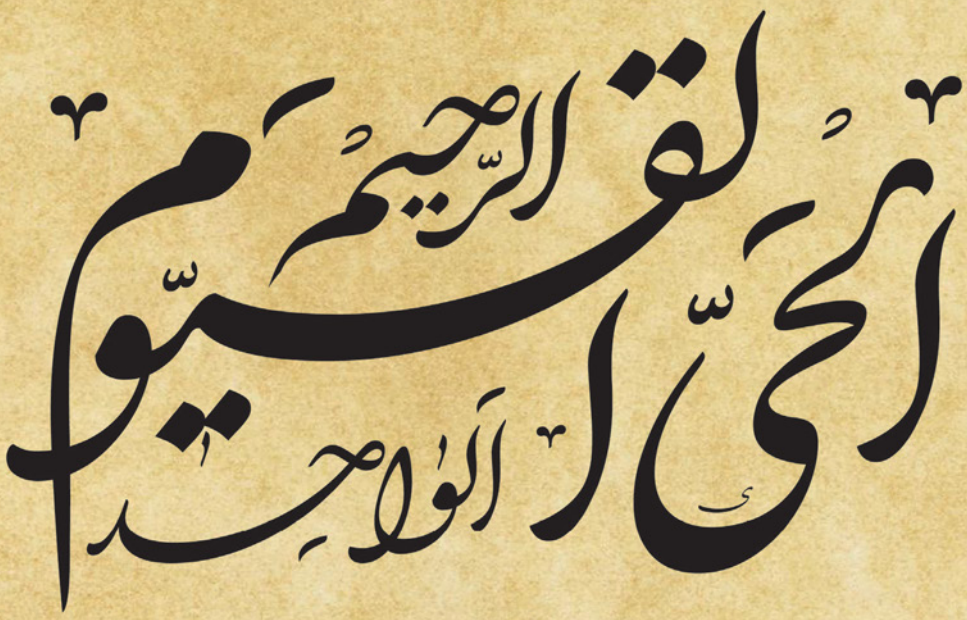
Describing God?

Christian and Muslim Approaches to the Divine Attributes in Dialogue

Klaus von Stosch | Lukas Wiesenhütter (Eds.)



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Describing God?

Beiträge zur Komparativen Theologie

VOLUME 42

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Table of Contents

Introduction VII
Lukas Wiesenhütter

PART I
Omnipotence and Omniscience

1 **Ibn Sīnā's Conception of Divine Omniscience** 3
Rahim Acar

2 **On God's Eternal Knowledge and the Problem of the Efficacy of Petitionary Prayers** 19
Ebrahim Azadegan

3 **Does God Know What Time It Is?** 33
Brian Leftow

4 **Divine Knowledge in Classical Shīʿī Theology: Divine Knowledge of Particulars and of the Present Time** 49
Muhammad Legenhausen

PART II
Justice and Mercy

5 **Justice and Mercy as a Paradoxical Task? The Perspectives of Friedrich Schleiermacher and Paul Ricoeur on Evil, Accountability and the Question of Reconciliation** 69
Maureen Junker-Kenny

6 **Human Suffering and the Riddle of Divine Goodness: Answers from the Book of Job** 87
Georg Gasser

7 **"Theodicy in a Vale of Tears": Towards an Islamic Theodicy of Protest** 107
Saida Mirsadri

PART III
Divine Simplicity and Divine Action

8 **Al-Ghazālī Against *al-Falāsifa* (the Philosophers) on Divine Simplicity** 137
Mehmet Sait Reçber

9 **Divine Simplicity and Divine Action** 155
Thomas Schärtl

10 **Divine Perfection and the Reality of God's Self-Disclosure: Are Mixed Relations Mixed Up?** 187
Alan J. Torrance

11 **Mullā Ṣadrā on God's Simplicity** 209
Reza Akbari

12 **Divine Attributes as a Subject of Comparative Theology: Conclusions** 221
Klaus von Stosch

Bibliography 237

Contributors 251

Introduction

Lukas Wiesenhütter

For the first time in church history, when a magisterial document referred to Islam in an appreciative manner, it did so by placing a particular emphasis on the divine attributes. The groundbreaking declaration of the Second Vatican Council entitled *Nostra Aetate* highlights various elements of the Islamic faith shared by Christians and Muslims: "They adore the one God, living and subsisting in Himself; merciful and all-powerful, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has spoken to men […]". After addressing the veneration of Jesus and his mother as well as the respected forms of piety, the text continues: "In addition, they await the day of judgment when God will render their deserts to all those who have been raised up from the dead." (NA 3)

This God is the one, the just and the merciful, and the omnipotent who has acted in creation and may be viewed throughout history as a common ground for the majority of monotheistic believers. However, describing God can also be regarded as a common challenge, that is, shared across religious boundaries. While the attributes of omnipotence and omniscience, justice and mercy, and simplicity and divine action are part of our constitutive traditions, their reconciliation with philosophical systems and the scriptural witness has never been uncontested. Jews, Christian and Muslim thinkers were drawing on Aristotelian and Neoplatonic thoughts to articulate their theologies and to bridge the gap between God's transcendence and action as the creator. Throughout history, they wrestled with the same problem of how the human language relates to the realm of the divine. Even during the formative time of scholastic theological systems, these debates were not confined to religious belongings. A well-known case in point is the influence by Ibn Sīnā on Thomas Aquinas.[1] Both thinkers continue to appear as prominent interlocutors in current approaches, as reflected in this volume.

