kind of stability lies the ultimate stability of God. So God is unchanging. Indeed, he is unchangeable; that is, it is *necessary*, not merely a happenstance, that he is unchanging. Why? Because he is the standard by which we detect change. To see a change in God, we would have to have something more stable by which to detect the change, and that "more stable" thing would be more ultimate than God, at least with respect to the criterion of change.

We can produce a similar argument by thinking about *language*. Our language that describes change presupposes stability in the language, a stability that transcends the change. If the language changes too much while we are describing the change, we do not succeed in setting forth stable truth.

This kind of thinking represents a kind of human *transcendence* over change. Once again, it offers a form of *mini-transcendence* because it is not the same as the transcendence of God. We are still creatures. But we have a capability, given by God, to imagine what it would be like to have a kind of godlike stability "from above." We have that capability because we are made in the image of God, through the eternal Son. We are not God, but we are like God. Our transcendence

over momentary changes reflects on a human level God's transcendence, which includes *his* ability to transcend all change.

How do we know that our own mini-transcendence is not a mere illusion, a mere excess and disintegration of imagination? We have to presuppose a more ultimate vision on God's part as the underpinning for our own thinking. God's transcendence over change is the ground for our mini-transcendence.

Now, for Alice to say that God is changeable is self-defeating. It is self-defeating because it undermines the condition that Alice needs in God himself in order to understand change. To put it another way, a claim concerning change in the world presupposes that we can tell ourselves what change is. And we can do this only by temporarily, in our imaginations, transcending the narrow limits of a short-range change. Whatever more precise definition of change we might use, we must have a ground or basis for our understanding in God, who is above all change, in order to know and define it. God's unchangeability is a *presupposition* for all our thoughts about change. (See fig. 42.2.)



Fig. 42.2. Immutability as the Presupposition for Change

Instead of focusing on our thinking, we could focus on our language. We could conduct an analogous argument about language concerning change. In order to use language about change, we must have language and meanings supplied by God. The meanings in language must enable us to talk about change in a way that grasps it as a coherent whole, and thus meaning itself transcends the limits of the change to which the meaning refers. The meaning of change presupposes the unchangeability of God, who has crafted our language.

Once again, we have set forth a *transcendental* argument, because it looks for the transcendental framework necessary for meaning and thought. Once again, the argument should not be understood as an argument of autonomous reason. The argument is best understood

as a way of considering implications of the biblical teaching about the second person of the Trinity, who is the Mediator of meaning. The second person is the Word, who is the archetype for language. It is impossible to have language or meaning apart from him as the archetypal source. And that archetype is unchanging, existing before the world began. In addition, it is impossible to have thinking or reasoning apart from him as the archetypal source because we are made in the image of God, after the pattern of the Son, who is the archetypal image of God. Our concept of change, either in language or in thought, presupposes his unchangeability.

So it is self-defeating for Alice to say that God is changing and not unchangeable. What if she says that God is unchanging in himself and yet he also changes when we consider him in his relations to us? We have already discussed this issue in the context of language about *new* relations (chap. 36). God brings about new things in the world. For example, he establishes the new covenant (1 Cor. 11:25). But God is unchanging in his character. God's unchangeability does not have meaning only in relation to God. It has to be there for Alice, in order for Alice to have meaning and structure for her language and thoughts about change. In other words, God's transcendence, and specifically his unchangeability, has to be right there, immanently, in a way that is tightly connected with everything Alice is: she is a person who can think about change and who can exercise mini-transcendence. God's unchangeability is *relevant*.

So, then, it does not work for Alice to say that God is unchangeable in one respect and changeable in a second, distinct respect. Rather, God is unchangeable. Whatever changes he accomplishes in time, through the Son, the Word, and in the power of the Holy Spirit, are changes that are not only consistent with his unchangeability, but expressive of his unchangeability. God's unchangeability necessarily constitutes the basis for Alice's own experience of change in her own created humanity. So we repudiate the language about God's changing. It is not consistent with the *kind* of God that God is, as he has communicated to us in Scripture. God is unchanging *for Alice*, in that he supplies the necessary transcendental foundation for her meanings concerning change. God is the author and crafter of every specific aspect of change, however minute, or it does not exist at all.

Since God is absolute, he must be the absolute source for change as well as the one who transcends all change and is “the same” (Ps. 102:27). As Creator, sustainer, and providential governor, he is Lord of everything in the entire creation, including all aspects having to do with change. Change in time reflects the eternal begetting of the Son by the Father, and the eternal speaking of the Word by the Father. God governs the entire world through speaking, as illustrated in Psalms 33:6, 9 and 147:15–18. The words governing creation and change reflect, express, and manifest the eternal unchanging speaking in the Word. God’s unchangeability in speech is the transcendental foundation for change in the world.

We can illustrate by using the resurrection of Christ. In chapter 7, we saw that the resurrection of Christ manifests the unchangeability of God’s purposes, and the unchangeability of his plan for every human being in union with Christ, through the entire course of history, to participate in the benefits of the resurrection. At the same time, the resurrection of Christ is an event in time, and illustrates how God’s unchangeability is the foundation for change taking place in time by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Let us put it in a Trinitarian context: the stability of the Father coheres with the creativity of the Son, who is the Word who is spoken and who executes the stable plan of the Father in the changes in the world. God’s stability coheres with the presence of the Holy Spirit, who brings God’s unchangeability to sustain us in our experience.

God in Relation to Us

Let us consider a third issue, that of God’s *relation* to us. We can see a presuppositional aspect in the meaning of God’s being related to us. His relation to us makes sense only if we can exercise a mini-transcendence by which we temporarily “rise above” our own role in the relation. We consider God in analogy with relations between two human beings. And we are able to consider relations between two human beings because we can “transcend” our own embeddedness in a personal relation and think of ourselves and others as part of a larger grouping with two or more personal perspectives. All human relations have meaning only because they reflect the archetypal divine

relations between persons in the Trinity. God's relation to us in covenant thus reflects the original relation between the Father and the Son, in the Spirit. God has a relation to us without changing himself, because the relation to us reflects the eternal relation in God, between persons of the Trinity.

We may put it in another way, very simply: a relation presupposes plurality, the plurality of at least two things that stand in relation to each other. Plurality presupposes the archetypal plurality of the Trinity. (See fig. 42.3.)

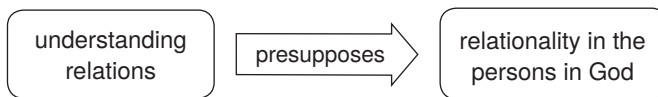


Fig. 42.3. Relations in the Trinity as the Presupposition for Relations in the World

God's relation to us comes to intense expression in the resurrection of Christ, because we are united to Christ and participate in eternal life through being united to him in the Spirit: "everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die" (John 11:26).

God's Presence

God is present with us, as expressed in *Immanuel*. Our understanding of his presence, like our understanding of his relation, presupposes our ability to have mini-transcendence and to consider God's presence as being like the presence of another human being in a personal relation. This mini-transcendence is not an illusion because it is based on the infinite transcendence of God. And this transcendence includes God's presence toward himself, as the Father is present to the Son (John 11:42; 17:5) and to the Spirit eternally. God's presence to us in time reflects his presence to himself. (See fig. 42.4.)

God's presence comes to expression toward us in the resurrection of Christ, especially in its application to us through the Holy Spirit: "he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who *dwells in you*" (Rom. 8:11).

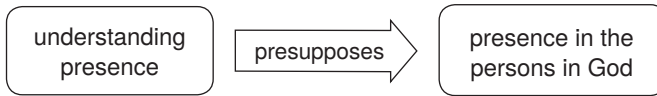


Fig. 42.4. God's Self-Presence as the Presupposition for Presence in the World

God's Knowledge

We can also see a presuppositional aspect when we consider God's knowledge. Our ability to know reflects on a creaturely level God's ability. To contemplate the possibility of something that God might not know, we must have a foundation for our contemplation in God, which leads to the conclusion that God already knows it.

Key Terms

change
eternity³
immutability
presupposition
relation
temporality
transcendental argument

Study Questions

1. What is a transcendental argument?
2. How do we argue that God is eternal, unchangeable, and having eternal relations in himself, starting with concepts of temporality, change, and relations in the world?
3. What is the best way of making affirmations about God's relation to time, to change, and to relations?

3. Key terms in bold are defined in the glossary at the end of this volume.

For Further Reading

- Poythress, Vern S. *Redeeming Science: A God-Centered Approach*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006. Chap. 1.
- Van Til, Cornelius. *The Defense of the Faith*. Edited by K. Scott Oliphint. 4th ed. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008. Pp. 121–27.

Prayer

Our Lord, enable us to appreciate more deeply how we depend on you as we contemplate your works. Help us to appreciate that you are the one in whom we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:28).

Identity and Distinction in God

REPRESENTATIVES OF CLASSICAL Christian theism have sometimes affirmed the identity of items in God in three ways: (1) God's attributes are identical to his essence. For example, God is his own goodness and he is his own infinity. (2) God's attributes are identical to one another. For example, his goodness is identical to his justice, which is identical to his infinity. (3) The persons of the Trinity are identical to their interpersonal relations. For instance, God the Father is identical to his *paternity*.

Strengths and Weaknesses

We have already observed one strength of this approach. It wants to avoid overdistinguishing aspects within God, and thereby undermining his absoluteness and his simplicity.

But if there is no distinction to be made, we run the risk of underdistinguishing, and we may lose our confidence in descriptions of God in ordinary language. Accordingly, classical Christian theists such as Turretin have taken care to say that the distinctions in our conceptions are not merely "formal" or not merely conceptual; that is, they are not merely in our minds, with no reference to truth outside our minds.

But in earlier chapters, we have also seen some liabilities in the language of identity. Even though classical Christian theists assure us that our use of distinctions in our own language corresponds to something outside our minds, the classical expressions concerning

identity (related to simplicity) can appear to be in some tension with the desire to affirm any kind of distinction pertaining to God.

Reaffirming Absoluteness

We have proposed to enhance classical Christian theism by using the doctrine of the Trinity. This route is natural when we reflect on the implications of the absoluteness of God. The absoluteness of God implies that God needs no resources outside himself. He needs no such resources to create the world. Neither does he need such resources in order to speak and to give us the gift of language, with its plurality of conceptions.

It follows that the pluralities in the world, and the pluralities in language, reflect the archetypal plurality in God himself. This archetypal plurality is the plurality of persons in the Trinity.

Identity and Distinction in Attributes

How might truths about the Trinity provide light for the issue of identity and distinction in attributes?

Let us illustrate by considering three attributes of God: ethical absoluteness, omnipotence, and omnipresence. These three can be relabeled using John Frame's triad for lordship, namely, authority, control, and presence.¹ As we saw earlier, these three attributes each have an affinity to a person of the Trinity (chap. 31; fig. 31.1). God the Father has all *authority*. God the Son executes the plan of the Father, thereby exerting *control*. God the Holy Spirit is the one who is immediately *present* with and in believers. (See table 43.1.)

Table 43.1. Correlations between Persons and Attributes

Persons	Father	Son	Holy Spirit
Perspectives on Lordship	absoluteness, authority	control	presence

1. Note, however, that Frame's categories express how God's absoluteness, omnipotence, and immensity are reflected in his relation to us as the Lord.

It is also true that each person of the Trinity has all three attributes—authority, control, and presence. But the Father is *preeminently* associated with authority, and so with the Son and the Spirit.

Now, the unity and simplicity of God imply that each person is fully God, not a part of God. The Father is God; the Son is God; and the Holy Spirit is God. These are affirmations of *identity*. If we ignored the Creator-creature distinction, we would be tempted to conclude that the Father and the Son and the Spirit are identical with one another, since each is identical with God. But the Bible indicates that they are distinct. We have *both identity and distinction*. This distinctness together with identity is unique with God.

Now consider the three attributes of lordship: authority, control, and presence. These three attributes function as *perspectives* on all aspects of God's lordship and on every act expressing his lordship toward creation.² We may consider God's acts in creating the world, or his acts in redeeming Israel from Egypt through the Red Sea, or his acts in leading the people through the wilderness. In each act he expresses his authority, his control, and his presence. All three aspects are always there together. They cannot be pried apart, as though we could say that he exerted control only at the Red Sea and not in leading the people through the wilderness. So each attribute functions as a *perspective* on each of God's acts. And it is thus also a perspective on God himself, who shows who he is as he accomplishes his acts.

(Note that the treatment of attributes as functioning like perspectives has historical antecedents. Thomas Aquinas says, "Therefore although the names applied to God signify one thing, still because

2. Herman Bavinck has language suggesting that God's attributes are distinct perspectives on God, but that the perspectives arise from the plurality of God's works: "Every name [applied to God] refers to the same full divine being, but each time from a particular angle, the angle from which it reveals itself to us in his works" (Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004], 2:177). Geerhardus Vos: "We may be content to say that all God's attributes are related most closely to each other and penetrate each other in the most intimate unity. However, this is in no way to say that they are to be identified with each other" (Vos, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. and trans. Richard B. Gaffin Jr. [Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2012], 1.5). Also John Frame: "each attribute is a perspective on his nature and plan" (Frame, *The Doctrine of God* [Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002], 151; see also 229).

they signify that under *many and different aspects*, they are not synonymous.”³

Some of God’s acts may show one attribute more prominently than another. For example, the sparing of the houses in Egypt that have blood on the doorposts shows God’s presence in those houses. The killing of the firstborn among the Egyptians shows God’s control. But the killing of the firstborn also, subordinately, shows God’s presence, a presence in judgment and curse. Likewise, the sparing of the Israelite houses shows God’s control, negatively, in that he controls the plague and keeps death from penetrating the houses with blood on the doorposts. This greater prominence is analogous to what we see in the relation of the persons of the Trinity to the three attributes of lordship.

Now we can look at the analogies between the three persons of the Trinity on the one hand and the three attributes of lordship on the other hand. We can make three interlocking observations.

First, just as each of the three persons is the one God, so each of the attributes functions as a perspective on *all* of God’s acts and *all* of who God is.

Second, just as each person is distinct from the other two persons, so each of the attributes is distinct from the other two. They are distinct in meaning: the idea of presence is not the same as the idea of control. They are also distinct in effects: the killing of the firstborn shows preeminently control, while the sparing of the Israelites shows preeminently presence.

Third, just as each person dwells in the other two, so each attribute “indwells” the other two. Each can be seen as presupposed by the other two, and also as implicated by the other two. For example, when God controls an event, he is present in his control. Control implies presence. We can reexpress this kind of truth by using the language of coinherence. The three persons in the Trinity *coinhere*, by which we mean that each dwells in the other two, and each knows

3. Thomas Aquinas, *The “Summa theologia” of St. Thomas Aquinas*, 2nd rev. ed. (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1920), 1.158, [1a] Q. 13, art. 4, “I answer,” italics mine, quoted in Matthew Barrett, *None Greater: The Undomesticated Attributes of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2019), 83, with the wording “from many different points of view.”

the other two completely.⁴ The coinherence among the persons of the Trinity is unique, and unlike anything in the created order. Yet if we wish, we can also use the word *coinherence* more broadly, by analogy. We use it in order to describe what happens with the three attributes of lordship. Then we would say that the coinherence among the persons of the Trinity is the *archetypal* coinherence. Patterned after this archetype, we find a *derivative* kind of coinherence expressed in the relation of the three attributes of lordship.⁵ (See fig. 43.1.)

We can describe this derivative coinherence in three complementary ways.

First, we can describe the unity belonging to all three perspectives taken together. To say that they are perspectives means that they are perspectives on the *whole*, that is, on lordship. Or, more broadly, we can say that they are perspectives on God. They are perspectives on the *whole* of God, and God is one. The unity of perspectives is guaranteed by the unity of God.

Second, by being perspectives, each perspective with its own unique theme or starting point, the perspectives also show that they are distinct from one another. Control is not presence, even though both are involved in each other in the case of God.

Third, by being perspectives, they function as perspectives not only on the whole of God, but on each other perspective. God by controlling events is present in them. And by being present in them, he controls them and expresses his authority over them. Or, to use our new terminology, we may say that the three perspectives are coinherent. Each attribute applies to each other attribute. God's control is authoritative and expresses his presence. God's presence expresses his authority and control. God's authority is controlling and present.

Now we may return to our original issue, whether the attributes are identical to one another or distinct. The analogy with the Trinity suggests that both aspects are true, in a coinherent way.⁶

4. Vern S. Poythress, *Knowing and the Trinity: How Perspectives in Human Knowledge Imitate the Trinity* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2018), chap. 7 and app. J.

5. Poythress, *Knowing and the Trinity*, chap. 14.

6. See Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology: Prolegomena and the Doctrines of Revelation, Scripture, and God*, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2007):

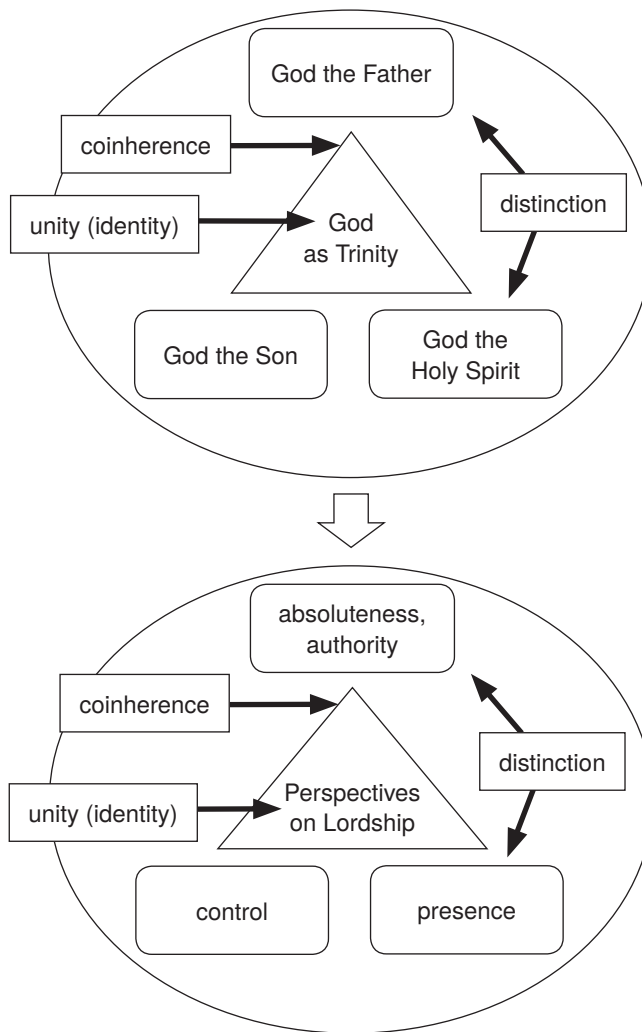


Fig. 43.1. Unity, Distinction, and Coinherence

As we say that each of the attributes of God is to be identified with the being of God, while yet we are justified in making a distinction between them, so we say that each of the persons of the Trinity is exhaustive of divinity itself, while yet there is a genuine distinction between the persons. (348)

We need both the absolute coterminicity of each attribute and each person with the whole being of God, and the genuine significance of the distinctions of the attributes and the persons. (364)

First, there is unity for all three perspectives. Since the perspectives are perspectives on the whole, they have the same object, namely, the acts of God's lordship. Or we could say that their object of knowledge is God himself as the one who displays who he is in his acts. God is the same God in all our acts of knowledge. God is identical to himself. The perspectives have a *kind* of identity in what they show us, namely, God. In order to avoid conceiving of this *identity* as the kind of identity that would collapse all distinctions, we may prefer to call it *unity*.

Second, each perspective is distinct from the other two. This distinction reflects the archetypal distinctions among persons of the Trinity. Hence, it is not *merely* in our subjective human conception. God's Word to us in Scripture and the gift of language with its distinct words reflect the archetypal plurality of persons in God.

Third, each perspective coinheres with the other two. This coinherence shows how the unity of the object of knowledge harmonizes with the distinct modes of knowledge offered to us by the three perspectives.

