

A Most Unlikely God

*A Philosophical Enquiry
into the Nature of God*

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Discordant Views of God's Nature

A time-honoured procedure for discussing God's nature¹—what he is like, how he differs from creatures—has been to settle upon some controlling notion to use as the yardstick against which to judge what can or cannot be said of God. For contemporary perfect-being theologians, or Anselmians, that notion has been of God as the perfect being, for Moses Maimonides the notion of God as One, for Aquinas the notion of God as Subsistent Existence, and for Leibniz it seems to have been a matter of indifference as to whether he used the notion of a perfect being (as he did in connection with his ontological argument) or of a First Cause (as he did in connection with his cosmological argument). With this general procedure I have no quarrel, and shall in fact be using it myself. There are, however, two obvious ways in which it can go wrong. One is in the choice of the controlling notion, and the other is in the application of that notion to specify the divine attributes. Since perfect-being theologians, or Anselmians, provide an example of the first mistake, and negative theologians of the second, it will be instructive to examine each of them before attempting to tread once more the path along which even some eminent thinkers have often stumbled.

Perfect-Being Theology

In challenging the controlling notion of God employed by perfect-being theologians, I have no wish to deny that he is indeed the absolutely perfect being. What I shall be denying, however, is their particular understanding of that notion. Aquinas, for example, understands a perfect being as *Actus Purus*, a being devoid of all potentiality; Maimonides conceives of it as One, a being

1. True, Alvin Plantinga has concluded that God has no nature. Cf. his *Does God have a Nature?* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1980). Later, however, I shall be arguing that his case is vitiated by a serious misunderstanding of the divine simplicity.

'without any composition or plurality of elements'; but Anselmians understand it as a being having the maximally consistent set of great-making properties or perfections. Whether the Anselmians' view is acceptable, however, depends on what they mean by a perfection. As explained by Morris, it is a property that fulfils the following conditions:

- 1.01. It is better to have than not to have.
- 1.02. It may vary in degree.
- 1.03. It is 'constituted by the logical maximum of an upwardly bounded, degreed great-making property.'² Omnipotence and omniscience are offered as examples.

The procedure for determining which great-making properties belong to God could hardly be simpler, namely, if having property *P* 'contributes to the excellence of a thing that does have *P*, then an absolutely perfect being has *P*, otherwise the being does not have *P*.'³ Among those that pass the test are omnipotence, omnibenevolence, omniscience, and indeed all the perfections.

The Anselmians' notion of a perfection has immediate implications for their understanding of God's transcendence over his creatures. They succeed in setting him well apart from his creatures, many of which may perhaps have great-making properties but no one of which would have even one of them to the maximum degree possible. On this view, the gulf between God and creatures would therefore be wide, and perhaps unimaginably so, though it would not constitute an absolute divide. It is difficult to see how it could be more than a difference of degree, since the terms indicating his properties—'powerful,' 'knowing,' 'loving,' 'merciful,' 'generous' and so on—seem to be used univocally of God and creatures. True, when applied to God, those terms are often qualified as 'maximally powerful,' 'all knowing,' 'infinitely merciful,' 'unsurpassably generous,' but the qualifiers do nothing to change the sense of the terms they qualify. Hence, the role of 'maximally,' 'all,' 'infinitely,' and 'unsurpassably' cannot be that of *alienans* adjectives⁴ like 'decoy' in 'decoy duck,' or

2. T. Morris, *Anselmian Explorations* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987), 21.

3. G. Schlesinger, *New Perspectives on Old-Time Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 16.

4. An *alienans* adjective is an adjective which changes (i.e. alienates) the sense of the nouns it qualifies, as is evident from the examples in the text. From the fact that an object is a decoy duck, one cannot infer that it is a duck, though that is just what one could infer from the fact that an object is a brown duck. Again, one cannot infer that the phenomenon of negative growth is growth, though one can indeed infer that fast (or slow, or erratic) growth is growth. On a number of occasions throughout the book I shall have occasion to draw attention to the importance of recognizing some adjectives as *alienans* ones.