In a sense, approaching the divine attributes today is seemingly particularly challenging due to the plurality of contemporary philosophical language games. For this matter, whether certain attributes should be upheld or if they need to be modified for the sake of the God witnessed in the foundational scriptures is not even uncontested. In this regard, the attribute of divine simplicity has been contested, because it is seemingly in tension with a God who is actively

1 Cf. David Burrell, *Knowing the Unknowable God. Ibn Sina, Maimonides, Aquinas* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986).

engaged in seeking a living relationship with creation. Similarly, omnipotence and omniscience have been questioned for a long time in terms of their compatibility with human free will. This debate has gained further momentum in the context of approaches to the problem of evil that is perceived as irreconcilable with the idea of an all-controlling being. This very problem also puts the attributes of justice and mercy into question. In addition, a long-standing Christian polemic exists that portrays grace and love as opposed to the notion of law, which is closely linked to the idea of justice. Traces of these apologetic moves can still be found although Christian political theologies have reemphasized the practical relevance of justice in recent decades. Alternatively, Muslim thinkers have raised the suspicion that Christianity pays scant attention to concrete justice and its application.[2] This history of polemics makes the question of how both attributes are understood in contemporary discourse a particularly pressing issue.

As particularly emphasized by philosophically informed theologies, staying loyal to the transcendence of God occasionally seems to be at odds with the scriptural witness and religious practice. When believers pray to God, they envision a living and personal relationship with God whom they hope may answer their prayer. If justice and mercy are not experienced realities, then the question must be raised if the divine attributes remain unconnected to the everyday use of the terms and are equivocally predicated of God.

A striking aspect is that these questions of how to perceive the divine attributes seem not so much to divide Christians and Muslims, as they lead us to revisit debates that are deeply rooted in *both* traditions. Instead of along denominational lines, a divide can be observed in various encounters between philosophical schools that shape utterances about the divine. Typically, contrasts are drawn between *analytical* and *continental* philosophers or defenders of *classical* as opposed to *personal* theism. In the footsteps of Greek thought, classical theists place a particular emphasis on the transcendence, immutability, and impassibility of God, while personal theists may employ a modern understanding of the term *person* when referring to God. This leads to the reconfiguration of God's relationship to time and history and prioritizes God's responsiveness to creation over the doctrine of impassibility. The same is true for versions of *free will theism* or *relational theism* that consider God's freedom and love as an axiomatic starting point that shapes the understanding of divine engagement with creation and the conception of divine attributes.

2 For example, Ibn Taymiyya raised such a critique, cf. Joshua Ralston, *Law and the Rule of God: A Christian Engagement with Sharīʿa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2020), 108–115.

While such contrasting pairs provide a helpful overview of the current theological landscape, they introduce the risk of leading to oversimplification and suggesting a priori incompatibility between them.[3] They also tend to underrate the diversity of approaches subsumed under one label. However, it frequently seems to be the philosophical framework instead of the religious belonging that leads to a varied understanding of God as the one, the just, or the merciful. This observation motivated the project documented in this volume. Following the method of comparative theology, Christian and Muslim theologians and philosophers discussed their and the approaches of others to the divine attributes. Thereby, a specific focus was placed on the potential role of analytical philosophy in this regard. The question that arose was whether or not analytical philosophy can provide a shared language that can help in communicating and translating between religious traditions? If such a communication were impossible, then a meaningful dialogue between faiths would be severely complex. The chances and limitations of this endeavor will be examined in the following contributions.

The first goal of the project was to reach a coherent manner of speaking about the divine that pays attention to tradition as well as the contemporary challenges in philosophy. What happens to a set of beliefs that is seemingly closely linked to the Neoplatonic heritage if the philosophical framework changes? The authors endeavor to explore the possibilities and limitations of bringing analytical philosophy into conversations with the classics of both religious traditions. This effort aims to build bridges in a twofold sense: namely, across philosophical approaches and religious faiths. Although the conceptualization and current relevance of divine attributes lie at the center of the following articles, they simultaneously address the underlying question: How is mutual understanding across cultures and faiths possible? Using analytical philosophy as a means of encounter across theologies does not intend to privilege one philosophical approach over the other. In fact, not all contributions gathered in this volume exclusively draw on analytical philosophy, and its limitations are explored as well. The project simply responded to the fact that analytical approaches are currently used in the theologies of both religions to reformulate traditional tenets in terms of contemporary philosophy. This aspect makes it worth exploring whether or not these attempts may help in facilitating a comparative approach to the common challenge of speaking

3 For example, consider the attempt to illustrate the compatibility of the "classical" divine attributes and the Biblical portrayal of God in Eleonore Stump, *The God of the Bible and the God of the Philosophers* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press 2016). Such an attempt adds complexity to a strict opposition of contrasting pairs.

about the divine attributes across religious traditions. This study employs the term analytical philosophy in a broad sense that does not equate it with claims to exclusivity or a certain stance on the question of metaphysical realism.[4] Instead, we understand it as a *style* that places a particular emphasis on the characteristics summarized by Michael Rea as, inter alia, focusing on formalized sentences, "precision, clarity, and logical coherence,"[5] and an avoidance of metaphorical speech. Despite differences, the authors of both traditions may follow (or reject) similar hermeneutical rules that could enable the fruition of such an encounter. Similarly, varying philosophical approaches may point out one another's blind spots.[6] Philosophical plurality will then not function as an obstacle to be overcome but as a potential enrichment in the quest of *faith seeking understanding*. The principle of charity that plays an important role in comparative theology is equally applicable to the encounter across philosophical frameworks.

The drafts of the papers gathered in this volume were presented during a summer school at the University of Paderborn in 2019 and an online workshop in 2021. As such, they are the result of an international encounter and engaged discussions of emerging scholars as well as experts from Protestant, Catholic, Shi'ite and Sunnite backgrounds. Throughout the workshop, Jewish colleagues joined and tremendously enriched the debates.

The first part of the book focuses on divine omniscience and its relationship with the other attributes, in particular, the omnipotence and transcendence of God.