Three Perspectives on Coinherent Perspectives

So we have three ways of looking at the triad of perspectives on lordship. The first focuses on the unity of the object of knowledge. The second way focuses on the distinction or diversity in the texture of each perspective in comparison with the other two. The third focuses on the coinherence of the perspectives, each indwelling the other two. Together, these three ways of looking at the triad offer three perspectives. These perspectives are similar to what we said earlier with the triad of contrast, variation, and distribution. Contrast focuses on the distinctiveness of a word and its meaning. Variation focuses on the distinction in each particular use, and studies how particular uses together offer a range of use. Distribution focuses on relations, in this case relations to the contexts in which a word appears. These three correspond, respectively, to unity, distinction, and coinherence in perspectives. (See fig. 43.2.)

We have already seen that the triad of perspectives on meaning—contrast, variation, and distribution—reflects the archetypal

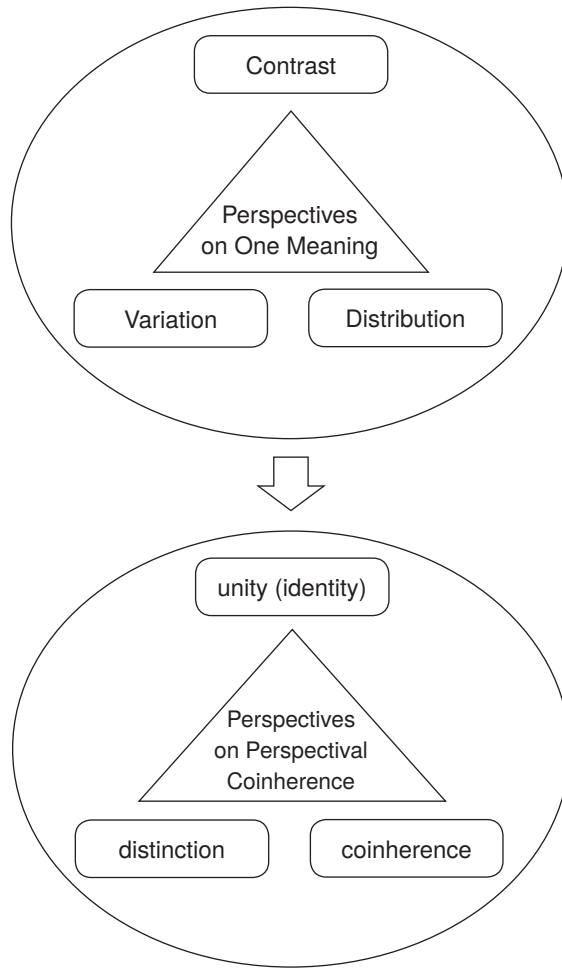


Fig. 43.2. The Triad for Meaning and the Triad for Relations of Perspectives

coinherence of the persons of the Trinity (fig. 13.7). Therefore, the triad of unity, distinction, and coinherence also reflects the archetypal unity and distinction in the Trinity.⁷ (See fig. 43.3.)

Note also that the whole idea of *perspectives* has its basis in the Trinity. That is, the Trinity offers the archetype for human perspectives.

7. See also Poythress, *Knowing and the Trinity*, chap. 32, on the special triad for God.

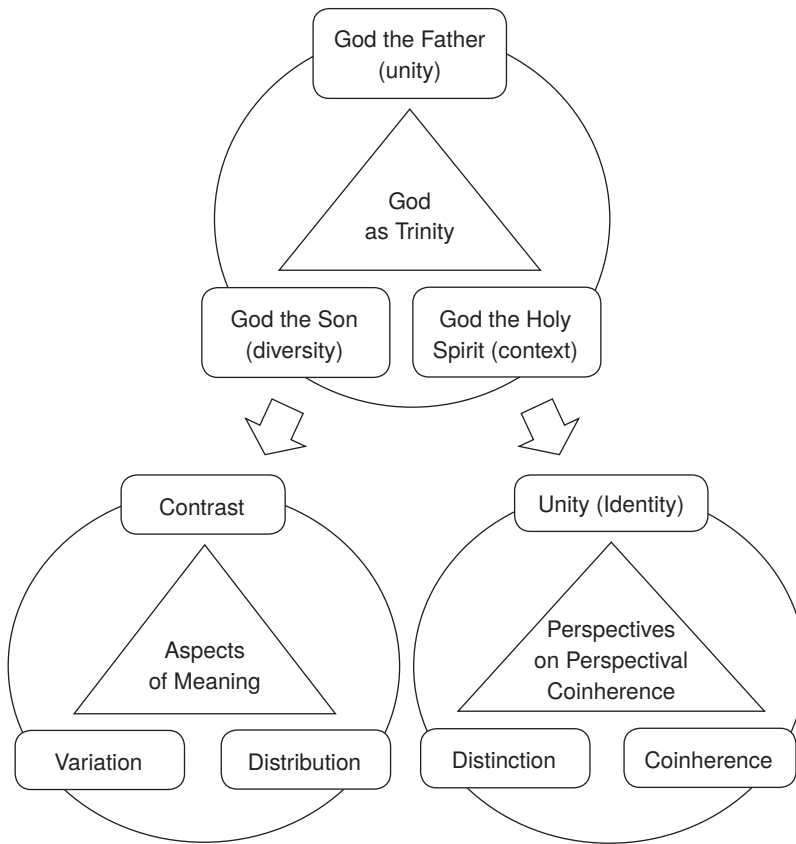


Fig. 43.3. Perspectival Coinherence Reflecting the Trinity

Each of the three persons of the Trinity has the full, comprehensive knowledge of God. But it is also true that each has a personal *perspective* on that knowledge (Matt. 11:27; 1 Cor. 2:10).⁸

The Trinity, as we have said before, is ontologically basic. When we reckon seriously with the Trinity as our ontological starting point, we find a way of affirming both unity and distinction in the attributes of God. The unity does not have priority over the distinction, nor vice versa. Both unity and distinction reflect the archetypal unity and distinction in the Trinity. The distinction in attributes is not merely a product of our minds or our conceptions, nor is it merely a projection

8. Poythress, *Knowing and the Trinity*, chaps. 30–31.

starting with God's works in the world. It is a reflection of the unity and distinction in the Trinity.⁹

Identity and Distinction in God's Relation to Attributes

We may now consider a second issue, whether and in what way God is identical to his attributes. Classical Christian theism has maintained that he is identical with his attributes. In this way, it has fought against overdistinguishing. But as we have seen, there remains a question whether it is able to do full justice to a distinction between God and his attributes.

We may once again appeal to the absoluteness of God. God's absoluteness implies that he has resources in himself to produce the created world with its distinctions, and to produce the human mind with its conceptual distinctions. Does the Trinity give us light as we consider the issue of God in relation to his attributes?

As we saw in chapter 32, predication has its foundation in the Trinity. This foundation is what we need. In the relation between God and his attributes, God is the subject and an attribute functions as the predicate. This relation between subject and predicate traces back to the relation between the Father and the Spirit, and between the Father and the Son. The relation between subject and predicate reflects in a derivative fashion the archetypal relation of the Father and the Spirit.

The reflection of the Trinity in subject and predicate suggests that we can affirm both identity and distinction in a way that reflects the Trinity.

For this purpose, we can use the triad of perspectives that we just discussed earlier in this chapter, the triad consisting in unity, distinction, and coinherence. These three labels designate three perspectives on the issue of God in relation to his attributes.

The perspective of unity in our case consists in focusing on God himself, with the attributes of God in the periphery. God is one. So

9. After arriving at these analogical formulations, I discovered a similar pattern of thought in Jordan P. Barrett, *Divine Simplicity: A Biblical and Trinitarian Account* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017), 179–86. Barrett's "analogy of diversity" is quite close to the analogy that I have drawn between the unity and diversity in the Trinity on the one hand and the unity and diversity in the attributes on the other hand.

all the attributes are one in him. We emphasize the unity of attributes with God himself.

The perspective of distinction in our case consists in focusing on the distinction between God and his attributes. That distinction reflects the distinction of persons in one God. So the attributes are distinct from God, but in a perspectival way that also affirms unity.

The perspective of coinherence in our present case consists in focusing on the indwelling of the attributes in God and God in the attributes. This indwelling is reflectively derivative from the indwelling of the persons of the Trinity in one another. It is coinherent. Therefore, the attributes are not separable from God.

The Unity of Persons with Their Relations

Finally, we may consider the issue of the relation of each person to the personal relations with other persons. What are we talking about here? Within the Trinity, *paternity* (or *fatherhood*) designates the personal relation of the Father to the Son. It is a *relational* term. The word *Father* designates the person (God the Father). Obviously, there is a close relation between *paternity* and the *Father*. How do we describe this relation?

The same kind of reasoning holds. As we observed in chapter 13, the Holy Spirit functions in some ways preeminently as the “relational” person in the Trinity. It is the Holy Spirit who, through coming to dwell in us (John 14:17), also results in the indwelling of the Father and the Son in us (v. 23). It is the Holy Spirit as a gift who expresses the relational bond of love between the Father and the Son (John 3:34–35). Thus, the archetype for relations is to be found in the Holy Spirit. The archetype for subjects who relate to one another is found in the Father. The Father is God and the Spirit is God. Therefore, we have unity. The foundation for distinction is found in the distinction of the Son from the Father. Therefore, we have distinction. (We also have a foundation for distinction in the distinction of the Spirit from the Father, and the distinction of the Spirit from the Son.) This pattern of unity and distinction is the archetype. It is then reflected derivatively in the relation between the Father and paternity, and in the relations that the Father has to the other two persons. (See fig. 43.4.)

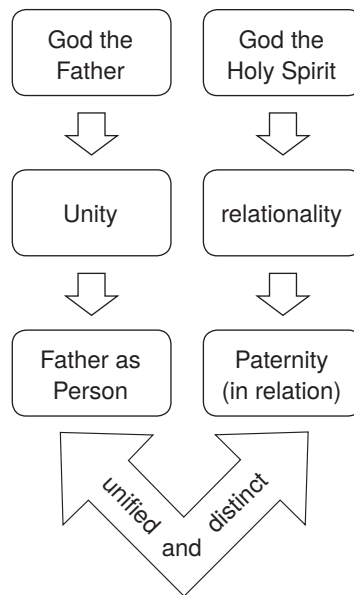


Fig. 43.4. Paternity

The unity and distinction and coinherence between the Father and his paternity reflect the triad of perspectives, consisting in unity and distinction and coinherence, which in turn reflects the Trinity. (See fig. 43.5.)

Help from the Trinity

Classical Christian theism has been right to affirm certain kinds of *identity*—or, as we prefer to say, kinds of *unity*. We have the identity of God with his attributes, the identity of the attributes with one another, and the identity of a person (such as the Father) with a personal relation (such as *paternity*). But the word *identity* can be wrongly taken to imply the absence of all distinction. Classical Christian theism was not able to vigorously affirm distinction *in addition to* unity, because without the doctrine of the Trinity and coinherence, the one side (distinction) threatens to undermine or destroy the other (unity).

In addition, the attempts within classical Christian theism to affirm a distinction kept the distinction in the realm of human

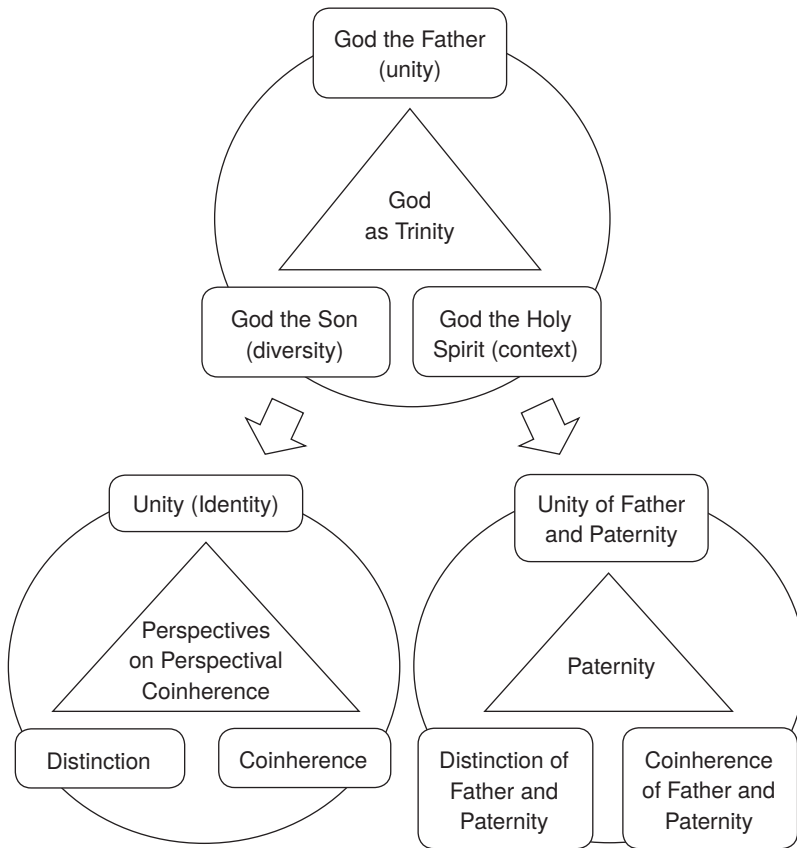


Fig. 43.5. Perspectival Coinherence for Paternity

conceptions and effects in creation. This limitation seemed to be necessary because introducing a distinction in God himself threatened the doctrine of simplicity. Moreover, the attempt to explain a sense of distinction ran into a seemingly insuperable dilemma: (1) if the distinction was explained, it dissolved the mystery; (2) if it remained unexplained, it left a tension between apparent distinction and the strong affirmation of unity in God.

The Trinity provides another way. It is the only way, really, because the Trinity is ontologically basic. This way does not dissolve mystery, but intensifies our appreciation of mystery.

Our conclusion is that classical Christian theism can receive enhancement. The enhancement has to preserve all the valid insights

and the strengths of the past in affirming and honoring the majesty of God. Enhancement can take place because God has revealed himself.

Anticipations of Trinitarian Mystery

Classical Christian theism does contain some anticipations of the enhancement that we have suggested here.

First, as we pointed out in chapter 31, Augustine and Aquinas use analogies between human faculties and divine persons in order to illumine the meaning of the distinctions between the divine persons. These analogies can be extended in order to articulate a perspectival distinction between divine attributes such as knowledge and love.

Second, many classical Christian theists (such as Aquinas and Turretin) have shown caution in the way that they have explained the identity of attributes with one another. They have recognized that this identity could be misconstrued as implying a synonymy of terms. So they have sometimes affirmed that the distinctions made by our language about the attributes are not an error.¹⁰

By analogy, let us compare this strategy to the classical exposition of the Trinity. The classical exposition affirms that the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God. If that were *all* that were said, some people might draw the apparently “natural” conclusion that the three persons are identical *to one another*. So the classical exposition adds a further affirmation that might *seem* to be directly contrary to the three previous “identities”: the Father is not the Son, the Father is not the Spirit, and the Son is not the Spirit. These six affirmations can be reconciled not by a wooden application of a mechanical logic of *identity*, but by acceptance of the mystery of the Trinity—one God in three persons.

These affirmations are analogous to certain affirmations about God’s attributes. The classical exposition of the attributes affirms that God *is* his own absoluteness, his own omnipotence, and his own immensity. This affirmation is analogous to the affirmation that each

10. Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison Jr., trans. George Musgrave Giger (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1992), 1.188 III, 1.189 X.

person of the Trinity *is* God. The classical exposition also affirms that in a sense the attributes are distinct from one another.¹¹ This second affirmation corresponds to the affirmation of the distinction among persons of the Trinity.

The enhancement consists in saying that these two difficulties—Trinity and attributes—are in fact analogous. The Trinity is reflected in the attributes, and therefore the exposition of the attributes can appeal to the mystery of the Trinity. We can affirm a perspectival distinction between the attributes precisely because their unity and diversity mysteriously reflect the archetypal unity and diversity in the Trinity.

Key Terms

authority
coinherence¹²
control
distinction
identity
perspectives

11. “Yet that the attributes of God differ both from his essence and mutually from one another is evident from the diversity of conceptions” (Turretin, *Institutes*, 1.188 VIII; the context, however, heavily qualifies this assertion). Herman Bavinck in his discussion of simplicity directly affirms that “every attribute of God is identical with his essence” (Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:173), but does *not* directly say that the attributes are identical with one another. Geerhardus Vos goes further. After affirming that we cannot make “a distinction in God between His being and His attributes,” he asks, “May we also say that God’s attributes are not distinguished from one another?” (Vos, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:5; the quotes are originally italicized because they are titles). His answer is:

This is extremely risky. We may be content to say that all God’s attributes are related most closely to each other and penetrate each other in the most intimate unity. However, this is in no way to say that they are to be identified with each other. Also in God, for example, love and righteousness are not the same, although they function together perfectly in complete harmony. We may not let everything intermingle in a pantheistic way because that would be the end of our objective knowledge of God. (Vos, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:5)

12. The key term in bold is defined in the glossary at the end of this volume.

presence

unity

Study Questions

1. What are the three perspectives on lordship used by John Frame?
2. What is the relation of these three perspectives to the three persons of the Trinity?
3. How does the doctrine of the Trinity help us to maintain both identity and distinction with respect to the attributes of God?

For Further Reading

Poythress, Vern S. *Knowing and the Trinity: How Perspectives in Human Knowledge Imitate the Trinity*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2018. Chaps. 14, 30, 31.

Prayer

May we and all the church grow toward the stature of the fullness of Christ (Eph. 4:13). May we appropriate the riches of the past, but also grow further through the richness of revelation that we have in the Bible. Cause us to rejoice in the mystery of your uniqueness.

PART 8

SOME ATTRIBUTES IN THE LIGHT OF THE TRINITY

We consider some of the attributes of God (love, mercy, will, and knowledge) in the light of the Trinity. These attributes are only a selection.

The Love of God

LET US NOW look at some examples of how we might consider some attributes of God in the light of the Trinity. Let us first consider the attribute of love.

Biblical Affirmations

The Bible has a multitude of affirmations of God's love for his people in Christ. We might list several:

God's *love* has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. (Rom. 5:5)

But God shows his *love* for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Rom. 5:8)

For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the *love* of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom. 8:38–39)

In this the *love* of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is *love*, not that we have loved God but that he *loved* us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. (1 John 4:9–10)

More than once the Bible asserts that “God is love” (1 John 4:8, 16). Love is an attribute of God. So love belongs to each person of the Trinity. The Father is love; the Son is love; and the Spirit is love. And yet there is only one God who loves.¹

In addition, we can see differentiation. In several of the verses above, the Father is the initiator of love. The Son is the one who manifests God’s love in his life. The Holy Spirit is the one who brings to bear God’s love immediately on our hearts. And yet all three persons are also present in all phases of this one rich work of God’s giving his love to us.

We can also see a differentiation in love among the persons in the Trinity. Consider John 3:34–35:

For he whom God has sent utters the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure. The Father *loves* the Son and has given all things into his hand.

The love of the Father for the Son is expressed in giving “all things into his hand.” And the most fundamental gift is the Holy Spirit: “he gives the Spirit without measure.” These verses apply to what happens in the earthly life of Christ. But they reflect who God always is. We understand that the Father loves the Son eternally, in the communion of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit preeminently expresses the love of God, as Aquinas saw when he correlated the Holy Spirit with an eternal procession of love within God (chap. 31).

Each person distinctively as a person loves the other persons as distinct persons in the Trinity. Each person in his expression of love coinheres with the expressions of love by the other persons. The love of God is three in one, and coinherently one in three and three in one. (See fig. 44.1.)

So we can see that the love of God is *one* love, an attribute of God, belonging to each person of the Trinity. The love of God is also differentiated, so that the Father loves the Son in the communion of the Holy Spirit. This is mysterious.

1. See the Athanasian Creed in Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom with a History and Critical Notes* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1919), 2:66–71.