'negative' in 'negative growth,' each of which does serve to change the sense of the term it qualifies. Rather, they are merely superlatives, which of course leave quite intact the sense of the terms they qualify. Thus understood, God's properties are merely human ones, albeit extended to the maximum degree possible.⁵

As conceived of by perfect-being theologians, therefore, God turns out to be simply the greatest thing around, some kind of super-being that would be quite capable of evoking admiration and wonder, but who could scarcely be described as being absolutely transcendent, or as being worthy of worship. The point is that the terms that perfect-being theology predicates of God are being used in precisely the sense that ipso facto precludes their being predicated of a God who is *absolutely* transcendent, since it is a sense in which they could equally be predicated of creatures. The difference between creatures and any God of whom they really could be predicated would therefore be simply one of degree. Although this may seem to be a hard saying, it follows straightforwardly from the fact that absolute transcendence cannot be attained merely by extending human attributes to whatever degree is deemed to be 'maximal.' The Anselmians' God is therefore anything but ineffable, for not only can we talk about him, we can do so in precisely the same terms as those we use in talking about humans. Such a view succeeds in presenting God in terms that are comfortingly familiar, but only at the price of being discomfitingly anthropomorphic.⁶

The Anselmians' notion of a perfect being has been presented as reflecting Anselm's own notion of God as 'that than which nothing greater can be conceived.' Underlying that suggestion, however, is the assumption that greatness

5. Although differing on many issues, process theologians and perfect-being theologians seem to be in broad agreement on at least two points, namely, the procedure for determining the (material) attributes, and the fact that such attributes are maxima. Thus, on the first point D. Pailin writes: 'The guiding criterion [for determining which material qualities are to be attributed to the divine] is that suggested by Anselm's perception that, as "the supreme Good through which every good is", God must have every good and so be "whatever it is better to be than not to be"' (p. 75). On the second point, he notes that 'although . . . it may not be possible to comprehend what it is to be "perfectly" loving, such a description suggests that in this respect God is to be considered as the ideal terminus of the range from hating to loving and from the less to the more loving' (p. 27). D. Pailin, *God and the Processes of Reality* (London: Routledge, 1989).

6. A view of God that differs to some extent from that of perfect-being theology is one that depicts at least some of God's properties as differing from human ones not merely in degree, but by way of specific difference. This view, however, is far from avoiding anthropomorphism altogether, since at least some divine and human properties would still be generically the same. William Alston is an advocate of this view in his "Divine and Human Action" in T. Morris, ed., *Divine and Human Action* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 259–80.

in any respect is to be understood in terms of a scale of more and less, with the greatest being at the maximum on that scale. Although the unfortunate consequences of the assumption are now apparent, it might well be asked whether it was unavoidable. Was there really any alternative? In fact, the alternative was to consider the possibility of the greatest being as not restricted to lying *on* any scale whatever—not even at the summit—but as that to which the items on the scale merely *point* or that towards which they merely tend to converge without ever actually doing so. In other words, what should at least have been considered was the possibility of the greatest *F* not being the final member in a series of members that were *F* to an increasing degree, not belonging to the series at all, but lying completely *outside* it. In that case, the greatest *F* would not be a maximum or limit *simpliciter* in an ordered series of *F*s, as Anselmians understand it to be. Rather, it would be the limit *case* of such a series. This is a distinction which I shall explain shortly, but only after indicating why perfect-being theologians are not the only ones to ignore it: negative theologians are no less at fault.

Negative Theology

At the opposite pole from perfect-being theology is the negative theology exemplified by Moses Maimonides, some of whose remarks make perfectly clear how he would respond to the claims of perfect-being theology:

[It should be said] that those who believe in the presence of essential attributes in God, viz., Existence, Life, Power, Wisdom, and Will, should know that these attributes, when applied to God, have not the same meaning as when applied to us, and that the difference does not only consist in magnitude, or in the degree of perfection, stability, and durability. It cannot be said . . . that His existence is only more stable, His life more permanent, His power greater, His wisdom more perfect, and His will more general than ours, and that the same definition applies to both. This is in no way admissible, for the expression “more than” is used in comparing two things as regards a certain attribute predicated of both of them in exactly the same sense, and consequently implies similarity [between God and His creatures]. When they ascribe to God essential attributes, these so-called essential attributes should not have any similarity to the attributes of other things, and should according to their own opinion not be included in one of the same definition, just as there is no similarity between the essence of God and that of other things. . . . the terms Wisdom, Power, Will, and Life are applied to God and to other beings by way of perfect homonymy, admitting of no comparison whatever.⁷

7. *The Guide for the Perplexed*, trans. M. Friedlander (New York: Dover Publications, 1956), 79–80.

The striking contrast between Anselmians and Maimonides in their understanding of the divine attributes reflects the chasm between their controlling notions of God, the former insisting on their idiosyncratic notion of what a perfect being should be, and the latter conceiving of a perfect being as ‘one in every respect, containing no plurality or any element superadded to His essence.’⁸ In saying that God is one, however, Maimonides is not attributing anything real and positive to him, for ‘God’s unity is not an element superadded, but He is One without possessing the *attribute* of unity.’⁹ Rather, he is saying merely that ‘there cannot be any belief in the unity of God except by admitting that He is one simple substance, without any composition or plurality of elements; one from whatever side you view it, and by whatever test you examine it; not divisible into two parts in any way and by any cause, nor capable of any form of plurality either objectively or subjectively.’¹⁰ From this, Maimonides concludes that in God there can be no positive attributes at all: ‘God’s existence is absolute. . . . Consequently, it is a false assumption to hold that he has any positive attribute.’¹¹

What, then, is to be made of the variety of attributes that we do in fact ascribe to the God who is One? How do they square with the ‘lack of plurality’ upon which Maimonides insists? In his view, the multiplicity of ascriptions reflects no plurality in God himself but only in his *effects*. For example, because wisdom and power in creatures are distinct divine effects, we may say that God himself is wise and powerful, though not meaning that he is in any way similar to those disparate effects, merely that he is *not* unwise and *not* powerless. That the divine wisdom in itself and the divine power in itself are not distinct from the divine essence is something that must be affirmed, even though this lack of distinction utterly transcends all human understanding.

All this having been said, it has nevertheless to be recognized that a negative theologian could quite consistently make such affirmations as ‘God is powerful and knowing and willing,’ provided that it were interpreted not as a triple affirmation of what God is but merely as the triple *denial*, ‘He is neither powerless, not inattentive, nor negligent.’ Similarly, to say that God is wise or merciful or intelligent would be to say that neither human wisdom, nor human mercy, nor human intelligence bears any resemblance to anything to be found in God. Indeed, no real property could legitimately be attributed to God except it be understood in these purely negative terms:

8. *Ibid.*, 72.

9. *Ibid.*, 80. My emphasis.

10. *Ibid.*, 69.

11. *Ibid.*, 82.

Since it is a well-known fact that even that knowledge of God which is accessible to man cannot be attained except by negations, and that negations do not convey a true idea of the being to which they refer, all people, both of past and present generations, declared that God cannot be the object of human comprehension, that none but Himself comprehends what He is, and that our knowledge consists in knowing that we are unable truly to comprehend Him.¹²

In regard to what God is, therefore, Maimonides holds that we are irredeemably ignorant. This view is not restricted to some mediaevals but has much in common with the contemporary Keith Ward's 'fairly radical agnosticism about the being of God,' and his claim that 'one characterizes God in the way which evokes an appropriate attitude in man, not in the way which describes his inner being most correctly.'¹³

Finally, lest negative theology be misunderstood as denying *all* positive properties to God, we should be clear that it denies only those that are real rather than Cambridge.¹⁴ Thus, such positive attributions as 'God was worshipped by the Israelites' or 'God is praised by some people, but derided by others' are quite acceptable to negative theologians; for being worshipped, praised, or derided are properties that need make no difference whatever to their objects. Nor, in the opinion of many mediaeval philosophers, are God's creating, sustaining, or intervening in the Universe any more than merely Cambridge properties: they are said to make no more difference to him than his being worshipped or praised. Since Maimonides himself was of that view, he would have no objection to such positive attributions as 'God is the creator of the Universe' or 'God is the sustainer of the Universe' or 'God brings about such-and-such in the Universe.'