Rahim Acar examines Ibn Sīnā's approach to the question how the divine attributes can be upheld and maintain awareness of God's transcendence at the same time. He points to the fundamental difference between human and divine knowledge when addressing the contested topic of whether or not particulars can be known by God who is characterized by the attribute of divine simplicity. Acar places a particular emphasis on the role of creation in this regard: in contrast to humans, God does not know things as existing independently; instead, God's knowledge makes everything exist in the first place.

Ebrahim Azadegan then confronts the teachings of divine knowledge and immutability with the Biblical and Qur'anic notions of an interactive God who

4 For this topic, cf. Michael C. Rea, *Essays in Analytic Theology: Volume I.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2020), 4.

5 Ibid., 3.

6 Such an encounter can involve a fruitful critique, too; cf. for the German-speaking debate Hans-Joachim Höhn et al. (eds.), *Analytische und Kontinentale Theologie im Dialog*. Quaestiones disputatae 314 (Freiburg: Herder, 2021).

is engaged in history and even repents previous actions. He discusses various philosophical attempts to make sense of the manner in which prayers can be considered efficacious. Azadegan argues for a concept he coined as the "argument from the efficacy of prayer," which leads to the view that God is not impassible, because God is active in responding to the needs of creation.

By asking the question, "Does God know what time it is?", *Brian Leftow* addresses the problem of the compatibility between the omniscience and atemporality of God. He also refers to Ibn Sīnā's thought to claim that, according to him, God cannot know what time it is just as an incorporeal God cannot possess sensual knowledge. While Leftow follows the argument by Avicenna, he points out that this is not equal to saying that God does *not know* a certain fact, because the *now* in question is dependent on one's standpoint in time.

Muhammad Legenhausen provides an instructive overview of the development of the Shiʿite discussions on divine knowledge and focuses on its compatibility with divine unity. He then proceeds to discuss the possibility of knowledge of particulars with reference to Ibn Sīnā's thought. Adding to the contribution of Acar, Legenhausen argues that the category of *knowledge by presence* is adequate for the description of God's knowledge of particulars that guarantees their existence at the same time. Finally, Legenhausen also addresses the question of whether or not God can know the present time as present. He points out that, in a certain sense, God does know what time it is, that is, what time it is *for humans*.

As exemplified by the contribution of Azadegan, the question of how God's knowledge relates to us can be of great importance to religious believers. In prayer, believers hope for a God who acts justly and merciful, as portrayed in the Hebrew Bible, Christ, and the Qur'an. Thus, the second part of the book addresses these two attributes.

By examining these attributes in the thought of Friedrich Schleiermacher and Paul Ricœur, *Maureen Junker-Kenny* critically engages the question posed by the project: To which extent can analytical philosophy be used as a common ground for dialogue between the monotheistic faiths? The author argues that the theological method applied should not neglect an understanding of religion in the context of the "practical options of life." Furthermore, she recommends that theology should engage in dialogue with other sciences and opts for a thought form that enables doing so. Finally, Junker-Kenny highlights the central importance of history – and God's actions in it – for the monotheistic faiths.

In his contribution, *Georg Gasser* introduces scripture and philosophy into the dialogue to approach the problem of suffering. By closely examining the suffering of Job and God's answer to him, he explores the difference between

personal and classical theism. Gasser argues that, according to the latter, God cannot be perceived as a moral agent in the manner of human beings. He then poses the question of how this view is related to the Biblical portrayal of God. In this regard, Gasser discusses a reading of the Book of Job that sheds light on God as the creator of human beings, who are longing for a moral order, and the natural realm that is not subject to such an order.

Similarly, *Saida Mirsadri* addresses the question of divine justice in the face of suffering. She criticizes the speculative attempts to solve the problem of evil in a theoretical manner; instead, she suggests an approach that focuses on practical reason. Inspired by the work of Navid Kermani as well as by modern Jewish and Christian responses to the question, she proposes an "Islamic theodicy of protest." For doing so, she engages with Islamic poetry, that is, in the works of Faridoddin Attar, Muhammad Iqbal, and Mehmet Âkif Ersoy.

One of the central attributes that is seemingly at odds with the view of God as responsive to creation is the attribute of divine simplicity. The third part of the book focuses on this doctrine and its relationship with divine action as well as the other attributes that were previously addressed.

Mehmet Sait Reçber explores al-Ghazālī's critique of the doctrine of divine simplicity as perceived by philosophers. He firstly presents the arguments put forward by Ibn Sīnā and al-Fārābī in its defense. Among the consequences of the tenet is the impossibility of providing a definition of God or to state that God has quiddity. He then illustrates how al-Ghazālī challenges this view, who, in turn, argues that denying quiddity is tantamount to denying reality. Furthermore, in his view, the position of philosophers would lead to the collapse of all divine attributes into one. Reçber explores the question about which ontologies operate in the background of the views proposed and highlights the remaining relevance of the critique by al-Ghazālī for current debates.

In his contribution "Divine Simplicity and Divine Action," *Thomas Schärtl* thoroughly discusses the strengths and weaknesses as well as the implications and potential metaphysical presuppositions of the doctrine of divine simplicity. He points out that it enables the articulation of God's transcendence and aseity in a clear manner and that it is closely linked to the theological use of analogical speech. He also provides a nuanced discussion of the implication of the doctrine for a consistent view of divine action.

Alan J. Torrance examines Christian resources for addressing God's perfection. He critically examines the classical doctrine of "mixed relations," which is closely linked to divine simplicity. According to this doctrine, creation holds a real relation to God, while God, in turn, has no *real* relation to creation. However, how does this view, as exemplarily held by Thomas Aquinas, relate to

the Biblical witness and to the event of the incarnation, which is witnessed as God's self-disclosure in history? Torrance discusses this question throughout his contribution.