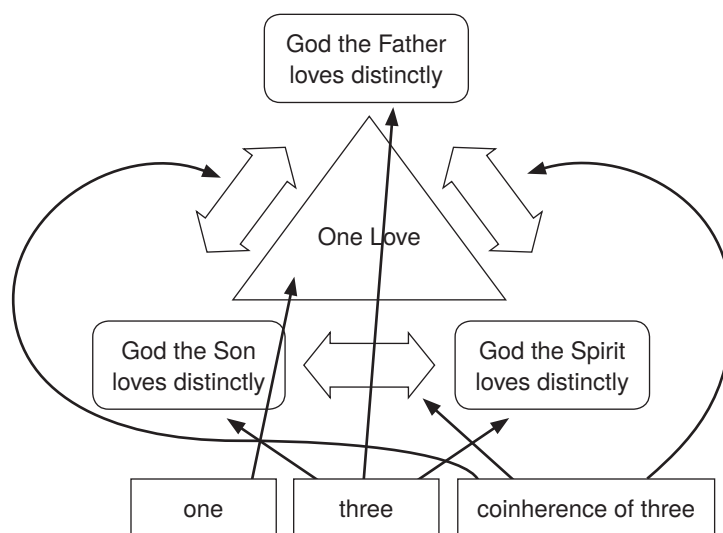


Fig. 44.1. The Trinitarian Love of God

Love in Communication

We may see God's Trinitarian nature reflected in other aspects of the way in which he loves us. The word *love* has contrast, variation, and distribution, reflecting the triune nature of God (chap. 13). Our *conception* of love has contrast, variation, and distribution, reflecting within our minds the triune nature of God. In this reflection, we remain finite. At the same time, we have communion with the infinite God through and in the manifestation of his infinite love.

Love Revealed

The love of God is revealed to us in both general and special revelation. In both cases, God communicates meaning through the Son, the eternal Word, in the power of the Holy Spirit, who functions like the breath of God carrying the communication to its destination in our hearts (Rom. 5:5). The love of God is revealed in God's words. It is also revealed in the reality of adoption. In union with Christ, through the bond of the Holy Spirit, we receive adopted sonship through the sonship of the eternal Son (Gal. 4:4–7; Eph. 1:5).

The love of God comes to us through reflection, which has its archetype in the Son, who is the eternal Image or reflection of God the Father. The love of God in the world reflects the eternal love of the Father for the Son (John 3:35).

God's Trinitarian love is unfathomable:

that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in *love*, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the *love* of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. (Eph. 3:16–19)

Love in the Resurrection of Christ

In the resurrection of Christ, the Father expresses his love for the Son. The love is expressed in the power of the Spirit, who raises Christ from the dead (Rom. 8:11).

Key Terms

differentiation
love
reflection

Study Questions

1. What are the unity and distinction in love in the Trinity?
2. How are unity and distinction in love expressed in God's love for us?

For Further Reading

Berkhof, Louis. *Systematic Theology*. 4th rev. ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939. P. 71.

Poythress, Vern S. *Knowing and the Trinity: How Perspectives in Human Knowledge Imitate the Trinity*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2018. Pp. 68–71.

Prayer

We thank you, our God and Father, that you have given us your love as the Father, and have adopted us as sons through Jesus Christ, who is the Son whom you love in the Holy Spirit. Your love is wonderful, unfathomable. Through the Holy Spirit dwelling in us, cause us to grow in your love. Empower us to love as you have loved us.

The Mercy of God

THE MERCY OF God is Trinitarian. We may make observations concerning mercy similar to what we observed concerning love.

The Nature of Mercy

Mercy arises when people are undeserving of love—when they are sinful and rebellious, and deserving of the opposite of love. The *expression* of mercy in time, after the fall of man, is new in time. But it expresses God's character of love and his disposition to do good. God eternally has the capacity to show mercy. But that capacity is not exercised until there is someone in the world who needs mercy.

Mercy in the Trinity

Mercy, like love, belongs to God and to each person of the Trinity. The Father is merciful. The Son is merciful. The Spirit is merciful. Yet there is only one merciful God.

John 3:16 speaks of God's loving the world. He loves the world that has rebelled. Such love is also merciful. The love described in this verse is preeminently the love of God the Father because it is the motivation for his sending the Son: "God so loved the world that *he gave* his only Son . . ." Likewise, Romans 8:32 declares, "He [the Father] who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all,

how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” The word *graciously* in this verse is a near-synonym for *mercifully*. The Father is merciful. And the Son is merciful, since he came to earth and delights to do the Father’s will (Ps. 40:8; John 8:29; Heb. 10:7). During his earthly ministry, he shows mercy to those in distress (Matt. 9:27–29; 17:15–18; etc.). The Holy Spirit as the Spirit of Christ brings the mercy of Christ to the suffering (Titus 3:5–6).

Mercy is differentiated: the Father initiates, the Son accomplishes, and the Spirit applies. This is mysterious. (See fig. 45.1.)

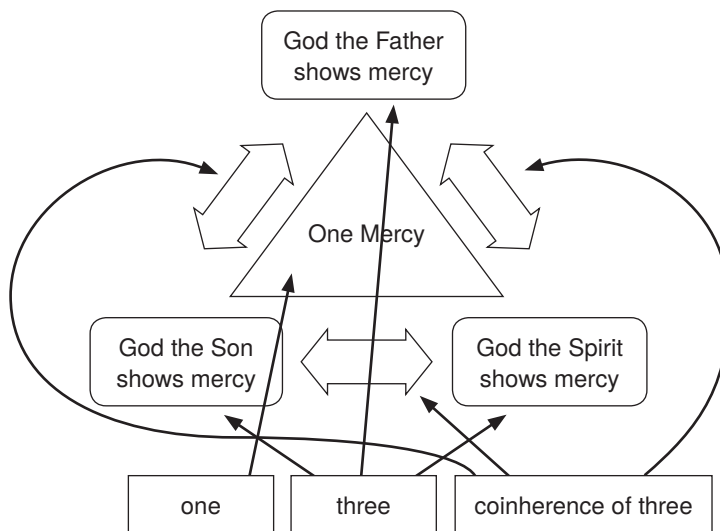


Fig. 45.1. The Trinitarian Mercy of God

Mercy is revealed in word, in the speech of the Father through the Son in the Spirit. Mercy is revealed in deed, in the mercy of the Son, who is the Son of his Father.

The Mercy of the Resurrection of Christ

The resurrection of Christ is a climactic expression of the mercy of God the Father toward us because in the resurrection we are granted perfect righteousness with the righteousness of Christ, and new life through the Spirit of Christ—all undeserved:

But God, being rich in *mercy*, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. (Eph. 2:4–7)

Key Terms

mercy
undeserving

Study Questions

1. What are the unity and distinction of mercy in the Trinity?
2. How are unity and distinction in mercy expressed in God's mercy to us?

For Further Reading

Berkhof, Louis. *Systematic Theology*. 4th rev. ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939. P. 72.

Prayer

Thank you for the riches of your mercy, given to us in Christ, so marvelous and so undeserved. Thank you for the pictures of mercy in those whom Christ healed during his earthly ministry. Make us truly grateful for the mercy you have shown us. Empower us to show mercy as we have received mercy (Matt. 5:7).

The Will of God

THE WILL OF God is Trinitarian.

Unity in the Will of God

In ordinary human discourse, the noun *will* has a range of meaning (contrast, variation, and distribution). Among the senses given in the Merriam-Webster online dictionary, the most pertinent ones for our thinking about God's will are probably the sense mentioned in 2c: "CHOICE, DETERMINATION" and the sense mentioned in 6a: "something desired; *especially*: a choice or determination of one having authority or power."¹

God has purposes. He has purposes for the whole of history:

Remember the former things of old;
for I am God, and there is no other;
I am God, and there is none like me,
declaring the end from the beginning
and from ancient times things not yet done,
saying, "My *counsel* shall stand,
and I will accomplish all my *purpose*." (Isa. 46:9–10)

1. Merriam-Webster online dictionary, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/will>, accessed May 25, 2018.

In him [Christ] we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the *purpose* of him who works all things according to the *counsel* of his *will*. (Eph. 1:11)

The singular words *counsel*, *purpose*, and *will* hint at the unity of his purposes for all of history. The will of God is unified. The purpose of God is unified. And this purpose is the purpose of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The Father plans and purposes all things. The Son plans and purposes all things. The Spirit plans and purposes all things. Yet there are not three plans and purposes, but one God who plans.

Diversity in the Persons

We can also see a differentiation in purpose. The Son carries out the purpose of the Father:

So Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise.” (John 5:19)

I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge, and my judgment is just, because I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me. (John 5:30)

For I have not spoken on my own authority, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment—what to say and what to speak. And I know that his commandment is eternal life. What I say, therefore, I say as the Father has told me. (John 12:49–50)

We must be careful here, because in these verses the Son is speaking in his incarnate state. He is one person with two natures, a divine nature and a human nature. So in these words there may be some focus on his human nature. But what he does on earth, he does as one person. His works are in harmony with who he always is as the divine Son. He was already Son before he came to earth; he was Son when he was “sent” (John 5:30; 12:49). The language of “sending” already

implies a differentiation, between the Father who sends and the Son who is sent. This differentiation precedes his coming to earth. It is similar to what we have observed in the language about creating the world, according to which creation is *from* the Father, *through* the Son, and not the reverse. The divine Son carries out the will of the Father.

In Philippians 2:6–7, we see a distinct participation of the Son before his incarnation. “Though he was in the form of God, [he] did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant.” The *decision* to take “the form of a servant” clearly precedes actually taking the form of a servant, that is, the incarnation. In this prior decision the Son has a unique role, distinct from the Father and the Spirit.²

We may also see a differentiation in the role of the Holy Spirit in carrying out the will of God:

When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but *whatever he hears he will speak*, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you. (John 16:13–15)

The Spirit speaks what he has heard from the Father and the Son. The focus is on words of redemption that the Spirit conveys to the disciples. But since the Spirit is immutable, his hearing is an eternal hearing.

There is an order in the one will of God. As we have said, the one will of God is the will of the Father, and the will of the Son, and the will of the Holy Spirit, because each person is God. But we also see a differentiation. The Holy Spirit carries out what he has heard from the Father and the Son. The Son carries out what he has heard from the Father (John 17:8). We do not have three wills at odds with

2. I owe this insight to Lane Tipton. We should observe that the decision in question is an eternal one, not a decision that takes in time—for instance, at the time of the incarnation. The incarnation takes place at a particular time because an eternal decision or determination is already in place. This is mysterious.

one another. That idea would deny the unity of one God. But we do have a differentiation, in which each person is distinct from the two other persons, and each has a distinct relation to the one will of God. There is a differentiation in the will, according to the persons. The one will is not more ultimate than the differentiated participation of the persons in the purposes. Nor is the differentiation in the personal participation more ultimate than the unity of the one will of one God. This is a mystery. (See fig. 46.1.)

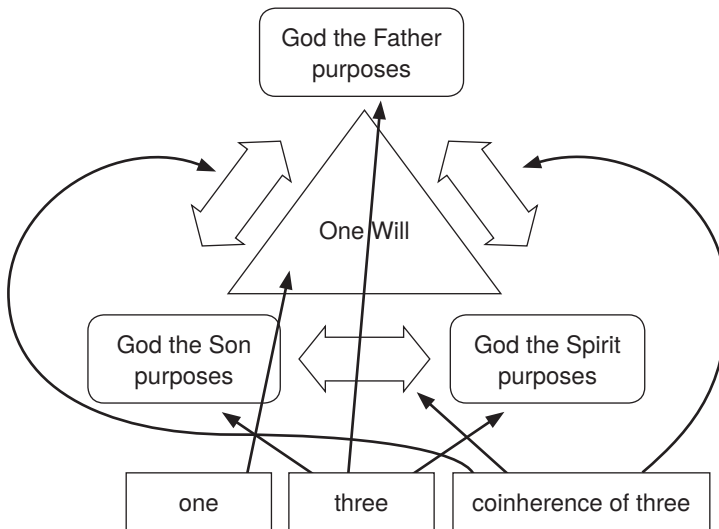


Fig. 46.1. The Trinitarian Will of God

Differentiation in Aspects of Divine Will

We can also see a differentiation in some of the aspects of the one divine will. Theologians have distinguished between God's necessary knowledge and free knowledge. Necessary knowledge is the knowledge that God has of himself. It is necessary in the sense that it is an implication of who God is. Because he is God, he knows himself completely. In distinction from *necessary knowledge*, *free knowledge* is the knowledge concerning creation and what God will do in the world. It is free because God was under no internal necessity that would oblige him to create the world.

Now, a similar distinction can be applied to the will of God. God necessarily wills himself and loves himself, as an expression of his will. In contrast to this necessary will, he *freely* wills to create the world.

If, as we have said, there is only one unified will of God, how can there be any distinctions? As usual, these distinctions are reflections of the ultimate distinctiveness in the persons of the Trinity.

We can see this implication if we go back to thinking about the distinction between God and the creation. As we saw earlier, God is able to create the world, a world that is distinct from himself. He creates by speaking. The creation of the world already presupposes a distinction between God and his speech. And this reflects the distinction between the Father and the Word. The Father begets the Son eternally. Or, alternatively, we may say that the Father speaks the Word. This action is an eternal action. (The second person of the Trinity, the Son, always exists; he is God, not a creature.) But it is then reflected in the act in which the Father through the Word creates a world distinct from himself.

Now, the distinction between the necessary will of God and the free will of God is analogous to the distinction between the objects of willing—in the one case, God himself, and in the other case, the world that God wills to create. The distinction between God and the world reflects on a lower level the prior, archetypal distinction between God the Father and the Word. Likewise, the distinction between the necessary will of God and the free will reflects the distinction between the Father and the Son. The distinction is one that expresses unity and coinherence. (See fig. 46.2.)

God's Will in the Resurrection of Christ

From the foundation of the world, God had planned the resurrection of Christ (1 Cor. 15:4; 1 Peter 1:20). There is one unified plan of God for the resurrection. We can also see a differentiation. It is the Father's will that Christ should be exalted as a reward for his obedient suffering: "*Therefore* God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name" (Phil. 2:9). Christ as the obedient Son acts in accord with the Father's will.

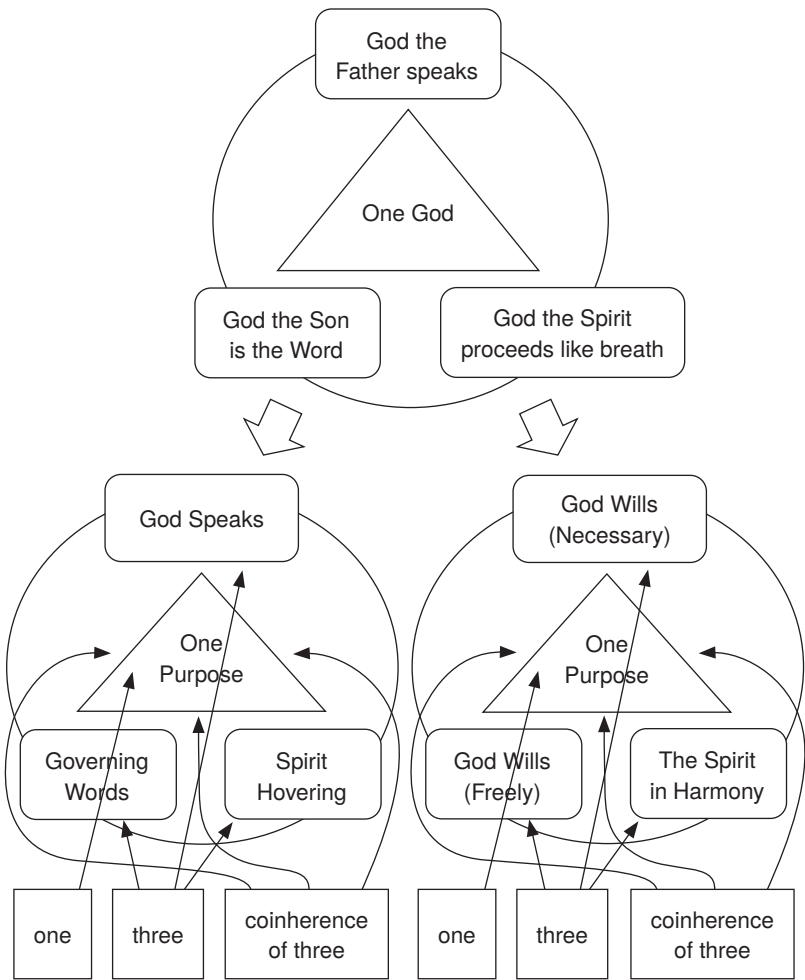


Fig. 46.2. Necessary Will and Free Will

Key Terms

free knowledge
necessary knowledge
purposes
will of God

Study Questions

1. What are the unity and distinction of divine will in the Trinity?
2. How are unity and distinction in will expressed in God's will to us?
3. What is the distinction between necessary will and free will in God?

For Further Reading

Bavinck, Herman. *Reformed Dogmatics*. Vol. 2, *God and Creation*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004. Pp. 229–45.
Berkhof, Louis. *Systematic Theology*. 4th rev. ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939. Pp. 76–79.

Prayer

Enable us to rejoice in the wisdom of your will, and to rejoice in the way in which your will comes to bear on us, in communion with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, one God forever.

The Knowledge of God

NEXT LET US consider knowledge as an attribute of God. We discussed earlier that God knows all things (chap. 8). How can we enhance our discussion in the light of the Trinity?

Knowledge of Persons

In Scripture we find evidence for affirming a unified knowledge of God and also a distinction of mode of knowledge for the three persons. Psalm 139 affirms God's complete knowledge of human beings. "His understanding is unsearchable" (Isa. 40:28). God is omniscient. We can therefore say that the Father is omniscient. The Son is omniscient. And the Holy Spirit is omniscient. Each person knows all things. The persons have this knowledge in participating in the unified knowledge of God.

We can also see a differentiation in knowledge with respect to the persons:

All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.
(Matt. 11:27)

The Father knows the Son. This is personal knowledge, which, of course, includes knowledge of facts, but is richer than a bare knowl-

edge of facts. The Father knows all facts about the Son, but also knows *the Son* himself. The person of the Father is engaged in this act of knowing. Similarly, the Son knows the Father.¹

We also have a text that speaks concerning the knowledge by the Holy Spirit:

These things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For *the Spirit searches everything*, even the depths of God. For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. (1 Cor. 2:10–11)

“The Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God.” This searching implies that the Spirit knows all things by knowing God comprehensively. This searching is the eternal work of the Holy Spirit. It is the basis for the Spirit's ability to reveal divine truth to human beings (1 Cor. 2:12–16).

In sum, the knowledge of God is the unified knowledge of the one God, and also a differentiated knowledge that involves unique personal participation on the part of each person of the Trinity. The unity and the diversity are compatible through coinherence. Is this mysterious? Yes. Is it incomprehensible? Yes. Is it glorious? Yes. (See fig. 47.1.)

Differentiated Knowledge through Revelation

We can also see differentiation when we think about how the knowledge of God comes to us through revelation, especially verbal revelation. In verbal revelation, God the Father speaks to us through the Word, and his speech comes home to us through the Holy Spirit, who dwells within us and interprets for us. We can make a similar observation by using the general pattern whereby the Father initiates, the Son executes, and the Spirit applies. The knowledge of the resurrection of Christ comes by the initiation of God, who

1. See Vern S. Poythress, *Symphonic Theology: The Validity of Multiple Perspectives in Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2001), 50–51.

raised Christ. Christ displays the reality of his resurrection when he appears to his disciples. And the Holy Spirit opens hearts to believe (Acts 16:14).