Negative theologians and Anselmians have now presented us with two radically opposed notions of God and his attributes. On the one hand, there is a God so lacking in plurality as to be marked by no internal distinctions whatever; on the other hand, a God so riven with distinctions, so character-

12. *Ibid.*, 84–85.

13. K. Ward, *The Concept of God* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1974), 156–57.

14. This point is overlooked by Morris (*The Concept of God* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987], 11) in his attempt to show that negative theology is 'self-defeating', on the grounds that at least one property is shared by God and humans, namely, 'the property of having properties not shared by some being with a different ontological status.' Since this property is merely a Cambridge one, negative theologians can acknowledge it without any inconsistency.

ized by plurality, as not to be identical with all his attributes, nor they with each other.¹⁵ On the one hand, a God so far from being anthropomorphic as to be shrouded in the negations of human properties; on the other hand, a God so anthropomorphic as to be describable by predicates which remain basically human ones, even when qualified by the likes of 'maximally' as in 'maximally wise' or 'omni' as in 'omniscient' or 'unsurpassably' as in 'unsurpassably generous.'

I remarked earlier that perfect-being theology is an example of what happens when one's thinking about God is controlled by a notion of him that is defective. In Maimonides' basic notion I find no defect, and shall in fact be defending it against those who regard it as thoroughly objectionable. The defect I do find in him is merely with the use he makes of that notion, not with the notion itself. In assuming that God's absolute transcendence precludes our ascribing any real properties to him, Maimonides ignores the fact that there is at least some similarity between a limit case and its corresponding limit simpliciter or maximum, notwithstanding the absolute difference between them. Despite the radical opposition between Maimonides and the Anselmians, therefore, the flaws in their positions have at least one common root, namely, their neglect of the distinction between limit simpliciter and limit case, a distinction that hitherto I have merely mentioned but shall now explain.

Notions of Limit Simpliciter and Limit Case

A basic difference between a limit simpliciter and a limit case is that the former differs merely in degree from that of which it is a limit simpliciter, whereas the latter differs absolutely from that of which it is a limit case: the limit *simpliciter* of an *F* is an *F*, whereas the limit *case* of an *F* is decidedly not an *F*. Consider, for example, the speed of moving bodies. As we are told, the upper limit on their speed is the speed of light. This is a limit simpliciter. Although we might be inclined to think that their speed has also a lower limit simpliciter (0 km/s), we should be wrong, for it is merely a limit case. Indeed, there is no lower limit simpliciter, since there is no speed below which there could not be a still lower speed. An obvious difference between the lower limit case and the upper limit simpliciter of the speed of moving bodies,

15. Only a few perfect-being theologians would deny these distinctions, though, in my view, such denial is not consistent with perfect-being theology.

therefore, is that the upper limit simpliciter is indeed a speed (300,000 kms per second) whereas the lower limit case is not a speed at all.

First-level predicables provide a further example of this difference. It may be theoretically possible, even if practically useless, for them to have any number of gaps. Purely for purposes of illustration, however, we might restrict the gaps to four. In that case we could have the following series:

4-place predicable, 3-place predicable, 2-place predicable, 1-place predicable

A 1-place predicable is a limit not because its gap is ineliminable, but because any expression formed by eliminating the gap would not be a predicable in any univocal sense of that term. A 1-place predicable is that member of a series of predicables beyond which no expression could be a predicable: it is a limit simpliciter. Nevertheless, we can see perfectly well what would happen if that last gap were in fact to be eliminated. The resulting expression has sometimes been called a 'zero-place *predicable*' even though it is no more a predicable than negative growth is growth.¹⁶ It is in fact a proposition, albeit one that is logically simple in the sense of having no *sub*-propositional parts whatever.¹⁷ By eliminating the last trace of what makes a predicable a predicable, we get an expression that is not a predicable but an expression with a truth-value, namely, a proposition. This is a *limit case* predicable: unlike the limit simpliciter, it is not a member of the series of which it is the limit case. However, although not belonging to the series, it is not totally unrelated to the members, since it is they and the way in which they are ordered that point to this limit case: although different in kind from the series' members, it is that towards which those members do point.