Reza Akbari presents the different types of arguments by Mullā Ṣadrā for divine simplicity that describe God as the necessary being without any components. Toward this end, he addresses two philosophical frameworks, namely, quiddity- and existence-centered arguments, before his focus on the relationship between the attributes and essence of God in the thought of Mullā Ṣadrā. In this regard, the *principality of existence* plays a decisive role. Akbari claims that this core thought by Mullā Ṣadrā lacks philosophical justification; instead, it relies on metaphorical speech.

In his concluding remarks, *Klaus von Stosch* reflects on the comparative encounter documented in this volume and places it within the wide context of the debates on classical theism and free will theism. By pointing out disagreements and commonalities across authors, he demonstrates possible means of intensifying an interreligious learning process on the divine attributes that this volume attempts to initiate.

The John Templeton Foundation generously funded the project called "Building Bridges Between Traditional Thought and Analytical Philosophy – Rethinking Divine Attributes in Islam and Christianity." The publication of the results would have been impossible without the support of Leonhard Banowski, Julian Heise, and Katharina Holtmann, whom we thank for their efforts. We also thank the two anonymous reviewers for their valuable remarks. This project led to a fruitful exchange between students and emerging scholars from various countries and motivated a few of them to pursue further research on the divine attributes. We hope that the texts that generated these stimulating debates during the workshops will be equally thought-provoking for the readers of this volume.

Bonn in October 2024 Lukas Wiesenhütter

PART I

Omnipotence and Omniscience

Ibn Sīnā's Conception of Divine Omniscience

Rahim Acar

Ibn Sīnā's discussions concerning the divine attributes, and specifically divine knowledge as a perfection property, may be understood in the context of medieval Islamic thought. The challenge before Muslim intellectuals during the Middle Ages was to understand the Qur'anic verses about God, without violating divine transcendence and without making those verses devoid of meaning. Ibn Sīnā, more or less, shared the religious concerns as well as the rational/philosophical concerns of his fellow philosophers and theologians. The question before him was this: what properties can we attribute to God without violating rational coherence and divine transcendence? One can also modify the question in this way: how should we understand the properties predicated of God, in the scripture, in a rationally coherent manner? To be rationally coherent, in this context, means to be coherent with well-accepted philosophical theories of Ibn Sīnā's time. Thus, we see Ibn Sīnā's effort to explain divine knowledge as a perfection property in a way suitable to the philosophical theories of his time as well as to Islamic religious sources.

In this paper, I would like to discuss Ibn Sīnā's conception of divine omniscience paying attention to the limits of human knowledge about divine knowledge. First, I am going to state his position regarding our knowledge of God and His properties, so that we may be aware of the limits of our knowledge of divine knowledge. Secondly, I am going to explain how Ibn Sīnā predicates knowledge of God. This will help me to highlight that God's knowledge is in accordance with the way God exists. Finally, I am going to recall that according to Ibn Sīnā's conception of divine knowledge, the relationship between the knowing subject and the known object is just the opposite of human knowledge of other things. Following discussions on these three points, I am going to argue that Ibn Sīnā is consistent in his statement that God is omniscient, although divine knowledge of other things may not meet certain criteria that are applicable to human knowledge.

1. Articulation of Ibn Sīnā's Conception of Divine Knowledge

Ibn Sīnā acknowledged the limited and mediated character of human knowledge about the existence of God and His properties. Adopting the conception

of science that was dominant in his time, Ibn Sīnā maintained that different branches of knowledge make parts of a whole in which different parts are hierarchically ordered. Accordingly, each science has certain principles, or presuppositions (*mabādiʾ*), which are provided by a science prior to it in the hierarchy. Each science has a proper subject-matter (*mawḍūʿ*), which it investigates and explains based on its presuppositions. And it also has certain objectives (*maṭlūb*), which are supposed to be the end-results or culmination of its investigation into its proper subject-matter. Metaphysics occupies the highest position among the sciences. It is the foundation for all other sciences, it ultimately provides the principles or presuppositions of the other sciences.[1]

For Ibn Sīnā, since God is not the subject-matter of any branch of science available to us, our knowledge of God is quite limited. Our knowledge of God and the properties we predicate of Him is limited because we know God not in Himself, but on the basis of our investigation into the *existent qua existent*. In order for us to have proper knowledge of God, God must be the subject-matter of a branch of science, but God is not the subject-matter of any branch of science. For Ibn Sīnā, if God were the subject-matter of any science, it would be metaphysics. He argues that God and His properties are investigated in metaphysics. However, God is not the subject-matter of metaphysics. God is rather the objective of metaphysics where His existence is proven.[2] Metaphysics has the highest and ultimate place among sciences which are available to the human mind. In metaphysics God is not the subject matter but an objective. Since no other branch of science can investigate God as its subject-matter, for Ibn Sīnā, knowledge of God in Himself falls beyond human knowledge.[3] God is related to the proper subject-matter of metaphysics as the origin, or the principle. That is, the subject-matter of metaphysics is "existent qua existent," or "being qua being" (*al-mawjūd bimā huwa mawjūd*).[4] In metaphysics, we want to explain the existent with regard to its existence not with regard to anything

1 Ibn Sīnā, *Kitāb al-Shifāʾ; al-Ilāhiyyāt*, ed. George C. Anawati et al. (Cairo: Organisation Générale des Imprimeries Gouvernementales, 1960), I.1, 4–9. (hereafter Ibn Sīnā, *Ilāhiyyāt*). For a discussion of the distinction between the subject-matter of a science and its aim or obejctive, see Majid Fakhry, "The Subject Matter of Metaphysics: Aristotle and Ibn Sina (Avicenna)," in *Islamic Theology and Philosophy*, ed. Michael E. Marmura (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY, 1984), 137–47 (esp. 140).