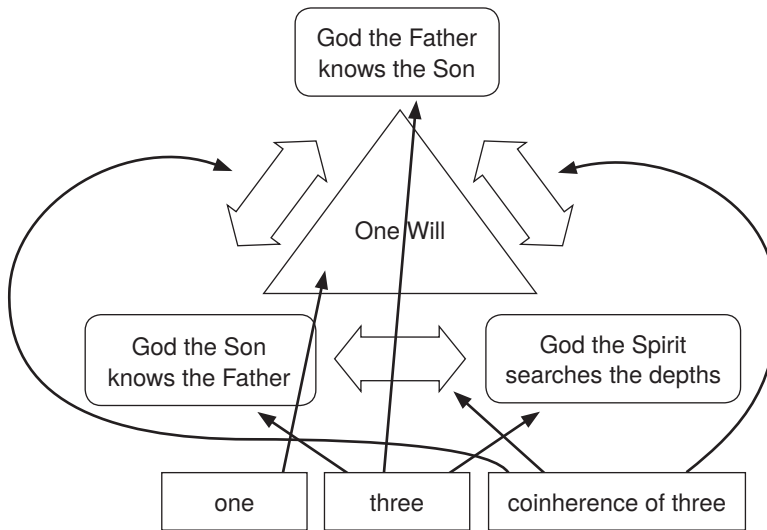


Fig. 47.1. Trinitarian Knowledge

Key Terms

differentiation
knowledge
unity

Study Questions

1. What are the unity and distinction of divine knowledge in the Trinity?
2. How are unity and distinction in knowledge expressed in God's relation to us?
3. What is the distinction between necessary knowledge and free knowledge in God?

For Further Reading

Bavinck, Herman. *Reformed Dogmatics*. Vol. 2, *God and Creation*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004. Pp. 192–203.

Berkhof, Louis. *Systematic Theology*. 4th rev. ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939. Pp. 66–68.

Prayer

We thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children (Matt. 11:25). Thank you for the perfect knowledge that the Son has of the Father. Thank you, divine Son, for revealing the Father to us. Enable us by the power of the Holy Spirit to grow in that knowledge until we see you face to face.

A Summary

THE SUBJECT OF God is a deep one. It is also a dangerous one, because the subject is exalted. It is easy to say what is not true, or to lead others astray, or to say more than one knows. As an author, I have felt the dangers in the process of writing, and I pray that the Lord may have mercy on me and may keep readers from going astray.

What to Affirm

In an attempt to make things clear, let us consider a summary of principles.

- God is majestic and wonderful and gracious and deserving of all praise and awe.
- God is Trinitarian.
- God is mysterious. He is incomprehensible.
- The Trinity is mysterious.
- We know the Father through the Son and the Spirit, in the mystery of his revelation.
- The Bible is the infallible written Word of God, through which we receive sound instruction about God. We rely on what it says rather than on philosophical speculation about some Absolute.
- The center of God's revelation of himself is in Christ, and particularly in his suffering, his death, his resurrection, his ascension, and his reign at the right hand of the Father.

- Ever since the fall, sin corrupts the mind. And the effect still remains among believers, who have been born again and renewed in their minds.
- God is absolute, infinite, immense, eternal, immutable, omniscient, and omnipotent. The list can be extended.
- The attributes of God are mysterious.
- Each attribute of God is Trinitarian at root, not monadic. (See fig. 48.1.)

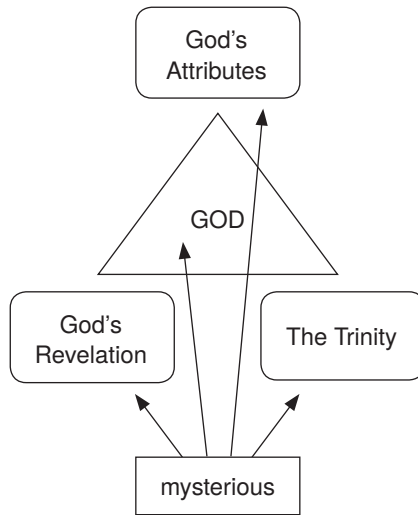


Fig. 48.1. Areas of Mystery concerning God

- Each act of God in the world is Trinitarian, not monadic.
- God does not and cannot change; he is the same, as Psalm 102:27 says.
- God's not changing is in full harmony with his continual actions in the world, and we ought to make sure that people understand this.
- God does interact intimately with the world, in full harmony with his absoluteness as God, as Psalm 102 indicates.
- God's acts and evaluations take the situation into account.
- Creation and providence are not a problem for God.
- Interacting with the world is not a problem for God.

- Having intimate personal relations with us is not a problem for God.
- Evaluating and judging things in the world is not a problem for God.

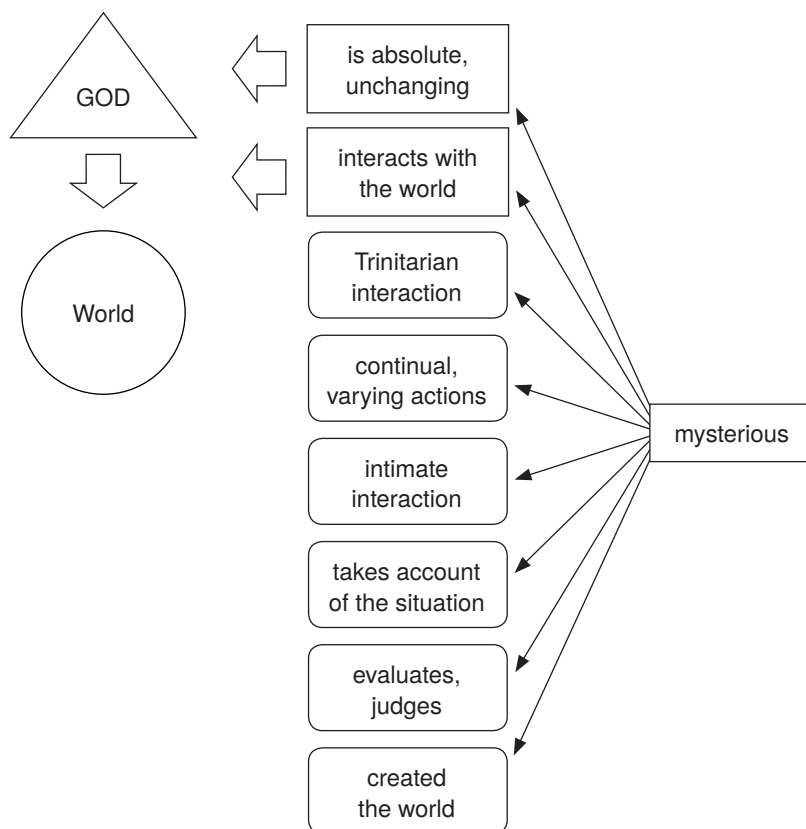


Fig. 48.2. Areas of Mystery concerning God's Relation to the World

- We affirm the biblically based insights of classical Christian theism. We also unapologetically use biblical phraseology in expressing God's interaction with the world.
- We feel free to use technical terminology, and in doing so express appreciation for the work of the Holy Spirit in saints of past ages. But we also use technical terminology with circumspection. We take account of contaminating influences from unbelieving philosophy. We take account of the need

for ordinary people to hear and come to know God, without being burdened by technical terms in a way that bogs down communication.

Let us take to heart the need to be humble before God.

What to Avoid

- We ought to avoid the suction of the two pools, the quicksand of mutuality theology and the black hole of monadic theology.
- We ought to avoid language that unintentionally pulls others toward one of the suction pools.
- It is not right, but misleading, to say that “God changes,” even if the speaker’s intentions are good. There are better and clearer ways of saying what we need to say in order to make the point that God is active in many ways in the world. We should prefer those other forms of expression, even if they may take more words and may not sound terribly profound, but may just be imitating the way that God describes his activity in Scripture.
- We should avoid suggesting that God adds new attributes or abilities or drops old ones when he creates the universe or mankind or interacts with the world. The old attributes are sufficient.

On Methods

We can also list a few more summary points that focus on our methods more than on our conclusions.

- The Trinity is ontologically basic.
- The Bible is epistemologically basic.
- The Bible is ethically basic, in the sense that it should govern our evaluation of what to say and how to say it, in order to be ethically responsible to God and our hearers.
- We should expect mystery. If we are not aware of it everywhere, we have already fallen in the direction of non-Christian immanence.

- We should critically analyze assumptions in philosophy.
- We should listen carefully and respectfully to what people say.
- We ought to avoid careless and sloppy talk about God and his ways. “You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain” (Ex. 20:7).

Be in awe of God.

When we can avoid it, we should avoid answering questions that are generated by unbelieving forms of philosophy *merely* on their own terms. “Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest you be like him yourself” (Prov. 26:4). We should be cautious, lest we be entangled or appear to others to be entangled in incorrect assumptions that underlie an unbelieving form of philosophy.

On the other hand, as wisdom allows, we should try to answer with biblical sobriety: “Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes” (Prov. 26:5). That may sometimes mean that we consider someone else’s assumptions in order to show that they are wrong and do not work, even on the other person’s terms. It may also mean that we consider what positive partial insights may be found within an unbelieving system because common grace has been an influence.

This principle applies to objections to the doctrine of God. The most basic problem in philosophy is the dominance of autonomous reason. Autonomous reason cannot stand the mystery of God’s revelation, and refuses to submit to it.

Key Terms

absoluteness¹

attributes

mystery

ontologically basic

philosophy

suction pools

technical terminology

Trinity

1. Key terms in bold are defined in the glossary at the end of this volume.

Study Questions

1. What are some of the things that we need to remember about the doctrine of God?
2. What are some of the things that we need to remember about the methods or the way that we use them in considering the doctrine of God?

For Further Reading

Frame, John M. *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*. Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987. Chaps. 6–10.

Prayer

Dear Lord, please enable us to think and live the truth in a manner worthy of your glory. Enable us to read your Word with wisdom, and to speak and listen with wisdom to others.

Conclusion

OUR DISCUSSION FUNCTIONS not as the end but as a beginning. Let us pray that as the church continues to grow in the Spirit, we will lose nothing out of the positive insights from the centuries of classical Christian theism and from any genuinely positive insights in newer discussions.

I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. (Phil. 3:14)

Within the context of a biblical worldview, and the context of submitting to the teaching of the Bible, and the context of exercising humility to God, there can be fruitful growth in understanding. A perspective that starts from transcendence can harmonize in principle with a perspective that starts from immanence. A perspective that starts with the desire for rational consistency can harmonize in principle with a perspective that starts with individual biblical texts, each with its unique texture. Where a perspective *starts* is not the same as the whole process. Rather, each perspective should take into account the insights gained from complementary perspectives. Harmonies exist in these perspectives because God harmonizes with himself, in the mystery of the Trinity. But we may have to grow in order to see how. May the Lord enable us, through the power of Christ working in the indwelling of the Holy Spirit:

Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be

Conclusion

glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen. (Eph. 3:20–21)

And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to *mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.* (Eph. 4:11–13)

Key Terms

harmonies
immanence¹
mystery
perspectives
transcendence

Study Questions

1. In theology, how do we combine respect for the past with the desire to add to the theological deposit of the past?
2. How do we do justice to the transcendence and the immanence of God?

For Further Reading

Poythress, Vern S. *Symphonic Theology: The Validity of Multiple Perspectives in Theology*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2001. Chap. 3.

Prayer

Lord, may you through your grace and power prosper your people in spiritual understanding, that we may know you, the only true God (Eph. 1:3–10).

1. Key terms in bold are defined in the glossary at the end of this volume.

*What It May Take: A Personal Reflection**

AS I HAVE continued to reflect on what it is that I am proposing, and what it is that I am inviting others to do, I have grown in empathy for the people who may not want to do it, or who may find it quite hard to do. So let me include some personal reflections about my proposal.

At this point, I should be clear. The present book is complete without these personal reflections. I do not want people to reinterpret the book because of what I say in this chapter. Rather, I want to help by suggesting how people might find ways to go forward.

In some ways, what I want to encourage is a small step. Think about the Trinity in order to enhance classical Christian theism. Be careful. Be in awe of God. Do not change anything right away, but think and consider how the Trinity may help your reflections.

What Not to Change

Let me be more specific. I do not want a change in classical Christian theism, if this term is understood broadly as a summary of what orthodox Christians have believed through the centuries. The breadth encompasses what all believers know, not just theologians,

* In the 2021 printing, the author revised content in “What It May Take: A Personal Reflection” (591–97) for the purpose of clarification.

and especially not just the more technical formulations of the theologians. People through the centuries have understood the majesty of God. David understood (1 Chron. 29:10–22). Johannes Oecolampadius understood.¹ Stephen Charnock understood.² Let that knowledge of God continue to dwell among us (Col. 1:27; 3:16), “in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation” (Phil. 2:15).

Introducing Growth

Perhaps for some of us, this is all we need. But for some, I am suggesting a step, perhaps an enhancement. As part of the process, I am asking for several things. And it is complicated, because these things are related to one another in ways that are difficult to fully spell out.

Changes in Using Technical Terms

First, I am asking us not to expect too much from a technical term (Chapters 17, 18, and 24).³ We should not expect that technical terms just by themselves will do our work for us. We may think that they are exact. We think we know exactly what they mean, instead of dealing with them as exhibitions of contrast, variation, and distribution, reflecting the mystery of the Trinity. We think they give us insight. And often they do. But when used without reflection, they can also conceal from us our underlying dependence on a spectrum of creaturely analogies and extrapolations from examples. For me to suggest that they are useful as memory pegs, and as gestures to the past, and as summaries of biblical teaching, may seem too little (Chapter 18). (See table 50.1.)

1. Johannes Oecolampadius, *In Iesaiam prophetam HYPOMNEMATΩN, hoc est, Commentariorum* (Basel: Cratander, 1525), 56v–57r. Online: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3931/e-rara-1772>. For English translation, see “Oecolampadius on Isaiah 6,” trans. Vern S. Poythress and Diane M. Poythress, May 21, 2012, <https://frame-poythress.org/oecolampadius-on-isaiah-6isai/>, accessed June 16, 2018.

2. Stephen Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, in *The Complete Works of Stephen Charnock* (Carlisle, PA/Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2010).

3. Vern S. Poythress, *Symphonic Theology: The Validity of Multiple Perspectives in Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2001), chaps. 6–7.

Table 50.1. Using Technical Terms: Reliance or Gratefulness

Dependent Reliance	Gratefulness
key source of insight	summary of biblical insights and insights from church history
sharp distinctions	valuable distinctions interpreted by context (history of theology; Scripture)
definitive achievement	memorable summary of past definitive achievement in theology
exact knowledge	expression of finite knowledge, with fuzziness

Not Relying on Aristotelian Metaphysics

Second, a bigger issue is whether we are willing to utterly abandon Aristotelian metaphysics, because it is too treacherous for Christian theology. I do not mean that we have to abandon technical terms, some of which may have been drawn from Aristotle or other philosophical backgrounds (Chapters 18 and 24). Technical terms in many cases are useful. But we should bear in mind that such terms are adapted to theology; they no longer carry with them the full philosophical framework that they inhabited at an earlier time. And if we do abandon Aristotle, where do we go? To Plato? No better. To Kant? I hope not. To the Trinity? Yes. But how do we do that? It is not easy to say. (See table 50.2.)

Table 50.2. Aristotelian Metaphysics versus Trinitarian Metaphysics

Aristotelian Metaphysics	Trinitarian Metaphysics
one-level	two-level (God and creature)
ten categories	the Trinity
sharp distinctions	coinherence
substance	God
form/matter	God's specifications

Not Relying *Primarily* on Tight, Abstract Logic in Theological Reasoning

Third, what role do we give to tight deductive reasoning in theology? Does it function as our *principal* or *primary* resource for affirming and maintaining an orthodox doctrine of God? Let us make sure that Scripture remains primary. That does not mean we do not use tight logic at all. There is room for clarity and precision. It is important to see what are the implications of the Bible in the area of doctrine. And the precision of technical terms fits together with the potential for us to use them in tight, deductive-style argumentation. But that is not the whole of theology. Strict, formal deduction is possible only in the context of a strictly controlled vocabulary, and with that too easily comes an artificially constrained world.⁴ The real world is complicated. And the language of ordinary human communication is complicated. And the Bible is complicated. And God is supremely deep. God is Trinity. We cannot master the Trinity.

That does not mean that we cannot use our minds. God gave us minds as well as all the other aspects of who we are. God is supremely rational. As human beings, made in the image of God, we are by nature in tune with his rationality. But it is also true that God exceeds our grasp. And it is true that our minds have been ethically and religiously corrupted by the fall. (See table 50.3.)

Table 50.3. Distinct Logical Styles, Abstract and Ordinary

Style of Abstract Logic	Style of Ordinary Inference
refined, precise terms	ordinary language, with variations
formal	informal
sharp distinctions	coinherence

4. Vern S. Poythress, *Logic: A God-Centered Approach to the Foundation of Western Thought* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013). For metaphysics based on the Trinity, see also Vern S. Poythress, *Redeeming Philosophy: A God-Centered Approach to the Big Questions* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), pts. 2–4.

context-free	context-guided
one-level	two-level (God and man)
draw implications (in a vacuum?)	draw implications (in the light of the total teaching of Scripture)

Avoiding Answering Heretics Wholly on Their Own Terms

Heresies continue to be spawned by people who have their own new terms for their own new ideas, ideas crafted to get behind Scripture or above Scripture or beyond Scripture, in order to offer something more ultimate. To root out heresies takes precision. For some people, the easiest way is to fall back on the precision of Aristotelian metaphysics as our basis for technical discussion of God. To abandon that safety net in Aristotle is challenging. Technical terms can sometimes serve as a starting point for heresy tests (Chapters 18 and 24). The history of the church is full of lessons about heresies and how to respond to them. But the records from the church cannot serve as the complete solution. Let us endeavor to keep Scripture primary.

We have “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (Eph. 6:17). Sometimes, it may seem on the surface to be too frail a weapon. But for all its apparent weakness, there is hope in divine power:

For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ, being ready to punish every disobedience, when your obedience is complete. (2 Cor. 10:4–6)

Is it worth it to make these efforts? I think so. It is worth it if we grow in knowing the reality of God. (See table 50.4.)

Table 50.4. Styles in Responding to Heretics

Technically Crafted Answer	Answer from Core Christianity
one-level	two-level (God and creature)
outdo heretics with precision, in the framework of Aristotelian metaphysics	focus on central gospel truth
or: outdo heretics with precision, in some modern metaphysical framework	focus on central gospel truth
appeal to historical precedent	appeal to the Bible; further instructed and illumined by historical theology

Key Terms

Aristotelian metaphysics
heretics
mystery
technical terms
Trinity

Study Questions

1. What changes does the author suggest in the theological tradition concerning the doctrine of God?
2. Why might the right kind of change be difficult?

For Further Reading

Poythress, Vern S. *Knowing and the Trinity: How Perspectives in Human Knowledge Imitate the Trinity*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2018. Chap. 35.

———. *Redeeming Philosophy: A God-Centered Approach to the Big Questions*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014. Chap. 11.

Prayer

Lord, may we and your people so grow in knowing the wisdom of Christ that we may abandon our trust in the flesh and may have divine power to know you and to fight heresies with spiritual weapons.

Appendix A:

Issues in the Controversy

IN APPENDICES A–C, we consider a modern controversy between classical Christian theism and positions that attempt to revise or enhance it.

A controversy exists in evangelical circles over the doctrine of God.¹ On the one side is classical Christian theism. On the other side are the “open theists,” who say that God does not know everything about the future because he cannot predict human freewill decisions. In between these two sides are quite a few other evangelical theologians, as we can see in the example provided by the following list:

He [James Dolezal] cites as examples Donald MacLeod (21), James Oliver Buswell (23), Ronald Nash (23), Donald Carson (24), Bruce Ware (24), James I. Packer (31), Alvin Plantinga (68), John Fein-

1. James E. Dolezal, *All That Is in God: Evangelical Theology and the Challenge of Classical Christian Theism* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2017), and responses: Joshua R. Monroe, “Third Update to Divine Simplicity: A Bibliography of Reviews of and Responses to Reviews of James Dolezal’s *All That Is in God: Evangelical Theology and the Challenge of Classical Christian Theism*,” April 17, 2018, <http://www.booksataglance.com/blog/third-update-to-divine-simplicity-a-bibliography-of-reviews-of-and-responses-to-reviews-of-james-dolezals-all-that-is-in-god-evangelical-theology-and-the-challenge-of-classical-christian-theism/>, accessed May 28, 2018.

berg, J. P. Moreland, William Lane Craig (69), Kevin Vanhoozer (72), Rob Lister (92), Scott Oliphint (93), and, yes, John Frame (71–73, 92–95).²

This list encompasses quite a few theologians, and some of their views and expressions differ from one another. One of the people in the list, John Frame, labels his own view *biblical personalism*. For convenience, I will use the label *Christian personalism* for the entire intermediate group, even though a spectrum of theological positions is represented.³

In contrast to open theism, the Christian personalists would agree with classical Christian theism concerning God's complete knowledge of the future. But at other points they present us with some differences from classical Christian theism, at least in the language of their formulations.