Similarly in regard to a point: although differing in kind from the ordered members of a series of ever shorter lines, it is that towards which the series points. Similarly, too, in regard to a line, since it differs in kind from the ordered members of a series of ever narrower surfaces, but is that towards which the series points. Similarly again in regard to a circle, since it differs in kind from the ordered members of a series of regular polygons¹⁸ with ever

16. As used in 'zero-place predicable' and in 'negative growth', the terms 'zero-place' and 'negative' are functioning as *alienans* adjectives.

17. Cf. my "Logically Simple Propositions," *Analysis* 34 (1974): 123-28, where I argue that it is not contrary to the nature of propositions that some should have no sub-propositional logical parts (neither subject nor predicate, first-level predicable nor second-level predicate), and where I offer some everyday examples of such propositions. For a briefer account, see the Appendix to chapter 8.

18. A polygon is regular if all its sides are equal. Otherwise, it is irregular.

more sides, but is that towards which the series clearly points. Thus, the limit case of a line is not a line but a point, the limit case of a surface is not a surface but a line, the limit case of a regular polygon is not a polygon but a circle, and the limit case of a series of first-level predicables is not a predicable but a proposition.

It may now be intuitively, even if obscurely, evident what would count as a limit case and what would not. In an attempt to dispel something of the obscurity, let me list the various series for closer examination:

- 1.04. . . . 4-place predicable, 3-place predicable, 2-place predicable, 1-place predicable. The limit case is a zero-place predicable (a proposition).
- 1.05. regular polygon with sides turning by $360/3$ degrees at its vertices, one with sides turning by $360/4$ degrees, one with sides turning by $360/5$ degrees, . . . one with sides turning by $360/n$ degrees. . . . The limit case towards which these polygons converge is one in which there are *no* angles (a circle).
- 1.06. 1 metre line, .5m line, .25m line, .125m line. . . . The limit case is a 0m line (a point).
- 1.07. 1m-wide surface, .5m-wide surface, .125m-wide surface. . . . The limit case is a 0m-wide surface (a line).

About the first series it is clear that no member is either more or less a predicable than any other member, nor is any member of the second series either more or less a regular polygon than any other, and similarly for the other series. In general, a series of *F*s is ordered according to the *degrees* of *F*-ness had by its members, which are all equally *F*. In no case, however, can the limit case be a member of that series, for it is not an *F* at all.

What, then, is the basis on which the members are ordered? They are ordered according to variations in a defining characteristic. A defining characteristic of a first-level predicable is that it be attachable to one or more proper names to form a proposition. A defining characteristic of a regular polygon is that it be equal-sided or equiangular, of a line that it have length, of a surface that it have breadth. Note, therefore, that the first series is ordered according to variations in the number of proper names required to form a proposition with the predicable, the second according to variations in the number of sides or in the sizes of its angles, the third according to variations in length, the fourth according to variations in breadth.

And what is the limit case in such series? In each one of them it is that in which a defining characteristic of the members has been varied to the point

of extinction; and an *F* from which a *defining* characteristic is absent is obviously not an *F* at all. In general, if there is a limit case to an ordered series of instances of *F*, the limit case itself will not belong to the series, for there will be an absolute difference between it and the members of that series. It will no more be an instance of *F* than a rocking horse is a horse, or negative growth is growth, or a decoy duck is a duck. Consequently, the term 'limit case' in 'limit case instance of *F*' functions as an *alienans* adjective like 'rocking' in 'rocking horse'. 'Limit simpliciter,' on the contrary, is *not* an *alienans* adjective in 'limit simpliciter instance of *F*'. Likewise, the term '1-place' in '1-place predicable' is not an *alienans* adjective, although the term 'zero-place' is.