2 Ibn Sīnā, *Ilāhiyyāt*, I.1, 5.5–6 and 16–19; 6.1–2 and 14–16. See also, Ibn Sīnā, *Ilāhiyyāt*, I.2, 14.14–17.

3 Ibn Sīnā's position regarding the subject-matter of metaphysics, whether God's existence is proved in metaphysics or physics, is different from that of Aristotle. Aristotle discusses the existence of the Unmoved Mover in book 8 of his *Physics*. For further discussion see Majid Fakhry, "The Subject Matter of Metaphysics: Aristotle and Ibn Sina (Avicenna)," 137–47.

4 Ibn Sīnā, *Ilāhiyyāt*, I.2, 13.8–13.

else. And in our attempt to explain the existent, we reach God as the principle of the existent qua existent.[5] Thus, we come to know the existence of God inasmuch as He is the origin, or the principle, of the existent, inasmuch as it falls within the confines of human knowledge, qua existent. In our investigation into the existent qua existent, God's existence is reached to explain the existents that need a principle in order to exist. In other words, in metaphysics, our investigation focuses on the existent qua existent. We try to explain the existence of the existent that falls within human knowledge. In order to explain why the existent exists, we reach the conclusion that there must be an existent that exists on its own, otherwise we could not explain the existence of the existent things that we know.

For Ibn Sīnā, the investigation in metaphysics concerning God, inasmuch as He is the origin of the existent qua existent that needs an origin, results in knowing that God exists and predication of negations and affirmation of relations to things, of which God is the origin. All those things, of which God is the origin, make up the universe. Hence, our knowledge concerning God's existence as well as His properties derives from our knowledge of the universe. On the basis of our investigation in metaphysics, what we can say of God, for Ibn Sīnā, is as following:

> If you truly ponder upon, (*ḥaqqaqta*) [you will see that] the first property (*ṣifa*) of the necessary of existence (*wājib al-wujūd*) is that He is something subsistent (*innun*) and an existent (*mawjūd*). Then comes other properties, in some of these properties this existence [i.e., necessary of existence] is identified (*mutaʿayyin*) by relation (*iḍāfa*); and in some of these, this existence [i.e., the necessary of existence] is identified by negation. None of them is, or can be (*wa laysa wa la*), necessitating in Himself (*dhātihi*) multiplicity, or differentiation (*muġāyara*).[6]

I need to clarify what exactly these negations and relations are, so that we can have a better grasp of what the divine knowledge is for Ibn Sīnā. We may safely assume that negations are based on the dissimilarity between God and creation. We negate certain properties that are found in creation. For example,

5 'Being the origin' is one of the sequels (*lawāḥiq*) of being qua being (*al-wujūd bimā huwa wujūd*), Ibn Sīnā, *Metaphysics*, I.4, 26.13–18. For further discussion about that God is not the subject-matter of metaphysics but God is investigated in metaphysics only insofar as He is the origin of the existent qua existent see, Rahim Acar, "İbn Sina'ya Göre Metafizikte Teolojinin Yeri," ["The Place of Theology in Metaphysics According to Ibn Sīnā"] in *Uluslararası İbn Sina Sempozyumu: Bildiriler II*., ed. Mehmet Mazak and Nevzat Özkaya (İstanbul: İstanbul Büyükşehir Belediyesi Kültür A. Ş., 2009), 161–69.

6 Ibn Sīnā, *Kitāb al-Najāt*, ed. Majid Fakhry (Beirut: Dāru'l-Āfāqi'l-Jadīdah, 1985), 287; see also Ibn Sīnā, *Ilāhiyyāt*, VIII.1, 354.11–14.

one may say, God does not have a body, God did not begin to exist, and God does not change. In these statements, "having a body," "beginning to exist" and "being changeable" are negated of God, because these properties are creaturely properties. They are negated of God, because God is dissimilar to creation.

The "relations," in this context seem to indicate the properties that are positively predicated of God *in relation to* creation. They may be understood as properties by which creation is related to God. They are the properties predicated of God with a positive connotation on the basis of our knowledge of things that make up the universe.[7] For example, "power" is predicated of God. God is said to be powerful, given the belief that the universe is created by God. This is, because making such complicated beings exist, with complex functions within the universe implies that the agent making the universe must have something similar to what we know as power. Thus, power is predicated of God *in relation to* creation. It is not predicated of God, on the basis of our knowledge of God in Himself, because we do not know God in Himself.

In a similar context, Ibn Sīnā describes human talk about God in terms of negative and positive relations. He emphasizes the difference between two situations: (1) God in Himself and (2) God as we know and predicate properties of Him:

> Know that when we say that or explain how the necessary being does not become multiple in any way, and His essence (*dhātuhu*)[8] is unique, intact, the pure real one, we do not mean by this that no aspect of existence is negated of Him. Nor do we mean that He does not have any relation to other aspects of existence (*wujūdāt*). This is impossible. This is because many different aspects of existence are negated of every being. Moreover, every being (*mawjūd*) has a relation (*iḍāfa*) and certain connection (*nisba*) to other beings. This is especially true in the case of the one from whom all being (*wujūd*) emanates. However, when we say that He is absolutely one in Himself (*dhāt*), and He does not multiply, we mean that He is as such [i.e., absolutely one] in Himself (*fi dhātihi*). In addition, if this [i.e., the statement about the unity of God] is followed by many positive

7 Some scholars also interpreted "relations" as simply indicating relations between God and creation. On this interpretation "relations" do not indicate any property found in God with some positive connotation. For a discussion of such an interpretation see, Rahim Acar, "Talking about God: Avicenna's Way out," in *Philosophy and the Abrahamic Religions: Scriptural Hermeneutics and Epistemology*, ed. Torrance Kirby, Rahim Acar and Bilal Baş (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), 192–95.