In considering this controversy, we will exclude the open theists, whose position is in obvious tension with the instances in the Bible where God makes predictions involving human actions. For example, we could point to the role of the Jewish leaders and the soldiers in the crucifixion of Christ, and Jesus' prediction that Peter would deny him three times. Long-range predictions, such as Old Testament predictions about the life of Christ, are particularly impressive. Centuries separated the predictions from the time of their fulfillment. In the intervening centuries, innumerable human decisions affected the course of history. These human decisions did not disrupt or make inoperable God's knowledge of the far future. In sum, God's predictions concerning human actions show that the presence of human actions does not make the future unknown for God.

So after setting aside open theism, we have two positions: classical Christian theism (which has some variations) and Christian

2. John M. Frame, "Scholasticism for Evangelicals: Thoughts on All That Is in God by James Dolezal," November 25, 2017, <https://frame-poythress.org/scholasticism-for-evangelicals-thoughts-on-all-that-is-in-god-by-james-dolezal/>, accessed March 27, 2018. The numbers are page numbers from Dolezal, *All That Is in God*.

3. Dolezal, *All That Is in God*, prefers the label *theistic mutualism*.

personalism (which is a spectrum). How do they differ? It is not so easy to say. The controversy involves quite a few books and quite a few people in online comments and in reviews of books. One of the main contributors is Dr. James E. Dolezal, who in 2017 published his book *All That Is in God: Evangelical Theology and the Challenge of Classical Christian Theism*.⁴ Dr. Dolezal is critical of the revisions in the doctrine of God undertaken by open theism. That in itself is not a new controversy. But Dolezal also criticizes what he sees as more subtle revisions that occur in mainstream evangelical authors listed above (Christian personalism).

We cannot cover in detail all the issues involved, nor all that is being said. Nor can we do justice to the variations in theology within each of the two main groups, namely, classical Christian theism and Christian personalism. We will have to be content with a summary. Then in appendices B and C we will offer some suggestions.

Main Emphases

Let us express some of the main differences in emphasis and in primary concern. To do this, we have to oversimplify. Classical Christian theism has the following features:

- Emphasis on God's transcendence, his absoluteness, his independence from the world.
- Philosophical terminology; abstract language.
- Technical terms.
- Abstract reasoning.
- Largely a reiteration of the descriptions and arguments of previous centuries of classical Christian theism.

(After introducing technical terms and abstract reasoning, however, and depending on the context, some representatives also spend time addressing pastoral concerns and explaining issues in ordinary language.)

4. See also James E. Dolezal, *God without Parts: Divine Simplicity and the Metaphysics of God's Absoluteness* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011).

Christian personalism has *some* of the following features:

- Emphasis on God's immanence, his presence, his personal characteristics (for example, speech, love, covenant-making), and his ability to have personal relations to human beings and to groups (the church).
- Primacy of ordinary language and biblical language.
- Few technical terms.
- Reasoning from many verses of Scripture.
- Some language in apparent tension with traditional formulations of classical Christian theism.

(Some among the Christian personalists, however, would be inclined to express themselves more philosophically, rather than biblically, and with more technical terms. We will focus on the ones who are more prone to speak in ordinary language and appeal to Scripture.)

To see the contrasts, we can arrange the two approaches in parallel columns. (See table A.1.)

Table A.1. Contrasts between Classical Christian Theism and Christian Personalism

Classical Christian Theism	Christian Personalism
emphasis on transcendence	emphasis on immanence
philosophical terminology; abstract language	primacy of ordinary language and biblical language
technical terms	few technical terms
abstract reasoning	reasoning from many verses of Scripture
reiteration of traditional formulations	some tension with traditional formulations

Unbridgeable Difference

Is the difference between these two unbridgeable? Dolezal's book thinks that it is. In his view, it is not a matter of two perspectives or two different emphases that are harmonizable.

Dolezal's perception of incompatibility is understandable because he can find instances in which the language of some of the Christian personalists directly contradicts his own language. For example, Dolezal maintains that God is unchangeable. Some of the Christian personalists appear to say that God changes in his relation to the world. Dolezal maintains that God is eternal, not temporal, while some of the Christian personalists say that he is temporal.

Yet we may also ask two questions. One question is whether the underlying intent of authors may be better than their actual wording. The other is whether the authors themselves might be open to changing their views in a way that they would see as an enhancement. Both questions are impossible to answer with certainty. But we can nevertheless explore whether some kind of enhancement may appeal to other people, if not to the authors themselves.

Possibility of Movement: Transcendence and Immanence

When we compare the two positions, we can see the possibility of finding some bridges. Consider the first contrast in the list, the contrast between transcendence and immanence. In God these two are not actually in tension. God is one God, who is both transcendent and immanent. It is fine to emphasize either one or the other, depending on the needs of the occasion. What is not acceptable is to deny or distort either one of the two. Moreover, an emphasis on only one always runs some risk. If people hear about only one, some of the hearers may neglect or repudiate the other, even though the speaker did not intend it.

But at a deep level, the two sides—transcendence and immanence—are in harmony. Properly understood, each points to the other. (See fig. A.1.) If God is truly transcendent, he confronts no difficulty when he comes and meets with people who are creatures, that is, when he expresses his immanence with them. Because of God's

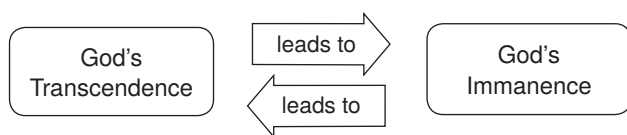


Fig. A.1. Transcendence and Immanence

absoluteness, his transcendence, God is fully able to come and be “God with us,” Immanuel, in the marvel of the incarnation (Matt. 1:23). In addition, the absoluteness of God’s moral requirements, due to his absolute holiness, actually impresses itself on us and holds us accountable. This impress and this accountability are manifestations of immanence. Immanence is an implication of transcendence.

The harmonious relation between these two sides makes deep sense against the background of the Trinity. As we have mentioned earlier, the unity and diversity in the three persons in God is unique. But it is also reflected in the unity and the diversity of the way that God acts toward the created world.

Let us illustrate how it works. God is Lord over the world. John Frame analyzes God’s lordship into three aspects: authority, control, and presence. Authority and control are aspects of transcendence, while presence is a relabeling of immanence.⁵ Each of the three aspects is a perspective on the whole of God’s lordship. Each encompasses the others, by implication. Each interlocks with the others. For example, authority includes authority over the course of the world, and so implies control. God’s control implies his presence in the events that he controls. So control implies presence. God’s presence includes the presence of his authority. This interlocking is a reflection of the coinherence among the persons of the Trinity.⁶ Since God is in harmony with himself in coinherence, the perspectives—rightly understood—are in harmony with one another. Transcendence (authority and control) implies immanence, and immanence implies transcendence.

Suppose now that we start with an emphasis on immanence. Rightly understood, this immanence implies transcendence. For God

5. John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987), 12–18.

6. Vern S. Poythress, *Knowing and the Trinity: How Perspectives in Human Knowledge Imitate the Trinity* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2018), chap. 14.

to be fully and effectively present as God, the *whole* of God must be present, not just one aspect, as though one aspect could be isolated. God must be able to be present everywhere, and this presence then implies his transcendence over the whole world. He is not “captured” in one spatial location or one point in time. His universal presence implies his power to be present, and so we confront infinite power. Immanence implies transcendence.

So we can have hope that by growing in knowing God through Scripture, we may fruitfully combine and deepen what we know about transcendence and immanence. Both sides of the conflict, by their emphasis, remind us of things that we need to know, even though we may also find in one or both sides things with which we still disagree.

Possibility of Movement: Manner of Expression

We may also wonder whether we can find a bridge between two styles of expression. Earlier, we reflected on the advantages and limitations of technical terms (chap. 18). We can grow in appreciating what each style of communication offers. We may also explore whether each side is in some danger of miscommunicating because of different expectations from the other side. Classical Christian theists may be disappointed that Christian personalists do not signal their orthodoxy by using the preferred technical vocabulary. So they look for reasons, and one reason might be that Christian personalists are altering orthodoxy substantively. So the classical Christian theists might be critical of the value of new modes of expression. Conversely, the Christian personalists expect the classical Christian theists to think biblically, and their remoteness from biblical language may be viewed with suspicion.

Classical Christian theists look for the kind of decontextualized precision belonging to technical terms. Christian personalists look for personal engagement with ordinary people, and they may then say two things in two different places that look contradictory, but where the context of their concern colors what is said in each place. (Think, for instance, of 1 Samuel 15:11, 29, 35.) Both styles, the technical style and the style for personal engagement, have their uses (chap. 18).

Possibility of Movement: Method

We also perceive a difference in emphasis with respect to method. Classical Christian theists present chains of argument. Reasoning is at the center in the method. Some Christian personalists present verses of Scripture. Interpretation of texts and comparison of texts are at the center. Again, the two sides can misunderstand each other. And in practice, neither method can do without the other. Interpretation of a single text and comparison between texts both involve reasoning. Conversely, reasoning with doctrinal truths requires understanding those truths as truths rooted in biblical discourse.⁷

Possibility of Movement: Value

Classical Christian theists value the theological tradition of the centuries. Christian personalists value direct engagement with the Bible and with the questions and struggles of the present day. Misunderstanding is again possible. “Why do you not value what I value?” The two sides need each other. The theological tradition helps to rein in irresponsible individualism and irresponsible innovation. Conversely, the engagement with the Bible enables refinement and critique of tradition, which is fallible. The engagement with contemporary struggles serves the people of God and can respond constructively to the tendency to see ancient tradition as irrelevant.

Value to Be Appreciated

Both groups have a lot at stake. Not everything said by everyone in the two groups shows maximal wisdom. But it would be a shame if we in the church lost the positive values and knowledge in one of the two groups because of perceived deficiencies. The classical Christian theists value tradition. And there is much that ought to be valued in the tradition, much encapsulated in the technical vocabulary and the affirmations and denials that may seem to untrained modern readers

7. For more on reasoning, see Vern S. Poythress, *Logic: A God-Centered Approach to the Foundation of Western Thought* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013).

to be obscure or irrelevant or impersonal. Let us encourage the classical Christian theists not only to hold on to what they know, but to enhance it, to develop it, to cause it to further blossom and flourish.

The Christian personalists value the Bible and its modes of expression. The Bible contains much richness, and we never exhaust it. So without endorsing everything already said by them, let us encourage the Christian personalists not only to hold on to what they know from the Bible, but to deepen what they know, to cause it to further blossom and flourish.

Each person in the body of Christ is uniquely gifted (1 Cor. 12). It would be unwise to presume to tell someone how to develop his insights in detail. It would also be unwise merely to ignore certain distorted expressions from the past, without first asking whether they contain some fragment of truth that has made them attractive. Finally, it would be unwise to just lazily tolerate heterodox expressions and less-apt expressions merely for the sake of future insights that might theoretically spring from them. We must have zeal for guarding the faith.

In the face of a formidable challenge of advancing orthodoxy, we may explore some suggestions for progressing.

Suggestions for Both Sides

We may make seven suggestions that might be considered by both sides.

First, let us explore the harmony between transcendence and immanence. If we are zealous for one, we should make sure that it also encourages us to be zealous for the other as an implication.⁸

Second, consider God's absoluteness as manifested in the Trinity. If we do not bring the Trinity into robust interaction with our meditations on God, we run the risk of falling short of maximal insight. We lose an opportunity for enhancing our insights without destroying anything in the truth of what we already hold.

Third, let us try to see how Christ mediates everything we know. This present book has endeavored to give some suggestions of this

8. Poythress, *Knowing and the Trinity*, chap. 18.

kind by showing how the resurrection of Christ manifests the attributes of God. The resurrection of Christ is a suitable focus for study. But so is the crucifixion, the present reign of Christ, and the day of Pentecost.

Fourth, let us listen to the other side. We should listen not only to the words, but to the underlying driving concerns. We might learn something, even though we still disagree.

Fifth, let us take care that our explanations are not misunderstood to imply a gap between God as he always is and God as he reveals himself. If there is a gap, then the “real” God, God as he always is, becomes inaccessible, and the god of revelation appears to be less than the real thing. Classical Christian theism can fall into this trap if it suggests that the language of immanence is only about what God “appears” to be like, but that the reality is otherwise. Christian personalism can fall into this trap by painting God in his immanence as being so like mankind that for practical purposes we lose sight of his transcendence. The God who reveals himself is the same as the God who always is.

Sixth, and opposite to point 5, be careful not to imply that God is pantheistically swallowed up in his revelation. God in his revelation is the same God as he always is, but God is not captured by the world when he truly acts and reveals himself in the world. This hazard mainly affects Christian personalism. But paradoxically, classical Christian theism can come close to it if it seems to imply that God’s accommodated language, given in Scripture, is “captured” by the world, so that it would no longer reveal God, but only a kind of finite replica of God.

Seventh, let us not become complacent about our own view. Each of us is tempted to take pride in what we have already achieved, and then to cease to actively listen and to actively submit ourselves to the Bible for further growth in knowledge. A person who identifies with classical Christian theism could feel that since his tradition is centuries old and (relatively) stable, there is little more to be said, except to repeat the formulations of the past and to repel all innovations. A person who identifies with some form of Christian personalism could feel that his view is superior to what he perceives as the stodginess belonging to traditional technical terms and philosophical reasoning.

He no longer asks himself whether he still needs to learn positively, including learning from the past tradition of classical Christian theism. We do not mean that the only way to learn would be simply to adopt the past as his own. It might also be to incorporate the past within a form of explanation that is clearer to a modern audience and that engages the present more directly.

The classical Christian theist may find himself tempted to say, “The old is good” (Luke 5:39). There are good things in it, to be sure, but there are also the dregs of Aristotle, who is pre-Christian, and dregs from what Aristotle thought was ontologically basic.

The Christian personalist may find himself tempted to say, “The *new* is good.” There are good things in it, to be sure, but it needs testing in relation to Scripture, primarily, and then in relation to the fallible but still valuable wisdom of past centuries.

Key Terms

Christian personalism⁹
classical Christian theism
harmonious
immanence
open theism
technical terms
transcendence
Trinity

Study Questions

1. What are the two sides in the controversy about the doctrine of God?
2. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the two sides?
3. In what ways might someone learn from each side?

9. Key terms in bold are defined in the glossary at the end of this volume.

For Further Reading

Mullins, R. T. “Review of All That Is in God: Evangelical Theology and the Challenge of Classical Christian Theism by James E. Dolezal.” *Journal of Biblical and Theological Studies* 3, 2 (2018): 395–99. <http://jbtsonline.org/review-of-all-that-is-in-god-evangelical-theology-and-the-challenge-of-classical-christian-theism-by-james-e-dolezal/>. Accessed February 28, 2020.

Prayer

May you, Lord, help us all to grow in the truth, to repent of complacency and pride, and to help one another to grow into the stature of the fullness of Christ (Eph. 4:13). May you empower us to speak the truth in love.

Appendix B: *Suggestions for Classical Christian Theists*

WE MAY NOW make some suggestions to the two groups separately, in hopes of helping them enhance the knowledge that they already have. We start with classical Christian theists.

From Transcendence to Immanence

Classical Christian theists are zealous for transcendence. Let us make sure that the sense of God's transcendence thoroughly fills the field of Christian knowledge of God, in harmony with the doctrine of simplicity. Transcendence is not to be cordoned off and appealed to only within some particular areas of theological theory or ecclesiastical practice. Let us ask whether discussions of classical Christian theism, valuable as they may be in many ways, have become a special theological playground for ideas, a separate field from the human struggles with pain, sin, hatred, sickness, and death. The majesty of God, transcendence of God, is relevant for comforting people in distress.

In particular, transcendence is to be seen as implicating immanence. If we do not yet have a robust way of affirming the biblical language that depicts God's immanence, we need to find a way. How do we describe God's sending the ten plagues and bringing the people of Israel out of Egypt and through the Red Sea? How do we describe

God's overthrowing Pharaoh and his host in the Red Sea? How do we describe his appearing at Mount Sinai and giving the Ten Commandments? How in sermons do we present the God of majesty in biblical descriptions such as these? How do we do it with reference to the life and death and resurrection of Christ?

We would like to have the traditional technical vocabulary for the absoluteness of God, his simplicity, his eternity, his immutability. But this technical vocabulary, so powerful and so influential on some of us, has its limitations when it comes to expressing what happens in the history of God's redemption in the Bible. That history is a history of immanent manifestations of God. If we do not have the immanence robustly there in our theological system, we will not really do justice to God's transcendence. We will not have the means for spreading the knowledge of his transcendence to every tribe and nation. Let our zeal for God's transcendence motivate us to shake heaven and earth, as it were, in order to make known the majesty of God.¹

Accessibility of Classical Christian Theism

Having a valuable technical vocabulary and technical formulations is not enough. Classical Christian theism has to communicate to the next generation and to a broad spectrum of people, or it will shrivel in influence. Let us think about communication to a broad audience. This goal may not be easy to accomplish. The very precision of the technical vocabulary is bound up with remoteness from common life. And the precision easily generates tension with the desire for a kind of flexibility in communication, needed to address people where they are.

Knowability

If God is unknowable, classical Christian theism is in vain. We must make sure that in our formulations and in our communication, we do not drift close to the black hole of monadic theology.

1. John Piper comes to mind because of his zeal for the glory of God and for the discipling of the nations.

The Back Stairway

Next, let us try to deal thoughtfully with the secret back stairway described in chapter 28 above. How? First, let us ask whether the back stairway actually exists. This book argues that it does not. But individual classical Christian theists may or may not agree. We need to consider three main possibilities: (1) The secret back stairway does exist, and provides access to God, independent of Christ. (2) The back stairway does exist, and provides access through Christ, rather than being independent of him. (3) The back stairway does not exist.

Let us consider each of these possibilities separately.

Options 1 and 2, which affirm a back stairway, share at least one difficulty. How will users of the stairway avoid the temptation to pride, in themselves and in their disciples, that is, those whom they teach? If disciples succumb to pride, it undermines the absoluteness of God, which is the very thing that classical Christian theism seeks to champion. The person who is proud in heart has made himself into a second absolute, rather than humbling himself before the one true absolute, God himself. Pride could destroy the entirety of classical Christian theism.

That must not happen. So what do we do? It is not easy to say. The back stairway is, after all, a hidden back stairway, not a public front stairway. Human nature being what it is, not everyone has or can acquire the elite qualifications to use it.

Now let us briefly focus on option 1 alone. What are its difficulties? It says that the back stairway exists independently of Christ and his work. How will a person harmonize the existence of this back stairway with what Christ says in John 14:6: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me”? Superficially, the back stairway appears to be another “way,” another route to the “truth,” another way to know the Father. Knowledge of the Father is symbolized by the second story, which is attainable through the back stairway.

Option 1 limits the scope of Christ’s apparently universal claim in John 14:6. Someone might say that Christ is making a narrow claim only about salvation, not about knowledge of God as a whole. So if

this were true, would we then conclude that Christ is *not* the only way to truth and the only way to knowledge?