To have understood the discussion of limit cases is to have understood that the absolute difference between the members of a series of *F*s and their limit case does *not* entail that the relationship between them is merely a matter of convention. Clearly it is not; otherwise, there could be no objection to allowing the limit case of a series of *F*s to be interchangeable with the limit case of a series of *G*s, e.g. that the limit case of a series of predicables be interchangeable with the limit case of a series of polygons. Precisely this non-interchangeability makes it clear that there is at least some similarity between a limit case of a series and the members of that series.

In failing to understand that there is some kind of similarity between members of a series and their limit case, perfect-being theologians and negative theologians alike have ensured the falsity of their claims about the nature of God. Perfect-being theologians did so by ignoring the possibility of there being anything similar to, but *beyond*, the maximum of a series of *F*s. Maimonides did so by not recognizing the possibility of some *likeness* between that entity and the members of the series beyond which it lay.

An obvious lesson to be learned from the errors of perfect-being theology and negative theology is that no enquiry into the divine nature can afford to repeat their sins of omission. On the contrary, any notion that is assigned the controlling role in our understanding of God will have to be one that does justice to the distinction between limit cases and limits simpliciter. Is there such a notion? I shall be arguing that there is, and that it is in fact the notion of a God whose role as creator of the Universe requires that he be identical with his existence. This is the classical notion of God as *ipsum esse subsistens* or Subsistent Existence, for whose existence I argued in *From Existence to God*. It is also, by implication, the notion of a God who is simple. And, as I shall be arguing in the present work, although the notion of a simple God admittedly makes no sense whatever in terms of limits simpliciter, it makes perfectly good sense in terms of limit cases.

Divine Simplicity

What, then, is the doctrine of divine simplicity? Briefly and most generally, it is the claim that in God there is no composition of any kind whatever. More particularly, and according to Aquinas,¹⁹ there is in God no composition between material parts, none between form and matter, none between essence and existence, none between essence or nature and anything to which it might be ascribed, none between genus and difference, nor any between individual and properties. These are negative claims of which Maimonides would obviously have approved. Positively, however, the divine simplicity means that God is identical with his existence, his nature, and his real properties (though not with his Cambridge properties). Of all these claims the most basic is that of God's being identical with his existence, i.e. his being Subsistent Existence. From it all the others could be derived, and most importantly the identity between God and each of his attributes.

Not unexpectedly, the notion of a completely simple God has elicited widely diverse responses. Perhaps the most common is one of incredulity at the suggestion that his existence, knowledge, wisdom, power, and other attributes are all identical with God himself and, hence, with each other. Some have dismissed it as incoherent, adding that, even it were not, it would reduce God to the level of a property. How could his wisdom be the same as his mercy, or his mercy the same as his justice, or his intelligence the same as his power, and each of them the same as each other? How could those identities which are quite impossible in creatures be any the less impossible in God? Such critics describe the doctrine somewhat unflatteringly as guilty of 'sophistry and illusion,'²⁰ as 'flouting the most fundamental claims of theism,'²¹ as unable to be construed 'in such a way that it fails to come out as necessarily false,'²² and as failing to 'escape from a devastating atheological argument.'²³

A second kind of response, and one endorsed by Brian Davies, attempts to divert such harsh criticisms by interpreting talk of divine simplicity as 'a piece of negative or apophatic theology and not a purported description of

19. *Summa Theologica*, I, 3.

20. A. Kenny, *Aquinas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 60.

21. A. Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1980), 54.

22. C. Hughes, *On a Complex Theory of a Simple God* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 5.

23. R. Gale, *On the Nature and Existence of God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 29.

God. . . its aim is to tell us the set of conclusions about God which are *not* to be drawn. And one thing being said by it is that God is not to be thought of (cannot be known) as something with properties distinguishable from each other, or as something we can conceive of as distinct from the nature we ascribe to it.²⁴ Keith Ward, too, denies that the doctrine of the divine simplicity 'tells us anything positive about God at all.'²⁵ Thus interpreted, however, the doctrine would be rendered quite innocuous, since it would avoid saying anything about what God is, while saying a great deal about what he is not. But this, I shall be arguing, is effectively to eviscerate the doctrine, which admittedly has implications for what God is not, but only because it has something significant to say about what he is.