8 The Arabic term "*dhāt*" is usually translated as "essence," as opposed to "existence," or "being." However, this distinction between essence (*dhāt*) and existence (*wujūd*) is properly applicable to things that make up the universe. It is not applicable, in the proper sense, to God, who is self-necessary. For a recent discussion on this distinction see, Rollen E. Houser, "Essence and Existence in Ibn Sīnā," in *Routledge Companion to Islamic Philosophy*, ed. Richard Taylor and Luis Xavier López-Farjeat (New York, NY: Routledge, 2016), 212–22.

> (*ījābiyya*) and negative (*salbiyya*) relations (*iḍāfāt*) these are the necessary concomitants (*lawāzim*) of the essence (*dhāt*) [i.e., God's essence] and [they are] its (*dhāt*) effects. They follow the existence of the essence (*dhāt*). They are neither constituents (*muqawwimātun*) of the essence (*dhāt*), nor are they parts of it.[9]

Although God, in Himself, is absolutely one and simple, we predicate many properties of Him, based on His negative and positive relations to the necessary concomitants (*lawāzim*) of His essence (*dhāt*). The necessary concomitants make up the universe. What we predicate of Him, based on the necessary concomitants of His essence, does not indicate how God is in Himself. However, the properties that we predicate of Him are not simply made up by the human mind. This is, because what we properly predicate of God must be based on God's necessary concomitants. Thus, on the basis of our knowledge of the necessary concomitants of God, i.e. the universe, we negate certain properties of God and predicate certain properties of Him.

2. Why or How Knowledge is Predicated of God

The property of having knowledge falls in the category of properties that are predicated of God in relation to creation with positive connotation. Ibn Sīnā argues that God knows and is knowable by defining knowledge in terms of existence. He defines it on the basis of immateriality. Knowledge is the possession of a reality free from matter and material conditions. Considered in itself, the nature of existence and the nature of the divisions of existence are possible to be known (intelligible or intellectually apprehended) (*maʿqūl*). Only matter prevents existents from being known. Inasmuch as something is material, or exists under material conditions, it is not known, it cannot be intellectually apprehended, but only imagined, or perceived by senses. And inasmuch as something exists immaterially, or set free from material conditions, it is known, or intelligible. If the thing in question is free from matter essentially, then it is essentially knowable, or intelligible. Consequently, given that God is absolutely free from matter and material conditions, He is knowable, or intelligible, in Himself.[10]

The fact that God is pure being, free from matter and material conditions, does not only make God knowable in Himself, but also insures that God knows in the best manner. I would like to take your attention to Ibn Sīnā's famous

9 Ibn Sīnā, *Ilāhiyyāt*, VIII.4, 343.16–344.1–5.
10 Ibn Sīnā, *Najāt*, 280.

expression in this regard. He says, "God is an intellect/intellection (*ʿaql*), intelligent/*intelligizer*/ intellectual apprehender (*ʿāqil*) and intelligible/ intelligized (*maʿqūl*)"[11] all at once. We may also render it as "God is the act of knowing, the knower, and the object of knowledge." The term "*ʿaql*" and its derivatives have an ontological connotation as well as an epistemological one. God knows, because God is an intellect, an immaterial being. God's being an intellect, i.e., an immaterial being, as opposed to being something material implies that God is knowing, or an intellectual apprehender, and intelligible (*ʿaql-ʿāqil* and *maʿqūl*) all at once.[12] Thus, in God, being and knowing are identical, or God's knowledge is not different from God's being.

3. How Does God Know?

Divine knowledge must be in accordance with God's being, or God's mode of being. The properties that indicate God's mode of being may be called divine "formal" properties. They are reached by negating creaturely modes of existence. For example, God is said to be simple, by rejecting being composed of essence and existence. They do not indicate any definite property with a specific meaning as opposed to perfection properties.[13] They rather indicate *how God is* by negating some creaturely mode of existence. These formal properties serve to discriminate which "regular" properties are negated of God and which regular properties are predicated of God. They also govern, in a sense, how God's perfection properties are. They modify the meaning of properties predicated of God with a positive connotation in relation to creation. These formal properties, first and foremost, include simplicity, necessity and eternity.

God's eternity is one of the formal properties that modify how God knows. It implies rejection of temporality and changeability. For example, one may say, "since God is eternal, God is not changeable." One may also say, "since God is eternal, God's knowledge is not acquired through learning in time." Similarly, divine necessity implies rejection of contingency, changeability and being falsifiable. In the human case, our knowledge of a certain fact is contingent upon some conditions external to us, as well as changeable conditions that

11 Ibn Sīnā, *Ilāhiyyāt*, VIII.6, 357.4–5.

12 Ibn Sīnā, *Ilāhiyyāt*, VIII.6.6, 356.16–357.5 See also Ibn Sīnā, *Najāt*, 280.

13 For the distinction between formal properties and perfection properties and a discussion concerning the modification of perfection properties by formal properties, see David B. Burrell, *Knowing the Unknowable God: Ibn-Sînâ, Maimonides, Aquinas* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986), 46–50.

are internal to us, as the knowing subject. However, divine knowledge is not contingent at all, because, God is necessary, and everything else is the result of the divine knowledge.

Similarly, divine simplicity as a formal property that must be taken into account when knowledge as a perfection property is predicated of God. The meaning of knowledge must be modified in accordance with the divine simplicity. For Ibn Sīnā, divine simplicity seems to imply three things. (1) There is no distinction between divine existence and essence (*dhât*). (2) There is no distinction between God and the properties predicated of God, with a positive connotation, in relation to the universe. And (3) in God, there is no distinction among different properties that we predicate of God with a positive sense. The first implication of the divine simplicity is to reject the distinction between existence and essence. In conceiving creatures, human beings for example, we can safely distinguish between the existence of an individual human being and its essence or quiddity. Thus, we can conceive an individual human being, identifying all minute details of this individual. But the conception of that individual is different from its existence in reality. The second implication is to reject the existence of distinct properties and the subject holding those properties. In so far as we conceive a creature, none of the properties we associate with it is identical to it. The properties and the subject holding those properties are distinct. In this sense, divine knowledge is not something distinct from God or God's essence. As stated before, Ibn Sīnā defines knowledge in terms of being and identifies divine knowledge with the divine being. The third implication of divine simplicity is that God may not have multiple properties distinct from each other in the manner, that we experience as human beings. The perfection properties, which we predicate of God, are based on human knowledge of the necessary concomitants of one simple Being. However, the properties that we predicate of God on the basis of our knowledge of the concomitants of the divine essence may not exist in God, metaphorically speaking, in the way they are manifested in creation.