Aquinas's postulation of two routes, natural reason and special revelation, may flirt with a division of this kind. But are we really ready to postulate a second route for *fallen* human beings? Are we also ready to limit the scope of Colossians 2:3, which states that "*all* the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" are hidden in Christ, in whom "the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily" (v. 9)? Are we ready to limit Colossians 1:15–17, in which Christ is shown to be the Mediator of *creation*? I would encourage people to think about the consequences before taking further steps. The irony in this route is that for the sake of holding on to a commitment to the hidden back stairway, a person might go so far as to dishonor the majesty and absoluteness of Christ. Such a person destroys classical Christian theism rather than maintaining it.

So we turn to consider option 2. Option 2 maintains that the back stairway is still nevertheless a stairway that goes through Christ. In my opinion, this route is superior to option 1. Most of the people who want to use the back stairway are Christian believers. They do know Christ. But where does this personal knowledge of Christ, which is mediated through Scripture, actively function when they are in practice walking up the individual stairs in the back of the house? Where do we find Aquinas or Turretin actively reckoning with Christ's mediation when they discuss how they know about the attributes of God? The people walking up the stairway may be Christian. But we need to ask whether the stairs on the stairway are crafted and built solidly by the climactic manifestation of the Father through the work of Christ. We may introduce another metaphor: is the door of the stairway Christ himself (John 10:7) or the cross of Christ?

A possible solution lies at hand, namely, to explain the back stairway in a way that makes explicit the role of Christ's mediation and, along with that, the mediation through the indwelling of the Spirit of Christ—in other words, to enhance classical Christian theism by using the realities of the Trinity and the realities of the one Trinitarian way of salvation. We should reckon in particular with the fact that Christ is not only Mediator of redemption (Col. 1:18–20),

but Mediator of creation (vv. 15–17). As the Word, the Logos (John 1:1), he is the final foundation and source for human rationality—including all the reasonings of philosophers, whether sound or corrupted.²

Now consider option 3. It says that there is no back stairway. In some ways, it is similar to option 2, which redefines the meaning and structure of the back stairway. Yet classical Christian theism, especially with Aquinas, but also in later writers, contains statements that may give the *impression* of offering a back stairway. The technical vocabulary and the technical, abstract mode of reasoning may give that impression. The remoteness from ordinary life seems to promise superlative insight. Some disciples of option 3 may be lured into the picture of the back stairway, even though their teacher does not intend it.

As we have observed, pride could destroy everything. We must try to warn against pride. And once again, the necessity of humility leads us back to the suggestion that the reflection on the work of Christ and on the Trinity should be integrated into the discussion of the attributes of God and the absoluteness of God.

The Importance of the Trinity

Leaving the Trinity out of the understanding of transcendence in classical Christian theism runs the risk of producing a description that gives the impression of a remote, uninvolved, frozen God. The eternal activity among the persons of the Trinity has the potential for enhancing our insights without destroying anything in the truth of what classical Christian theism represents. The Trinity provides us with a stable anchor for affirming God's activity in relation to the world, because his activity in relation to the world manifests who he is in his eternal activity among the persons of the Trinity. The same holds for difficulties with respect to God's eternity, compared with his actions in the world of time. And the same holds for God's immutability, compared with his actions that make changes in time.

2. Vern S. Poythress, *Logic: A God-Centered Approach to the Foundation of Western Thought* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), chaps. 11, 15.

Biblical Basis

Let us show people the biblical basis for what we affirm. Tradition is not enough for the long-run health of classical Christian theism because tradition is fallible. Let us be zealous for the truth to be passed on.

Perspectival Distinction of Attributes

Let us also try to find a way to articulate the source for nonsynonymy of attributes in God himself. If the nonsynonymy is *merely* a creational effect, it compromises the absoluteness of God, because then the nonsynonymy is not totally a product of God in his Trinitarian nature.

Since God is Trinitarian, it is to be expected that our deepest categories for analysis and exposition, including our technical vocabulary, would reflect who God is as the Trinity. Since God is absolute, the revelation from God to us requires no resources outside who he is as Trinity. Revelation is Trinitarian because God is Trinitarian. A lack of match between God's revelation and our technical vocabulary threatens to undermine what we desire to communicate, the absoluteness of God.

Key Terms

classical Christian theism³

Mediator

technical vocabulary

transcendence

Trinity

Study Questions

1. What might classical Christian theists do to move forward?
2. Why does the issue of a hidden back stairway present a possible obstacle to future growth?
3. Key terms in bold are defined in the glossary at the end of this volume.

For Further Reading

Berkhof, Louis. *Systematic Theology*. 4th rev. ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939. Pt. 1, chap. 8.

Prayer

May we as Christians grow in appreciation of the insights of classical Christian theism and deepen our understanding of its relation to the Trinity.

Appendix C:

Suggestions for Christian Personalists

NOW LET US consider some suggestions for Christian personalists. Since the Christian personalists represent a spectrum of positions, it is hard to address all points on the spectrum. But we want at least to attempt something. Some of the suggestions are similar to what we considered in the previous chapter.

From Immanence to Transcendence

Christian personalists are zealous for immanence. Let us make sure that the sense of God's immanence thoroughly fills the field of Christian knowledge of God, in harmony with the doctrine of simplicity. Immanence is not to be cordoned off and appealed to only within some particular areas of theological theory or ecclesiastical practice. Let us ask ourselves whether our discussions of Christian personalism, valuable as we may find them in many ways, have an inner consistency, rather than being tailored only to narrower topics. For example, does it really work to suggest that God is unchanging with respect to his necessary nature but changing in relation to the world? Can we do better in showing people harmony? God manifested his immanence in the whole tradition of classical Christian theism, even though this tradition is fallible. Can we build better

connections with this long-standing tradition, or do we, wittingly or unwittingly, give the impression of abandoning it or ignoring it?

In particular, immanence is to be seen as implicating transcendence. If we do not yet have a robust way of affirming the absolute and unchanging majesty of God, we need to find a way. Let us beware of the quicksand of mutuality theology and open theism in particular.

The Need for Transcendence

Let us reckon with the reality that immanence is compromised if God loses his infinite competence to rescue us where we are. Transcendence is necessary for immanence to be meaningful.

Aim of Humility

If our doctrine of God does not humble people, it is not an adequate expression of God's immanence. Humility is the proper response when God comes. And people are humbled when they see God's magnificence—his transcendence.

Christ's Mediation

Let us try to show how Christ mediates all our knowledge. An emphasis on immanence, if not balanced by an understanding of God's majesty, is in danger of opening the door to people's thinking that God is so accessible in some vague, general way that we do not need anything, even Christ, as a Mediator.

Unity in Doctrine

Immanence is the immanence of *one* God. Zeal for immanence should lead us to a zeal for showing how the same God, with the same unchanging attributes, is there in every circumstance and in every text of Scripture. Let us not seem to set the plurality of the ways in which Scripture speaks about God in tension with the unity of the one God and the one unified doctrine that Scripture teaches.

Interpreting the Bible

Christian personalists are zealous for the language of the Bible. Let us make sure that we do not underestimate that language. God speaks. And his speech is Trinitarian. So at every point in interpreting every passage, we are confronting the majesty of God in the fullness of his Godhead, the fullness of who he is. This fullness includes his transcendence and the differentiation of three persons who are distinctively present in God's speech to us.

The Trinity as the Source for the Immanence of God

Let us try to bring the Trinity into relation to our thinking about the attributes of God. Leaving out the Trinity in our discussion of attributes runs the risk of leaving our discussion without an ultimate source *in God* for God's activities in the world. Then, in the minds of hearers, God's activities in the world threaten to get swallowed up in the limitations of the world. So, for example, consider the issue of God's relation to time. The world unfolds in time. We as human beings are in time. God acts in the world of time, and God has personal interaction with us who are in time. We experience his interactions with us through the entire course of our life. To do justice to God's immanence, we want to affirm the reality of God's activity in the world and toward us. We want to make sure that people understand that God is present for each one of us, wherever we are in time.

So, then, must we say that God is *temporal*? No. Such an expression has serious liabilities in communication. It is easy for the hearer to think that God is immersed in time, is captured by time. The expression sounds as though God is just like us in relation to time. Was there good reason why classical Christian theism resisted such a formulation?

But suppose we reckon with the Trinity. The eternal activities in God, by which the Father begets the Son and the Father loves the Son, offer the archetype for God's activity in the world, once the world is created. So he remains himself, and nothing other than himself, when he acts toward us, because his acts reflect and express who he is. He

adopts us as sons because the eternal Son is eternally his Son. The eternal Son eternally receives the Father's love and favor. Our reception is a reflection within our own experience of time of the Father's eternity. Is this mysterious? Of course.

In a way, such a route explains nothing at all. It appeals to a deeper and more incomprehensible mystery in order to explain something in our lives that is already a mystery, and for which we want an explanation. In a way, the explanation does not explain. Yet in another way, it explains by explaining that God is absolute. There is nothing behind him that is more ultimate, and that might serve as an explanation. We adore the mystery of who he is. And this mystery has actually been made known to us in Christ. God has come near and has granted us eternal life in communion with his Son. This communion is through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is the Spirit of the Son, who gives us communion with the Son and also with the Father: "our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ" (1 John 1:3).

Key Terms

Christian personalism¹

immanence

Mediator

Trinity

Study Questions

1. What might Christian personalists do to move forward?
2. Is the transcendence of God important in trying to move forward?
3. How is the Trinity pertinent to Christian personalists?
4. What must Christian personalism be careful to avoid?

1. Key terms in bold are defined in the glossary at the end of this volume.

For Further Reading

Frame, John M. *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*. Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987. Chap. 1.

Prayer

May we grow in understanding your immanence in a way that continues to do justice to your transcendence.

Appendix D:

Can We Know the Essence of God?

IN APPENDICES D AND E, we consider the question of knowing the essence of God (app. D) and the meaning of accommodation (app. E).

Can human beings know the essence of God? A long history in Christian theology has steadily given a negative answer: we cannot know God's essence. By common grace, even in pre-Christian times, Philo of Alexandria maintained this position.¹ The context in Philo's work may suggest that he is putting forward an alternative way of stating the incomprehensibility of God.² Similar formulations can be found in Clement of Alexandria, John of Damascus, Thomas Aquinas, Stephen Charnock, and many others, up until modern times.³ How should we evaluate this answer?

1. Philo of Alexandria, *On the Posterity of Cain*, 48 (168–69), <http://www.earlyjewishwritings.com/text/philo/book8.html>, accessed May 1, 2018.

2. “When, therefore, the soul that loves God seeks to know what the one living God is according to his *essence*, it is entertaining upon an obscure and dark subject of investigation, from which the greatest benefit that arises to it is to comprehend that God, as to his essence, is utterly *incomprehensible* to any being, and also to be aware that he is invisible” (Philo, *On the Posterity of Cain*, 5 [15], italics mine).

3. Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 6.18, <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/clement-stromata-book6.html>, accessed May 1, 2018; John of Damascus, *An Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, 1.2, http://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/03d/0675-0749,_Ioannes_Damascenus,_De_Fide_Orthodoxa,_EN.pdf, accessed March 9, 2020; Thomas Aquinas, *The “Summa theologia” of St. Thomas*

Liabilities

We have ourselves been reckoning with the incomprehensibility of God all through our discussions in this book. But some liabilities come with the choice to express incomprehensibility as an inability to know the essence of God.

First, as we have seen, the word *essence* does not have a single stable, precise meaning (chap. 23). On the one hand, it is sometimes used as a synonym for the term *substance* in discussing the unity of one God in the context of the doctrine of the Trinity (chap. 24). It is also used in discussing the *essence* of dogs or human beings or another class of created things (chap. 23). In the latter use, it is burdened with a background in Aristotelian metaphysics that does not mesh well with the reality that the Trinity is ontologically basic.

Second, the incomprehensibility of God can be understood in either a Christian sense or a non-Christian sense (chap. 2). In a Christian sense, it means that only God knows himself completely, comprehensively, while human beings know God derivatively and in accord with their limitations as finite creatures. In a non-Christian sense, it can express a non-Christian view of transcendence, which says that God is completely unknowable and inaccessible. The same potential ambiguity accompanies the assertion that we cannot know the essence of God.

It is important to clear up this ambiguity. At the same time, if we choose to use the language concerning essence, it is not so clear how to do so. If we are using the term *incomprehensibility*, we can disambiguate our meaning by saying that we can *know* God truly, but we cannot *comprehend* him. That is, we cannot know him completely, as he knows himself. We cannot have masterful knowledge. But what do we say if we want to disambiguate the assertion that we cannot know the essence of God? We can say that we know God's effects on

Aquinas (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1920), 1.11, [1a] Q. 1, art. 7, reply obj. 1; *Summa theologiae*, 1.21, [1a] Q. 2, art. 1, "I answer" (but with qualifications for the beatific vision); Stephen Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, in *The Complete Works of Stephen Charnock* (Carlisle, PA/Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2010), 1.278; Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 2:36–41.

us and on the world. But this affirmation is still too weak. Knowing God's effects (such as seeing the effects of his providential control over the world of plants and animals) is not the same as knowing God *in* the effects. (Remember that Romans 1:18–23 indicates that even non-Christians know God, not simply his effects.) If we know God, and not merely his effects, we might actually also know the essence of God, depending on what we mean by *essence*. And so we still have to deal with remaining ambiguity in the term *essence*.

Echoes of the Aristotelian System

As we mentioned, an additional liability is that the term *essence*, in this kind of usage, suggests a link back to Aristotle's concept of essence, which has inherent ambiguity (chap. 23). Aristotle's concept belongs firmly to a one-level framework of knowledge. There is no built-in distinction between God's knowledge and human knowledge, but only a single level, the knowledge that minds achieve through reason.

The one-level scheme has built-in tension, since knowing the essence of dogs could mean either something minimal (merely enough to single out the class of dogs from other domestic animals) or something maximal (all that God knows about dogs). Aristotle's system tempts us to think that knowledge must mean masterful knowledge, or else it is merely opinion or ignorance. But no one has masterful knowledge, even of dogs, except God himself.⁴ So if we follow Aristotle's system and have to choose between masterful knowledge and ignorance, we end up with ignorance. We would have to conclude that we do not know the class of dogs and that we do not know God either. This position is a form of non-Christian transcendence. There is no way out of it except by abandoning the one-level system and replacing it with a Christian view of knowledge, a view that explicitly acknowledges two levels. Then, on the level of derivative, creaturely knowledge, we can have genuine knowledge that is imitative of God's knowledge, but is not masterful knowledge.

4. Peter van Mastricht makes a similar observation, in *Theoretical-Practical Theology*, ed. Joel R. Beeke, trans. Ted M. Rester (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2018), 2:77 (my thanks to Robert Golding for drawing my attention to this text).

Erroneous Inference

We can see still another liability if we consider the relation of God to what people mean when they speak of the *essence* of God. Suppose that Carol undertakes to use this language concerning the essence of God, and that she says that we cannot know God's essence. We then ask her, "What is the relation of God to his essence?" If Carol decides to say that God is something *more* than his essence, she gets into trouble. It sounds as though she is saying that God would consist in an essence plus something else. Then he would be composite, which would deny his simplicity and absoluteness. To avoid this alternative, Carol says that God *is* his essence. She means that there is nothing left over, as it were, "outside" his essence. But Carol has also said that we cannot know the essence of God. Since God is his essence, it would seem to follow that we cannot know God. God is unknowable. That is a form of non-Christian transcendence. (See fig. D.1.)

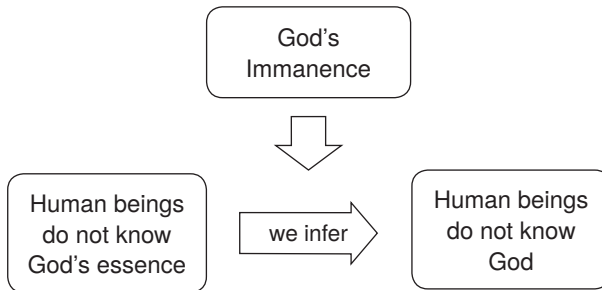


Fig. D.1. Bad Inference: Not Knowing God's Essence and Not Knowing God

We can reexpress the difficulty in a different way. Let us suppose that when Carol says that we cannot know the essence of God, she really means to say that we can know God truly, but we cannot comprehend him. Would she be willing to replace the word *God* with the expression "the essence of God"? Then she would obtain the formulation, "We can know the essence of God truly, but we cannot comprehend the essence of God." But Carol explicitly *denies* that the essence of God is known. That leaves us with two alternatives as to

how we understand human knowledge of God. Either (1) human beings do not actually know God; or (2) they know God, but not his essence. Position 1 is non-Christian transcendence, contradicting explicit verses of Scripture (Matt. 11:27; John 17:3; Rom. 1:21). Position 2 distinguishes God from his essence, undermining the simplicity of God.

There is no easy way out, because the term *essence*, as we observed, is naturally construed as having meaning within a one-level view of knowledge and rationality. Carol's formulation has non-Christian transcendence lurking just out of sight. That is not a good situation for Christian doctrine.

Is the solution to say that human beings *do* know the essence of God? No. That leads to the opposite extreme, by suggesting that we can comprehend God. The term *essence* is problematic. It needs to be abandoned.

Abandon the Formula?

We suggest, then, that the formula "we cannot know the essence of God" needs to be abandoned, even though it boasts great antiquity and widespread assent. It needs to be abandoned because the word *essence* cannot be freed from profound liabilities when used to try to explain the knowability of God.

We can hope that many of the theologians who used this formulation over the centuries really meant to say that human beings know God, but that we do not know him completely (comprehensively). But that is not what the theologians actually said.

Key Terms

Aristotle⁵

essence of God

incomprehensibility

5. Key terms in bold are defined in the glossary at the end of this volume.

Study Questions

1. What is the background for the idea that we “cannot know the essence of God”?
2. What are the liabilities associated with the term *essence*?
3. What difficulties arise with further inferences if we start with the thesis that we cannot know the essence of God?
4. What is the best solution to the difficulties?

For Further Reading

Berkhof, Louis. *Systematic Theology*. 4th rev. ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939. Pt. 1, chap. 2.

Prayer

Our God and Father, we thank you that through Jesus Christ we can know you, and know you as our Father. Thank you that you have communicated to us truly. We thank you that we can have rich knowledge of you, and we rejoice in your incomprehensibility. Help us as your people to use words that convey faithfully who you are.

Appendix E:

The Meaning of Accommodation

LET US CONSIDER the issue of *accommodation*. God is infinite. Human recipients of God's Word are finite. How do we negotiate the relation between the infinite and the finite? Ultimately there is mystery. How we think about God and accommodation affects how we think about what sort of communication we have in the Bible.¹

The doctrine of accommodation in God's revelation to man has had a long and venerable history, from the ancient church to the present.² On one level, it is a simple idea. But a closer inspection reveals mysteries and intractable depths.

The Definition of *Accommodation*

Let us begin with the simple level. A. N. S. Lane summarizes the idea of accommodation by saying, "God speaks to us in a form that

1. Apart from the opening paragraph, the contents of this chapter are taken from Vern S. Poythress, "Rethinking Accommodation in Revelation," *Westminster Theological Journal* 76, 1 (2014): 143–56, with adjustments and clarifications. Used with permission.

2. John Henry Blunt, ed., "Accommodation," in *Dictionary of Doctrinal and Historical Theology* (London, Oxford, and Cambridge: Rivingtons, 1871), 4; A. N. S. Lane, "Accommodation," in *New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Sinclair B. Ferguson, David F. Wright, and J. I. Packer (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 3;

is suited to the capacity of the hearer.”³ God speaks to human beings in human languages, and in a manner that is intelligible to them. This suitability has been called *condescension* or *accommodation*.⁴ It is a simple and obvious idea, in the sense that it is an obvious feature of Scripture and of the earlier oral communications from God to man that are recorded in Scripture (Gen. 3:9–13; 12:1–3; 15:1; etc.).

This kind of accommodation can be defined in at least two ways. In the narrower sense, it denotes the ways that God reveals *himself*.⁵ That is, we focus not on all instances of revelation, but on those in which God himself is the subject matter being communicated. God is infinite and incomprehensible, but he makes himself known to human beings. As a result, they truly know him, but in accord with the limitations of their finiteness. Thus, we may say that his revelation of himself and his character is “accommodated” to the noetic abilities of human beings. For example, when Scripture says that God is King, the word *King* is intelligible partly because we know about human kings. God is not a king on the same level, but by analogy to human kings. The use of analogy functions in making scriptural teaching accessible to its readers, who know about human kings.