My own response is to rebut the criticisms not by interpreting the simplicity doctrine's claims negatively, but by showing that, when the identity claims are understood to be between limit cases rather than between limits simpliciter, they can not only be interpreted positively but are proof against the incredulity and perplexity which the doctrine has so often evoked. I mention the following merely as an advance sample of how some of the otherwise baffling identity claims are to be understood in terms of limit cases:

- 1.08. 'God is his existence' is to be understood as: 'The limit case instance of an individual = the limit case instance of existence.'
- 1.09. 'God is identical with his *F*-ness' is to be understood as: 'The limit case instance of an individual = the limit case instance of *F*-ness.'
- 1.10. 'God's *F*-ness is identical with his *G*-ness' is to be understood as: 'The limit case instance of *F*-ness = the limit case instance of *G*-ness.'

To explain and defend these and other identity claims, will be the work of later chapters from which it will emerge that claims, which would have been untenable had they been about *non*-limit cases, are in fact quite tenable when they are about *limit* cases.

Although it is important to explain how the divine simplicity itself is to be understood, it is perhaps the implications of that doctrine that will be the most telling in impressing upon us just how radical is the difference between

24. B. Davies, "The Doctrine of Divine Simplicity" in his (ed.) *Language, Meaning and God* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1987), 59 (my emphasis). Likewise, D. Burrell argues that to say that God is simple is 'a way of remarking that no articulated form of expression can succeed in stating anything about God' (D. Burrell, *Aquinas: God and Action* (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), 18. Although Davies regards the simplicity doctrine as a piece of negative theology, he is not a negative theologian tout court. I say this because he does allow analogical predicates to be said of God, though for reasons that are quite independent of his views on divine simplicity. The same is true of Burrell.

25. Ward, *The Concept of God*, 158.

God and creatures, and what it means to say that his transcendence is nothing less than absolute. A quite basic difference is that, whereas creatures have abilities, capacities, and potentialities, a simple God has none whatever. It is not merely that all his abilities are never less than fully exercised, his capacities never less than fully extended, and his potentialities never less than fully actualized. Rather, it is that he has no ability to exercise, no capacity to extend, nor any potentiality to actualize. It is therefore a nonsense to regard him as having any ability or capacity to do or be *F*, no matter what *F* might be. Nor, of course, does it make any more sense to say that he had any *inability* or *incapacity* to do or be *F*. The point is that the dichotomies ability/inability, capacity/incapacity, potentiality/nonpotentiality are no more appropriate to God than the dichotomy moral/immoral is to a raindrop. This means that we cannot say 'God can (or cannot) do or be *F*.' What we can and ought to say is, 'It can (or cannot) be that (God do or be *F*).' Unlike creatures, therefore, the only necessity or possibility applicable to God is not *de re* but *de dicto*.

Likewise, it makes no sense to say that a simple God can change: he is immutable, though not of course inactive. As for his power, he is unlike creatures in never exercising it *on* anything, and thus his activity is never anything but creative. This means that, in talk about his causation, the causal operator should always be used externally. For example, not 'God makes the Universe exist' but 'God makes it be that (the Universe exist),' not 'God acts on individual *X* to bring about *F*' but 'God brings it about that (*X* do *F*).'

At first sight, the emphasis on various aspects of God's otherness might seem to paint us into a corner since, in trying to say that God is so different from creatures as to be self-existent, identical with all his attributes, and not an individual, we find that the only language available to us is one that is applicable to things that are *not* self-existent, *not* identical with their attributes, and *are* individuals. Thus, we seem constrained to a silence, which could be broken only by retreating to the Anselmians' practice of attributing to God qualities that differ merely in degree from those had by humans. This difficulty would not arise if God-talk were restricted to saying about God something either merely negative, or merely relational, or both, e.g., if 'God is wise' were interpreted either as saying no more than 'God is not wise in the way that human beings are wise,' or as 'God is the cause of wisdom in creatures,' or both.²⁶ Nor would there be any difficulty if all God-talk were either

26. Although the few examples that I have given of God-talk are all predications—indeed, they are all predications employing *first*-level predicates—I use them not to suggest that all God-talk must be of this very basic kind, but simply because a grasp of more complex kinds of propositions presupposes a grasp of some atomic propositions, namely, those that enter into what Dummett calls the 'constructional history' of a proposition.

metaphorical or symbolic. It arises only for a God-talk which claims to be not only positive and often non-relational, but to be taken literally as well.