In accordance with divine simplicity, God has one act of knowledge. God's self-knowledge (*yaʿqilu dhātahu*), which is identical to His existence. For Ibn Sīnā, divine self-knowledge includes divine knowledge of other things.[14] God has one act of knowledge which comprises divine self-knowledge and divine knowledge pertaining to other things. Affirming multiple acts of intellectual apprehension of God would be the attribution of imperfection to God.[15] Simple intellectual knowledge in this sense is opposite not only to divisible

14 Ibn Sīnā, *Ilāhiyyāt*, IX.4, 402.13–403.1. See also Ibn Sīnā, *Ilāhiyyāt*, VIII, 7, 363.10–13.

15 Ibn Sīnā, *Ilāhiyyāt*, VIII.6, 359.11–12.

simultaneous multiplicity of acts of knowledge, but also to discursiveness.[16] Ibn Sīnā's distinction between things inasmuch as they are known by God and things inasmuch as they exist *in re* secures the simplicity. Ibn Sīnā distinguishes between divine knowledge of the intelligible forms of things and the existence of things on account of divine knowledge of them. Emanation of 'intelligible forms, insofar as they are understood by God', is something different from the emanation of things with intelligible forms existing *in re*. For Ibn Sīnā, since God's existence does not depend on the existence of other things, the existence, or more accurately the realization, of many intelligible forms *in re*, does not contradict divine simplicity.[17] Thus, Ibn Sīnā takes knowledge predicated of God as a perfection property, just as other perfection properties, as modified by divine formal properties.

4. Is God Omniscient?

Although Ibn Sīnā argues that God knows everything, one may reject his argument and remind divine simplicity, eternity and necessity. One may think that there must be a correspondence, or rather a correlation, between the knowing subject and the object to be known. Given the fact that only God is simple, eternal and necessary, it seems that God can know only Himself. This is because knowing many things would violate God's simplicity; and knowing changeable things would violate God's eternity. In fact, various thinkers during the Middle Ages and in modern times argued that for Ibn Sīnā God does not know particulars, for similar reasons. Before addressing the major objections to Ibn Sīnā's position in this regard, let me first explain how Ibn Sīnā tried to argue that God knows everything.

When discussing Ibn Sīnā's answer to the question if God is omniscient, we may distinguish between Ibn Sīnā's answer to the question "whether God knows all other things," and his answer to the question "how God knows other things." Ibn Sīnā justifies his answer to the question whether God knows other things, by confirming that God is the principle, or origin (*mabda'*) of all the universe. The existence of other things must be explained by divine knowledge, because their existence cannot be explained by a natural action. For Ibn Sīnā, as I tried to articulate above, God's knowledge does not have to be limited

16 Ibn Sīnā, *Ilāhiyyāt*, VIII.7, 362.17–363.4. For Ibn Sīnā's discussion of the simple knowledge in opposition to complex, or discursive, knowledge, see Avicenna, *De Anima*, ed. Fazlur Rahman (London, New York & Toronto: Oxford University, 1959) V, 6, 242.6–244 n.9.

17 Ibn Sīnā, *Ilāhiyyāt*, VIII.7, 366.1–7.

to self-intellection because the intelligible reality, or quiddity, present to the knower may be his own reality, as well as the reality of other things. God knows other things, because God's self-knowledge requires that God knows all things, of which He is the origin. Divine knowledge of other things includes them not simply as intelligible forms in God as their origin, but includes their existence *in re*.[18]

In order to understand Ibn Sīnā's conception of divine omniscience, one must pay attention to the fact that Ibn Sīnā takes God's creative activity into account. This is because creativity seems to reverse the relationship between God as the knowing subject and all other things as objects of knowledge. Since God's knowledge of other things is creative, it is not acquired from other things. For him, God is omniscient in the sense that God knows all that exists, whether material or immaterial, and everything that concerns existing things. God must know Himself by Himself, because He is essentially an immaterial being. And God also must know other things, because he is the cause of them. That is, if God did not know them to exist they would not exist. And God's knowledge of other things is not simply knowledge of isolated items which do not have any relation to other things. But God knows things "insofar as they are necessary in the order (*al-tartīb*) of the series (*silsila*) proceeding down from Him (*min ʿindihi*) vertically and horizontally."[19] We may interpret the vertical order as the series of essential causes of things beginning from God down to prime matter. The horizontal order may indicate the order of things, not only with reference to God, the essential cause of everything, but also with reference to their auxiliary and accidental causes, which precede and prepare the ground for (and accidentally contribute to) the existence of any given thing.[20]

Having looked at Ibn Sīnā's answer to the question "whether God knows everything," now let me recall his answer to the question "how God knows other things." In addition to the causal explanation of divine knowledge of other things, to support his argument that God knows everything, despite the fact that God is simple, eternal and immaterial, Ibn Sīnā came up with his famous, or infamous, formulation:

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18 Ibn Sīnā, *Ilāhiyyāt*, IX.4, 402.13–17. Cf. Beatrice Zedler, "Saint Thomas and Avicenna in the De Potentia Dei," *Traditio* 6 (1948): 121–22. Zedler misses the very point Ibn Sīnā is trying to make in this passage. Despite the textual counter-evidence, she equates Ibn Sīnā's conception of concomitance with acting by way of nature as opposed to acting by way of knowledge.