In a broader sense, *accommodation* denotes all the ways in which God produces revelation or communication to human beings in ways that suit their capacity.⁶ In this sense, not only what God says directly about *himself* but what he says about anything at all is “accommodated” to the capacity of his hearers.

John D. Woodbridge, *Biblical Authority: A Critique of the Rogers/McKim Proposal* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982); Hoon Lee, “Accommodation: Orthodox, Socinian, and Contemporary,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 75, 2 (2013): 335–48.

3. Lane, “Accommodation.”

4. Lane, “Accommodation.”

5. According to L. M. Sweet and G. W. Bromiley, accommodation is “the principle that God adapts His *self-revelation* to man” (Sweet and Bromiley, “Accommodation,” in *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley et al. [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979], 1:24, italics mine).

6. Lane, “Accommodation”; likewise, Wick Broomall says that “[it] allows a writer, for purposes of simplification, to adjust his language to the limitations of his readers without compromising the truth in the process” (Broomall, “Accommodation,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984], 9).

This kind of suitability or accommodation surely makes sense. Theological discussions of accommodation may use the analogy of “a father addressing a small child or a teacher with a young pupil.”⁷ In an ordinary human situation, a wise human being adjusts his speech to fit his hearers. Likewise, God, who is all-wise, beyond any human wisdom, suits his speech to his hearers. In addition, after the fall of mankind into sin, God’s communication takes into account the sinful condition of mankind, and comes in a manner suited to their condition.⁸

The word *accommodation* is also sometimes used to describe progressive revelation: God’s communication to his people at any one time in history suits the historical circumstances and the redemptive epoch in which the communication occurs. Earlier communication may lack the detail and specificity that God intends to provide later. The progress is from truth to deeper truth, not from error to truth.⁹

Anthropomorphism

Biblical interpreters have appealed to the narrow sense of accommodation to explain features about biblical descriptions of God. For example, they may say that God describes himself according to human capacity when the Bible speaks of God’s arm or his eyes or his being angry or grieved. These descriptions are *anthropomorphisms*. Modern discussions of accommodation sometimes quote Calvin:

The Anthropomorphites also, who dreamed of a corporeal God, because mouth, ears, eyes, hands, and feet are often ascribed to him in Scripture, are easily refuted. For who is so devoid of intellect as not to understand that God, in so speaking, *lisps with us as nurses are wont to do with little children?* Such modes of expression, therefore, do not so much express what kind of a being God is, as

7. Lane, “Accommodation.” Also Rudolf Hofmann, “Accommodation,” in *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, ed. Samuel Macauley Jackson (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977), 1:22–23.

8. On the additional complications due to sin, see Sweet and Bromiley, “Accommodation,” 26–27.

9. See Blunt, “Accommodation,” 4–5.

accommodate the knowledge of him to our feebleness. In doing so, he must of course *stoop* far below his proper height.¹⁰

A Variant View

Is there more than one concept of accommodation? Up until the Enlightenment, the classical idea of accommodation took care not to deny the full truthfulness of Scripture.¹¹ *Accommodation* did *not* mean that God tolerated a process in which human writers of Scripture would include in their writings erroneous conceptions of their time, in order to serve a higher theological purpose. Richard Muller summarizes:

The Reformers and their scholastic followers all recognized that God must in some way condescend or accommodate himself to human ways of knowing in order to reveal himself. This *accommodatio* occurs specifically in the use of human words and concepts for the communication of the law and the gospel, but it in no way implies the loss of truth or the lessening of scriptural authority. The *accommodatio* or *condescensio* refers to the manner or mode of revelation, the gift of the wisdom of infinite God in finite form, not to the quality of the revelation or to the matter revealed.¹²

Muller goes on to note that a counterproposal involving accommodation that included error rose later in historical criticism.¹³ It is with us to this day, and has penetrated ostensibly evangelical circles.¹⁴

10. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 1.13.1, italics mine.

11. Gnostics and Socinians, however, put forward an idea of accommodation that included error (John McClintock and James Strong, *Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature* [New York: Harper, 1874], 1:46–47).

12. Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 19.

13. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms*, 19. Also Hofmann, “Accommodation,” 1:23–24.

14. E.g., Kenton L. Sparks, *God’s Word in Human Words: An Evangelical Appropriation of Critical Biblical Scholarship* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008); Kenton L. Sparks, *Sacred Word, Broken Word: Biblical Authority and the Dark Side of Scripture*

For our purposes, let us concentrate on the classical doctrine. We cannot include a full treatment of the heterodox idea of accommodation to error.

Doctrinal Basis

At its core, the doctrine of accommodation seems to be little more than an expression of the implications of the Creator-creature distinction for the nature of revelation. God is the infinite Creator, and we are not. On the basis of biblical teaching, we make a distinction between what he knows and what we know. And we infer that his communication to us will take into account who we are as creatures. The doctrine guards against overestimating our knowledge and trying to treat our knowledge as if it were the ultimate standard into which God is required to fit.

In addition to the Creator-creature distinction, the Bible teaches that man is made in the image of God, and that even human beings in rebellion continue to know him (Rom. 1:19–21). These affirmations guard against an opposite danger, namely, that we would *underestimate* the instruction given by Scripture and general revelation, and move in the antibiblical direction of saying that God is unknown or unknowable.¹⁵

So we might choose to leave it at that, and to say that the doctrine of accommodation is pretty straightforward and obvious. It is, if we confine ourselves to an introductory discussion. But if we look at the details, we find mysteries. And we find potential perils, because as sinners we may be tempted to rush in too quickly on the basis of the assumption that we have understood all that there is to understand.

1. A First Peril: False Transcendence

One peril arises from the temptation to practice a false transcendence. Such temptation can enter even after someone has affirmed the transcendence of God by using the Creator-creature distinction.

(Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012).

15. John M. Frame warns against both dangers in *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987), 13–40. See also chapter 2 in the present book.

The peril can be illustrated by starting from common human illustrations of accommodation, such as a father with a young child, or a teacher with a young pupil. We as observers can watch the father or the teacher, and we understand what is going on. We appreciate the ways in which the father or the teacher knows more, and knows more deeply. We observe with appreciation all that he is holding back in order to communicate in a simple fashion to the youngster.

So someone—let us call her Donna—imagines God as doing the same thing. And indeed, there is an analogy. But the analogy is only partial. Donna cannot actually become an observer of God, on his own level, in the same way that she can become an observer of a human father. But she can try to imagine it, and then fall into the temptation of trying to figure out just what God is leaving out, compressing, and simplifying in the process of speaking to “childlike” human beings. Donna’s speculation about what God is really doing may then function as a more ultimate authority than Scripture. Scripture has only the qualified authority of being for the childlike. And Donna?—Donna has become godlike.

Something similar to Donna’s approach actually arose historically in the case of gnosticism. The gnostics claimed that they had secret teachings for those who were “spiritual.” By contrast, the overt teachings in the writings of the New Testament were at a lower level, suited to the capacity of ordinary Christians. The gnostics were saying in effect that the biblical writings were “accommodated” in a way that contrasted with the gnostics’ allegedly “deeper” knowledge.

This route taken by Donna and by the gnostics illustrates the peril of false transcendence. Donna tries to transcend our human limitations in order to watch God over his shoulder, so to speak, and thereby to know the ways in which she can and cannot receive Scripture at full value. This move of Donna’s can well result in a transition from *accommodation* in the classical sense to the modern historical-critical sense of *accommodation* of errors within Scripture. Even if it does not, at least not immediately, there has been a fateful transition to a new seat of authority. The new authority is Donna’s personal vision of how God practices fatherlike condescension. That vision trumps the authority of Scripture itself. And so by means of her personal vision, Donna has become her own ultimate master. She

may still verbally confess that Scripture is inerrant, but internally the ultimate authority has shifted. In like manner, the gnostics shifted authority toward their secret knowledge and secret writings.

As an additional qualification, we should note that the communication in the Bible involves progress over time. God adds more revelation from the time of Adam through the Old Testament and into the New. In the light of fulfillment in Christ (Heb. 1:1–3), we can in certain ways see how God was communicating less fully but nevertheless truthfully in the Old Testament. By means of the climactic revelation in Christ, we have come to a kind of “maturity” in understanding in comparison with the Old Testament (Gal. 4:1–4). But this growth in understanding takes place through additional canon, the canon of the New Testament, not through secret “gnostic” insights.

2. The Peril of False Immanence

We have described Donna’s approach as an instance of false transcendence. But simultaneously it involves a false understanding of God’s immanence.¹⁶ According to the biblical teaching about God, God’s immanence implies in the sphere of epistemology that he makes himself known to us, both in general revelation and in Scripture. As a substitute for this doctrine of immanence, Donna and the gnostics have their own claims to special knowledge. Donna’s personal vision of the nature of God and the gnostics’ claims to secret knowledge function as immanent authorities. Human ideas here function as a false source of insight. These key ideas claim to function as immanent and accessible knowledge concerning what God is “really” like or is “really” doing behind the “veil” offered by Scripture.

We can also fall into another form of false immanence. Let us say that a particular person—Joe—acknowledges in a basic way that Scripture is ultimate for all human understanding of God. He knows

16. John Frame’s square on transcendence and immanence (fig. 2.1) is valuable here in distinguishing between Christian and non-Christian views of transcendence and immanence (Frame, *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, 14). Even people who have become Christians through the work of the Holy Spirit have some remaining sinfulness, and we are tempted to fall back into various compromises with non-Christian views (see chapter 2 above).

that he cannot “get behind” Scripture in the way that Donna imagines. Joe can still distort the idea of immanence by interpreting the accommodated character of Scripture as if it implied that he could *master* scriptural revelation. In taking this route, he is still admitting, on the basis of the Creator-creature distinction, that he cannot master God. But he thinks that (in principle) he can master Scripture, precisely because it is accommodated to us and therefore falls within the sphere of human control. He reasons that, unlike God himself, Scripture as accommodated language must be completely subject to human ideas of rationality. This move still maintains that God is unmasterable and infinite. But Joe may infer that his idea of God, given through Scripture, is masterable, since it belongs to him and to humanity. Then the “god” about which Joe is talking is finite, and he is worshipping an idol of his own conception.

Thus, we must hold together two sides: God in communicating to us suits his speech to our capacity (immanence); but simultaneously it is God who speaks, with divine authority and power (transcendence). God’s immanence implies that we can genuinely understand and absorb what he says, by the help of the Holy Spirit. God’s transcendence implies that we do not master his communication to us—or any part of it, since he is present in everything he says.

3. Perils in Underestimating Divine Power

The language describing accommodation is not perfectly precise. So the door remains open for misusing it in still other directions. One such direction involves underestimating divine capabilities.

Consider again the analogies involving a human father with his child or a teacher with his young pupil. These situations involve adjustments on the part of the father or the teacher, depending on the particular case.

In the case of a father with his child, the child is who he is, whether the father likes it or not. The father cannot sovereignly control who the child is, nor what his capacities are. The father may feel frustrated by the child’s limited capacity. He may feel frustrated by not being able to say more. He may be frustrated because, even after effort, he fails to communicate some idea that is important to him. He does the best he can, but he is limited by circumstances outside his control.

If we put too much stock in this illustration, the temptation arises to drag the same connotations into our picture of God. We infer that God is like a human father, and so he is hemmed in, against his will, by the circumstances and the limits of human capacities. But that is not correct. God is not limited like a human father, because he creates all the “circumstances,” according to the doctrine of creation. Sin violates God’s order, to be sure, but it is an intruder.¹⁷ In the original situation of creation, man as a creature cannot “frustrate” God’s desire to communicate, because God created man and is completely in charge.

God did not create man in isolation from a later purpose to communicate. It is not as though he created man first and then, as an afterthought, asked himself whether it might not be good to establish communication, and on what terms communication might be possible. Rather, God created man already having in mind the purposes of communication. Consequently, there can be no “frustration” on God’s part due to what human beings are.

By contrast, a human being might make a bicycle and then be frustrated that it is not stronger or faster than it is. God is not frustrated, because he is God. He does not have to “adjust” to a situation outside his control or to human capacities that he did not specify. Precisely because God is the absolute Creator, human finiteness offers no resistance, no “problem” for communication. Contrary to the thinking into which we are prone to fall, the distinction between infinite and finite minds and cognitive capacities is not a “problem” for God. It is not something that he must puzzle over in order to “adapt” his communication to unfortunate, uncontrollable limitations.

Thus, the words *accommodation* and *adaptation* are not altogether helpful. Both can suggest that God is accommodating or adapting to a situation that he cannot control, more or less the way in which we as human beings adapt to our circumstances or accommodate ourselves to a situation beyond our control. So how else could we describe what God does? More guardedly, we might describe God as communicating in a way *suited to* or *fitting for* his hearers. But even with these new expressions, it is possible to import the idea that God must mold

17. On accommodation in a situation of sin, see Sweet and Bromiley, “Accommodation,” 1:26–27.

himself or his Word into shape, so to speak, in order to “fit in” to circumstances outside his control. This kind of concession undermines the authority of God’s Word because it implies that God is only partly responsible for what he says, and that part of the responsibility goes to allegedly autonomous circumstances that constrain the limits of what he is able to say.

In addition, the analogy with a human father suggests a certain kind of defect in the communication. The child is meant to grow into an adult, and communication between two adults is richer. In comparison with adult communication, communication between father and child is limited. Is it “defective”? Some people might say so. But there is a time and place for everything. It is not defective if we have a robust view of family life, and of the positive role of child-rearing and those early opportunities for communication. Communication early in the life of a child may still be completely true and robustly edifying. Communicative adequacy and success are to be judged not by some artificial standards of perfection, but ultimately by divine design and conformity to divine standards. Divine standards positively approve the kind of communication in which a father takes into account his child’s present capacity.

But now suppose that the child is in an accident that causes permanent brain damage. The child never reaches mental adulthood during this life. Might we say that the communication between father and child is now impaired? It is in a sense “defective” in a way that the father is powerless to remedy. We must see that this situation is *not* parallel to God’s situation: he has power to communicate just as he pleases.

How, then, might the situations with a human father relate to the situation with God? Over time human beings are meant to grow, both as individuals and as a race. But they never outgrow humanity in order to become God. We can appreciate a growth through progressive revelation, and an individual’s growth in spiritual knowledge as he continues to study Scripture over a period of time. But we continue to be human, not God. According to the analogy, we never outgrow “childhood.” Is this a defect? Only if measured against the human sinful desire to be God. Our knowledge at the consummation will still be fully human. And that is OK.

4. Perils Concerning Quick Dismissal or Underestimation of Meaning That Looks Accommodated

Another kind of peril involves an underestimation of the mystery of Scripture in its details. Consider the concept of accommodation in the narrow sense, in which it deals with how God reveals himself, that is, his own character. This kind of accommodation, it is said, explains anthropomorphic language about God. But does it? A closer look shows that there are continuing mysteries.

Consider an example. Exodus 15:6 says that “your right hand, O LORD, shatters the enemy.” The stock explanation using accommodation would say that this description of God is an accommodation to human capacity, through anthropomorphism. Yes, it is an anthropomorphism. But does this verse really have much to do with the concept of accommodation? If instead we were to reckon with the immediate context, we could observe that Exodus 15:6 is part of a poetic song. The song is full of metaphors and figures of speech. The Lord does not have a physical body with a physical right hand. Consequently, it is clear that the expression is a metaphor, in keeping with the context. It means that the Lord acts to shatter the enemy, as a human being might shatter a thing with his right hand.

Similar truths *could* have been expressed in other ways, without the use of vivid metaphors. For example, as an alternative we could say, “The Lord exercises his power to defeat the enemy utterly.” That way of saying it is not colorful, not poetic, not rhetorically engaging. But it says some of the same things that the poetic expression does. Thus, the Lord could have spoken in an alternative way without using vivid anthropomorphisms. But he did not. Why not? The doctrine of accommodation, by itself, says only that God addresses human beings according to their capacity. Both metaphorical and nonmetaphorical forms of expression meet this criterion. Indeed, anything that is intelligible human language meets the criterion!

Accommodation says only that Scripture is intelligible. It does not explain why the Lord in one text chooses one particular kind of intelligible speech in contrast to many other alternatives. Thus, accommodation does not really explain anthropomorphism or any of the particulars. If we use it as an explanation when it is not appropriate, we run the risk of overlooking the particulars. Our appeal to

accommodation may become a recipe for glossing over the particulars and implying that they are not significant.

One peril arising in this connection is the temptation to unconsciously “discount” and devalue figurative language. We start thinking that figurative language is not “the real thing,” but only an ornament, due to accommodation. So the “unaccommodated” truth will be a truth stripped of ornamentation. If we take this route in our minds, we label metaphor and figurative language as nonserious. We substitute our own ideas of what should have been said for what God actually said, perhaps because we are embarrassed by what he said, or because we think it is just for theological children and not for us. Simultaneously, we fall victim to false transcendence by imagining that we know the unaccommodated truth. The remedy, as usual, is to submit to what God said, rather than be embarrassed by it. He knows what he is saying. He is utterly comfortable with metaphors, even though human sin tempts us to misunderstand them.

5. Perils of Overestimating Our Control over Language and Thought

Another peril concerns the temptation to overestimate the depth of what we know, or underestimate remaining mysteries. We say to ourselves, “I know what a right hand is. It is a physical hand, on the right side of the body, with four fingers and a thumb. God does not have a right hand. Therefore, Exodus 15:6 is an accommodation.”

Do we really know what a right hand is? The description I just gave is partial, because it focuses wholly on the shape, position, and physical constitution of the hand. Do we think that is all? Then we are ignoring the functions of the right hand. We do things with our hands. We touch, we grab, we gesture. We are also ignoring the potential for using the right hand as a metaphor for something.

Why do we as human beings have right hands? Within a biblical framework, the answer surely includes observing that God made us that way. He did so out of his bounty. For example, Sue has a right hand because God gave her one. And why did he do it? Partly, at least, so that she could praise him for her right hand. Partly so that she could do things with it. Her power to do things imitates God’s original power. So it is an aspect of the image of God.

God is the original, the Creator who is all-powerful. Sue has power derivative from and imitative of God's power. Her hands are expressions of that imitation. We may take the next step and say that the original for Sue's right hand is God's power to make, to shape, and to protect. If so, Sue's right hand is metaphorical. It is a figure within creation for God's power. God's power is the original "right hand."

In addition, Sue's right hand is not only an image of God's power. It embodies God's power. God is present to empower Sue whenever she moves her hand. So when Sue moves her hand, we observe not only Sue's power but God's power, right there in her right hand. Without his sustaining power, Sue could do nothing.

If we then say that Exodus 15:6 is *merely* accommodation, in an attempt to explain away a metaphor, are we not also engaged in explaining away depth of meaning in the significance of Sue's right hand? And does it not display some overweening and dangerous arrogance, which tempts us to think that we have already grasped all that is important when we focus exclusively on a hand as a physically structured object, and when we in our minds ignore the presence of God filling the heaven and the earth and therefore also Sue's hand?

Consider another example. The doctrine of accommodation can be used to say that "God (of course) is not really angry; the Bible's statements about God's anger are instances of accommodation."

This analysis, like the analysis of God's right hand, exposes temptations to minimizing. To begin with, instead of saying that God is not angry, one could propose that God's anger is analogous to human anger, rather than being on the same level. So the word *angry* would be used metaphorically or figuratively. But we could also attempt the same kind of reversal as we observed with God's right hand. Where does the human ability to get angry come from? It comes from the Creator, who made us in his image. There can, of course, be sinful human anger, but that is a perversion and sinful twisting of righteous anger, which ought to engage us when we see injustice, and which stirs us up to pray and work and fight against injustice. Where did we get these abilities? From God, who has the archetypal ability, because he is the God of justice. God's character is fully just, and God is powerful in acting for justice. His being is engaged, as it were, in its depths. It is not just that he has a proposition in his mind, the proposition "This is

unjust.” God’s commitment in evaluating and judging injustice is the original anger. Our anger is the shadowy imitation. So now, which is the “real” anger and which is only “metaphorical” anger?