Although the problem would admittedly arise if the similarity in meaning between God-talk and creature-talk were one of univocity, it has been argued that there would be no problem at all if the similarity were less than univocity, i.e. if it were one of analogy. Opposing this move, however, critics are apt to maintain that if, for example, the predicates in 'Maria is intelligent' and 'God is intelligent' were to have any similarity of meaning at all, then there would have to be at least one respect in which the meaning of the predicate in the former was the same as that in the latter. But to admit even one respect in which they are the same would be to admit that they were univocal, and not analogical after all.

Although there is a ready reply to the last animadversion, an introductory chapter is no place in which to develop it. For the moment, suffice it to say that in chapter 8 I shall be arguing that the very simplicity doctrine that is alleged to preclude the use of God-talk in any positive and literal sense is, on the contrary, precisely the doctrine which also undergirds the analogical character of such God-talk. Moreover, it does so without detracting in any way from the divine transcendence.

The aforementioned consequences of God's being simple could have been expanded to include many others, notably in regard to the divine willing, the divine knowing, and the absence of any ability to choose in a God who is nevertheless free in regard to what he wills (other than his own goodness). Still, sufficient have been mentioned already to indicate why the simplicity doctrine is not merely some esoteric hypothesis of no practical significance, but is in fact quite central to our understanding of God's nature, his attributes, and the range of ways in which the absoluteness of his otherness is manifested. It is central, also, to an appreciation of the flaws that are endemic to perfect-being theology, negative theology, and process theology.

Before attending either to God's simplicity or to its distinctly arresting consequences, however, there is much to be done in chapters 2 and 3 in examining the role of existence as a real property of concrete individuals. An understanding of that role is a sine qua non for appreciating the much misunderstood, and hence much derided, notion of Subsistent Existence. And that, in turn, is basic to an appreciation of God's nature and simplicity.

2

Existence

To dispel the considerable misconceptions surrounding the notion of God as Subsistent Existence, there is a prior need to dispel the no less considerable misconceptions surrounding the rather more familiar notion upon which it depends.¹ I refer to the notion of existence as had by ordinary concrete individuals, about which three misconceptions are of particular concern:

- A. The claim that '____ exists' is not a first-level predicable:² it is not predicable of concrete individuals. But if '____ exists' cannot be predicated of concrete individuals, it makes no sense to speak of their having existence as a property.
- B. Moreover, even if (A) were false and '____ exists' were predicable of concrete individuals, existence would be no more than a Cambridge property:³ it would not be a real one.
- C. Even if (B) were false and existence were in fact a real property, it would be the most impoverished of real properties.

1. A not insubstantial part of this chapter has appeared earlier in my *From Existence to God* but is so basic to the present work that it needs to be repeated rather than merely referred to.

2. Following Geach, I say that an expression is a *predicable* if it *can* be attached to a subject, and a *predicate* only when it *is* so attached. Thus, in 'John lied in court' and in 'Whoever lies in court commits perjury' there are two occurrences of the one predicable, but only in the first case is it a predicate. The second case can be rendered as '(x)(x lies in court \supset x commits perjury)'; in which '____ lies in court' is not predicated of anything. Cf. P. T. Geach, *Reference and Generality* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 3d ed., 1980), 50.

3. Geach has coined the term 'Cambridge change' to distinguish changes like butter's rising in price from real changes like butter's melting. I am simply extending the application of the adjective 'Cambridge' from changes to properties. Being at two dollars a kilo would be a Cambridge property of butter, whereas being melted (i.e., liquid) would be a real property.