As with the right hand, so here—our anger not only is imitative of God’s anger, but also, when it is righteous, involves God’s work in us. We have fellowship with God, and our anger is an expression of the Holy Spirit’s work in us. God is expressing *his* anger in ours (though we must be careful not to deify ourselves or excuse cases of unrighteous anger). So there is no such thing as “merely human” anger. It is always also a testimony to the character of God. J. I. Packer said once that it is not that God is anthropomorphic, but that man is theomorphic—made in the image of God.¹⁸ Even in the case of unrighteous anger and unbelieving anger, people do not escape the God who made them. They are twisting the image of God, not escaping it. So what is *anger*? We do not really know much about what we are saying until we realize that knowledge of anger is bound up with knowledge of God, which travels out into unfathomable mystery.

What may sometimes happen here is that we make a decision—understandable in one respect—to focus on accommodation with respect only to descriptions of God, and not to descriptions of anything else. This distinctive focus can easily tempt us to infer that our knowledge of the world—of right hands, anger, eyes, fire, wind, human love—is nonmysterious. We evaporate the mystery of the presence of God in the world and the testimony of the world to God.

So let us consider the broader use of the word *accommodation*, in which the word applies not only to God’s descriptions of himself, but to all of Scripture. All of Scripture comes to us in human languages, through human authors, and originates within the context of human circumstances in history. What God says suits these contexts. To use the traditional term, all of Scripture is “accommodated.”

As before, the same peril arises of thinking of accommodation as a kind of human adaptation to circumstances beyond the individual’s control. We then introduce ideas that are not appropriate to God, given his comprehensive control, from creation onward.

If all of Scripture is accommodated, we have to include the literal

18. From an oral comment by J. I. Packer in the 1970s or 1980s.

statements as well as the figurative ones. Anthropomorphic language about God is no more and no less “accommodated” than the affirmation that God is “immortal, invisible” (1 Tim. 1:17) or the affirmation that “Erastus remained at Corinth” (2 Tim. 4:20). But a single general principle of accommodation that explains everything is in danger of explaining nothing in particular. In practice, we run the risk of considering some things in Scripture as “accommodated” and others as not. But then we are in danger of producing a canon within the canon, and also producing a false transcendence with respect to what can allegedly be treated in practice as if it were unaccommodated.

6. The Peril of Prioritizing Reason, General Revelation, and Other Extrascriptural Sources

The language of accommodation, when applied to all of Scripture, opens the door to still another peril. If Scripture is accommodated, perhaps something outside Scripture is not. Human reason will not serve as an allegedly unaccommodated source because it is surely related to finite human capacity. And yet people have been tempted to consider human reason as a window onto the divine. According to this view, reason is virtually a divine spark within us, and therefore identical to divine reason. Then reason becomes lord over Scripture—which is what took place in deism.

Or if this route is rejected, people may still plausibly think that God’s word governing creation (Ps. 33:9; Heb. 1:3) is unaccommodated. It is not addressed to us, so it need not have the restrictions involved in communicating to human beings. It is untrammelled and unlimited. Therefore, people may be tempted to treat it as a source allegedly superior to Scripture. Given the impressive triumphs of modern science, the danger is real and growing.

But theologically speaking, the general principle of accommodation applies to God’s speech governing creation in a way analogous to what we have said concerning speech addressed to human beings. The speech of God with respect to creation calls for response on the part of the created things that obey God’s commands. So by analogy with God’s speech to human beings, we may infer that God’s commands suit or fit the created things to which they are addressed. Since we ourselves are not these created things, we know little about how

such accommodation would work. In the end, the details are highly mysterious. We are in a worse position to understand these words of God, partly because we are not one of the immediate hearers (God is not immediately addressing us in these cases), partly because we do not have access to these words in verbal form. Scientists can only infer and guess at and approximate what God says, and these guesses constitute what scientists think about the “laws of nature.”

In this respect, scientific thinking about the laws of nature is thrice accommodated. God’s speech concerning creation suits creation. That speech includes the first step in accommodation, namely, accommodation to the created things being addressed. Second, creation becomes a source of information to scientists. It “reveals” clues about how things work. This information from creation, though nonverbal in character, suits the capacities of scientists. That suitability is a second accommodation. Third, the scientific interpretations undertaken by the scientists suit their capacities. Their own reflections constitute a third accommodation, an accommodation to their thoughts and predispositions. Thus, the products of human science, in the form of theories, hypotheses, and summaries of “facts,” are thrice accommodated. The same goes, *mutatis mutandis*, for historical investigation.

A thrice-accommodated human project offers us a view through a dark glass. Neither science nor historical investigation can become a source from which we build a stable, solid platform, which would allegedly be superior to Scripture. The reason should be plain. It is a case of “Physician, heal yourself.” The proposed platform could be built only if we first “healed” the effects of triple accommodation on science and the study of history.

What this path eventually reveals is that a sound view of accommodation ought never to become an excuse for seeking a superior viewpoint outside a scriptural foundation. The person who seeks a superior viewpoint has tacitly abandoned, somewhere in the process, the conviction that Scripture is actually God’s speech, accommodated or not.

7. The Peril of Leaving Out God as Recipient

Finally, simplistic thinking about accommodation runs the risk of neglecting a full reckoning with covenantal revelation. The

implications of covenant need some explanation. We may begin with a human treaty (or *covenant*) between two parties. The treaty is written not for the sake of one party alone, but for both. Both parties make binding commitments to the treaty (e.g., Gen. 31:44–54). When God makes his covenants with human beings, the covenants address and bind the human beings. But God is the second party. He binds himself, as it were, to his own words (compare Heb. 6:13). He hears what he says. We can see this implication by observing that God told Moses to deposit the documents of the Mosaic covenant in the Most Holy Place, in and beside the ark, in the presence of God (Deut. 10:5; 31:24–26). Their location symbolically expresses the fact that God is aware of their contents and will faithfully fulfill the commitments that he has made as one party of the covenant. This placing of covenantal words in the presence of God comes to full realization when God addresses God in John 17, in words that are also accessible to us.¹⁹

John 17 is a very special case. But even in its special character, it can illustrate by analogy what is true of all Scripture. All of Scripture is covenantal in a broad sense. In it God addresses us, but he also addresses himself as the second party. The Holy Spirit stands with us, indwelling us, as we receive the Scripture. And that implies that the Spirit is hearer as well as speaker (John 16:13).

Thus, the usual reasoning about accommodation has a potential flaw. The usual reasoning can suggest the assumption that the Scripture has us who are human beings as the *only* hearers. If we were the only hearers, we might easily conclude that Scripture is “accommodated” to us, but does not at all have God in mind as a possible hearer. But the key assumption about our being the only hearers is false. Like the treaty, Scripture speaks both to God and to us. Or, to put it more elaborately, God is speaking to God, in the mystery of the Trinity, and to us as well. If so, what it means to God is beyond calculation. And therefore Scripture itself is beyond calculation.²⁰ Its accommodation to us is an additional feature, not a subtraction from the fullness of divine meaning.

19. Vern S. Poythress, *God-Centered Biblical Interpretation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1999), 19–25.

20. Poythress, *God-Centered Biblical Interpretation*, 19–25.

Every text of Scripture suits the time and place and circumstances and human intermediaries who are present as contexts in which it newly comes. God's speech is always coherent with the contexts that he himself specifies by his speech governing the universe (Heb. 1:3). That is the real meaning of accommodation.

Since we are considering the matter deeply, let us observe that the Son communicates to the Father in John 17 in the context of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. The communion between two persons of the Trinity always *suits* the context of the third person as well as the context of each person who is giving and receiving love. The archetype for *accommodation* or contextual fit is the Trinity. Each person speaks to another person in the context of the third person.

Do you understand it? No. It is incomprehensible. Those who would make it comprehensible undertake to destroy God, or to become God themselves.

Conclusion

Rightly understood, accommodation is an expression of the Creator-creature distinction. But sin tempts us in many ways to distort the meaning of accommodation in favor of false transcendence and false immanence. We must be on our guard and avoid thinking that the concept of accommodation dissolves the fundamental mysteries in divine communication and divine covenants. Instead, it reasserts them.

Key Terms

accommodation²¹

analogy

anthropomorphism

communication

covenant

false **immanence**

false **transcendence**

21. Key terms in bold are defined in the glossary at the end of this volume.

general revelation
immanence
mystery
revelation
transcendence

Study Questions

1. What is the meaning of *accommodation* in the history of theological discussion?
2. Is there more than one concept of accommodation?
3. Why is the idea important?
4. What mistakes can we fall into if we are not careful in how we understand accommodation?

For Further Reading

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Prayer

Lord of the universe, may we be wise in recognizing our limitations in receiving and understanding Scripture, and at the same time give full value to the depth of what you communicate to us. Thank you for communicating to us deeply as well as taking into account our limitations. Thank you for opening fellowship with you in your love.

Glossary

THE TERMS IN this glossary usually have special meanings within theology or within this book. Therefore, the definitions usually do not match what would be found in an ordinary dictionary describing general usage.

absolute. See *absoluteness*.

absoluteness. The **attribute** of God that says that God is sufficient to himself and is not dependent on the world or anything in it. God does not *need* anything outside himself (Acts 17:25). Also called *aseity*; *independence*. **absolute**, adj. See **infinity**.

accident. Within **Aristotle**'s metaphysical system, a feature of a thing that does not belong to its **essence**. Thus, an accident or accidental feature could be added or subtracted from that thing without changing what kind of thing it is (i.e., its essence).

accommodation. The work of God in having his revelation to us fit our capacity and our condition.

anthropomorphic. See **anthropomorphism**.

anthropomorphism. A manner of speaking about God that uses an analogy with human beings and what they do. **anthropomorphic**, adj.

Aquinas, Thomas. A highly skilled and influential theologian of the thirteenth century who interacted extensively with **Aristotle**.

archetypal. See **archetype**.

archetype. An original on which is based derivative examples, which are called **ectypes**. **archetypal**, adj.

Aristotelian. See **Aristotle**.

Aristotle. A Greek philosopher of the fourth century B.C. **Plato** was his teacher. **Aristotelian**, adj.

aseity. See **absoluteness**.

atomists. Philosophers who believe that atoms (tiny bits of matter that are not further divisible) are the most basic constituents of the world, and that everything else is built up out of atoms.

attributes (of God). Features describing who God always is. Among the attributes of God are **absoluteness**, **eternity**, **immensity**, **immutability**, **infinity**, **omniscience**, and **simplicity**. The list can be extended. Also called *perfections*. See **character**.

Augustine. A church father of the fourth and fifth century A.D. who wrote a key work on the **Trinity**.

biblical theology. The study of the teaching of the Bible, focusing on the gradual unfolding of God's plans and purposes through successive epochs of history, with attention to progressive revelation in earlier and later verbal communications from God, and with attention to prominent themes in the Bible.

categories. In **Aristotle's** metaphysics, the most basic and most general conceptual classes into which the world is divided. The categories are ten in number: **substance**, quantity, quality, a relative, where, when, being in a position, having, acting upon, and being affected.

character (of God). What God is. God's character includes all his **attributes**.

Charnock, Stephen. A Puritan pastor of the seventeenth century whose book on the **attributes** of God subsequently had wide influence.

Christian personalism. A label introduced in this book to group together a number of theologians and writings that emphasize God's personal interaction with the world and his **immanence**. It contrasts with **classical Christian theism**.

classical Christian theism. The orthodox Christian doctrine of God. This is expounded in centuries-long meditations and discussions of who God is, including the acknowledgment that God is Trinitarian (God is three **persons**). These meditations include praise to God and prayers, as well as academic meditations on the **attributes** of God. God is absolute, infinite, immutable,

- eternal, omnipotent, and omniscient. Note, however, that there are variations in how people expound the doctrine of God, and that there are remaining difficulties in the tradition of classical Christian theism outside the Bible, partly due to the influence of Aristotelian metaphysics. Classical Christian theism contrasts with **Christian personalism**. See **Aristotle**; **orthodoxy**; **Trinity**.
- coinherence**. The mutual indwelling of the **persons** of the **Trinity**.
coinherent, adj.
- coinherent**. See **coinherence**.
- contrast**. The features of a unit that identify it and make it distinct from other units (especially in the context of language analysis). Also called *contrastive-identificational features*. See **distribution**; **variation**.
- contrastive-identificational features**. See **contrast**.
- create**. See **creation**.
- creation**. God's act of making the world initially from nothing, and then also forming, structuring, and separating things in the world, during the six days described in Genesis 1. **create**, vb.
- creaturely comparison**. A style of communicating about God that uses the nonhuman creaturely environment in describing God and his acts in the world. "God is my *rock*" is an instance of creaturely comparison.
- distribution**. The characteristic contexts in which a unit is expected to appear (especially in the context of language analysis). See **contrast**; **variation**.
- ectypal**. See **ectype**.
- ectype**. A derivative example, which reflects an original. The original is called an **archetype**. **ectypal**, adj.
- empiricists**. Philosophers who believe that sense data are the most basic constituents in building up the world.
- equivocal**. Having notably distinct meanings in two or more occurrences. Typically used in the context of describing language. See **univocal**.
- essence**. The nature of God, including all his **attributes**. The term *essence* affirms the unity of God. The term *person*, by contrast, is used when focusing on the distinctions among the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. There are three **persons** and one essence.

The term *essence* is also used in another way, in the context of Aristotle's metaphysics. Roughly speaking, in **Aristotle's** terminology, the essence of something is what makes it what it is. The essence is closely related to what defines it. For example, the essence of a dog Fido is what it is for him to be a dog. The essence contrasts with **accidents**, which are nonessential features of a thing. See **substance**.

eternal. See **eternity**.

eternity. The **attribute** of God that says that God is not limited by time. He is superior to time. He is not subject to the passing of time. He always exists. **eternal**, adj. See **immutability**.

form. Within **Aristotle's** metaphysics, what kind of thing an object is. Form is correlated with **matter**.

heresy. A teaching that seriously deviates from and corrupts the truth about God and the way of salvation.

idealists. Philosophers who believe that ideas are the most basic constituents of the (human) world.

immanence. God's being close to the world. God is personally present to himself and is present everywhere in the world. **immanent**, adj. See **Christian personalism**; **mutuality theology**; **transcendence**.

immanent. See **immanence**.

immense. See **immensity**.

immensity. An **attribute** of God: the fact that his presence has no limits, either before the creation of the world or afterward. **immense**, adj. See **omnipresence**.

immutability. The **attribute** of God that says that he does not change and cannot change. Any change in his character would be inconsistent with who he is. **immutable**, adj. See **eternity**.

immutable. See **immutability**.

independence. See **absoluteness**.

infinite. See **infinity**.

infinity. An **attribute** of God: his lack of limitations, his surpassing the world and every finite thing. **infinite**, adj. See **absoluteness**.

matter. Within **Aristotle's** metaphysics, what a thing is made of. Matter is correlated with **form**.

monadic theology. A label for a distorted form of theology that pays

attention only to God's transcendence, and ends up with a God who is remote and who cannot interact with the world because it would allegedly compromise his **transcendence**. God's oneness is the conception that governs everything else. The opposite error to monadic theology is **mutuality theology**.

mutuality theology. A label to describe a distorted form of theology that cares only about God's **immanence**, and ends up making God a finite god who is very like human beings and who struggles alongside us to bring about good results. The opposite error to mutuality theology is **monadic theology**.

omnipresence. The **attribute** of God that says that God (and everything he is) is present everywhere in the world and fills all things, without being confined to one location. **omnipresent**, adj. See **immensity**.

omnipresent. See **omnipresence**.

omniscience. The **attribute** of God that means that God knows everything. **omniscient**, adj.

omniscient. See **omniscience**.

open theism. A false, unbiblical view of God that claims that God does not know some specific future events, in particular events that depend on free human decisions that are yet to be made.

orthodox. See **orthodoxy**.

orthodoxy. Correct teaching concerning the major doctrines in the Bible. **orthodox**, adj.

perfections. See **attributes**.

persons. The three members of the **Trinity**. In the context of the Trinity, there are three persons: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Each person is distinct from the other two. See **essence**.

philosophical style. A style of analysis and communication concerning God that uses a series of extremely general terms, often terms with a primary background in philosophy.

Plato. A Greek philosopher of the fourth century B.C. **Aristotle** was one of his disciples.

Plotinus. A Hellenistic philosopher of the third century A.D. who emphasized the ultimacy of the One, and tried to explain everything with this starting point.

predicable. See **predication.**

predicate. What is ascribed to a subject. In the assertion “Fido is brown,” *Fido* is the subject and *is brown* is the predicate. See **predication.**

predication. The ascription of some descriptive term to another term that is the subject of the predication. Predication takes place in the contexts of assertions about the world. **predicable**, adj. See **predicate.**

process philosophy. A philosophy that says that *events* rather than things are the most basic constituents of the world.

Proclus. A successor of **Plotinus** in the philosophical Academy at Athens.

prominence. Relative to a particular context, what is more central and determinative for the whole. It contrasts with what is peripheral. **prominent**, adj.

prominent. See **prominence.**

Pseudo-Dionysius. A fifth- or sixth-century writer who carried Neoplatonic philosophy into the Christian community by writing under the pseudonym of Dionysius the Areopagite, the convert of Paul mentioned in Acts 17:34.

simple. See **simplicity.**

simplicity. An **attribute** of God that says that God is without parts; he is indecomposable. One implication is that each attribute of God describes the whole of God. No attribute is separable. In addition, God is not decomposable into a class and a particular instance of the already-existing class. **simple**, adj.

substance. What is ontologically basic. The term *substance* has been a key term in Western philosophy, but philosophers differ in their use of it. The term *substance* is also used as an equivalent to **essence** in the context of the doctrine of the **Trinity**. God is one substance and three **persons**, three subsistences.

transcendence. God’s being exalted. God is infinitely superior to the world. **transcendent**, adj. See **immanence**; **monadic theology.**

transcendent. See **transcendence.**

Trinity. God as one God and three **persons**: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. See **classical Christian theism.**

Turretin, Francis. A Reformed theologian of the seventeenth century

who wrote an influential three-volume work on systematic theology, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*.

univocal. Having exactly the same meaning in each occurrence. Typically used in the context of describing language. See **equivocal**.

unmoved mover. One of **Aristotle's** names for a first cause. In some ways, it is like God because it is not caused by anything else and it always exists. But Aristotle's concept is not the same as the personal God of the Bible, who created all things and actively governs all things.

variation. The ways in which distinct instances of a unit can be different, while it still remains identifiably the same unit. See **contrast**; **distribution**.

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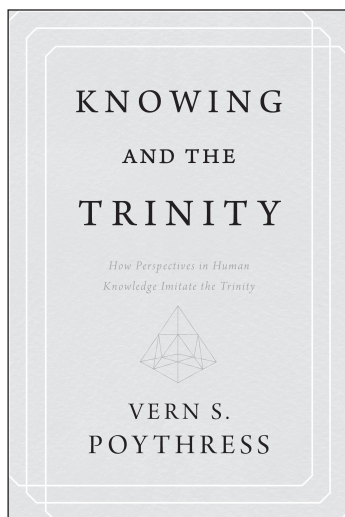
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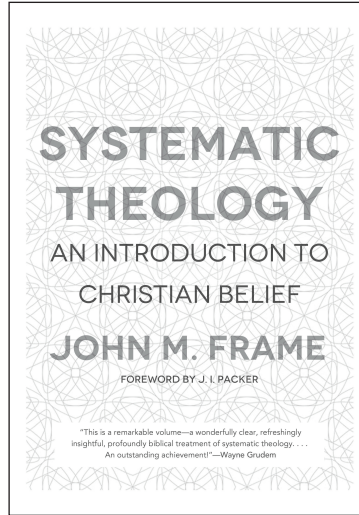


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