19 Ibn Sīnā, *al-Ishārāt wa al-Tanbīhāt*, ed. J. Forget (Leyde: E. J. Brill, 1892), VII, 181. In addition to these passages, see also Ibn Sīnā, *al-Taʾlīqāt*, ed. ʾAbd al-Raḥmān Badawī (Cairo: al-Hayʾa al-Miṣriyya al-ʿĀmmah li-al-Kitāb, 1973), 116–23, 152–56.

20 Ibn Sīnā, *Ilāhiyyāt*, VI.2, 265–66.

> the necessary being knows everything in accordance with the universal way. However, nothing individual escapes from Him. Even [things as small as] the weight of an atom (*mithqāla ḏarratin*) does not escape from Him in heavens and on the earth. This is a strange thing, one needs a fine genius (*qarīḥa*) to conceive it.[21]

Knowing "everything in accordance with the universal way" without leaving anything out is an enigmatic phrase. What is this universal way of knowing things which is – from Ibn Sīnā's perspective – suitable to the divine existence and which at the same time covers everything that exists? The universality, for Ibn Sīnā, seems to indicate that God's knowledge is (1) intellectual as opposed to being sense perceptual, (2) eternal and immutable as opposed to being temporal and changeable, and (3) one and simple even though it is inclusive of many things.[22]

How can this universal way of knowing include everything? Being an intellect, being simple, eternal and necessary may allow God to know universal propositions that do not relate to anything particular in a specific time and space context. But do they allow Him to know particulars, as particular things or events? This has caused debates among interpreters of Ibn Sīnā. In this regard, one may distinguish between general, universal propositions and existing things, which may exist forever, or may exist at some time. For example, propositions that are true forever, "man is a rational animal," "one molecule of water is composed of two hydrogen atoms and one oxygen atom." We can call this kind of propositions as general universal propositions. If they are true, they are true forever. These are either definitions or deduced on the basis of definitions. But they do not indicate anything about the reality, about the existence of things. One may argue that this kind of universal propositions are known by a simple, eternal and necessary being without any difficulty. However, when it comes to the knowledge of particulars, it is not easy to explain how a simple, eternal and necessary being knows them. Let us consider the following examples: "the earth revolves around the sun," "now there are ten people in this classroom," and "yesterday, it rained in Istanbul." How can a simple, eternal and necessary God know these particular things and events, simply, eternally and necessarily?

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21 Ibn Sīnā, *Ilāhiyyāt*, VIII.6, 359.12–14. This expression seems to refer to certain Qur'anic verses. *Qur'an*, Jonah X: 61; 1. Sheba xxxiv: 3.

22 Michael E. Marmura, "Some Aspects of Avicenna's Theory of God's Knowledge of Particulars," in *Probing in Islamic Philosophy: Studies in the Philosophies of Ibn Sina, al-Ghazali and Other Major Muslim Thinkers* (New York: Global Academic Publishing, 2005), 73–75.

In order to explain how such particular events and things could be known by a simple, eternal and necessary (unchangeable) God in the universal way, Ibn Sīnā argued that God knows particulars inasmuch as they have properties. Since God cannot have temporal and spatial relations to particular things or events, as they come to exist and pass away, knowing things that exist at a certain time and place in the universal manner cannot be acquired in a temporal and spatial context. Thus, Ibn Sīnā confirms that God knows them inasmuch as they have properties.[23] This expression that 'God knows particulars inasmuch as they have properties' is confusing. On the one hand, Ibn Sīnā acknowledges that without reference to the order of causes, particulars that happened to be part of reality at some time and some place cannot be rationally identified. Heavenly particulars, which are the only members of their species may be described in such a way that they are rationally identified. But such descriptions still require reference to their causes in order to insure that those descriptions correspond to some real particular. When it comes to particulars that are not one and only members of their species, no rational description depicting them is possible without pointing at them.[24] Since God does not have temporal-spatial relations to particulars, the option of pointing at particulars does not seem to function in explaining God's knowledge of particulars.

Thus, Ibn Sīnā's explanation of how God knows other things, i.e., particulars that make up the universe, did not sound credible to some of his interpreters. They concluded that for Ibn Sīnā God does not know particulars. For example, in his *Incoherence of the Philosophers*[25] (*Tahāfut al-Falāsifa*), al-Ghazālī examined Ibn Sīnā's claim that God knows other things through a universal knowledge (*'ilm kullī*). He argued that for Ibn Sīnā God does not know particulars, i.e., particular events and things. Underlining that God is not in time and in space, al-Ghazālī concludes that God does not know particular events. According to al-Ghazālī, on Ibn Sīnā's conceptual paradigm, God cannot know them because, God's knowledge is unchangeable and not temporal. But particular events occur only as part of the course of change. Knowledge of a particular temporal event requires a temporal relation between the knower and the known event. Without such a temporal relation, one cannot know events to take place at the time when they actually occur, or to be expected at any

23 Ibn Sīnā, *Ilāhiyyāt*, VIII.6, 360.1–3.

24 Ibn Sīnā, *Ilāhiyyāt*, VIII.6, 360.1–10.

25 Al-Ghazali, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, ed., trans. and annot. Michael Marmura (Utah: Brigham Young University, 1997). Regarding Ibn Sīnā's position on God's knowledge of other things, see also the articles included in this volume by Brian Leftow, "Does God Know What Time It Is?" and by Muhammad Legenhausen, "Divine Knowledge in Classical Shi'ī Theology: Divine Knowledge of Particulars and of the Present Time".

time before they occur, and to be over at any time after they occurred. God can know only descriptions of events, as part of the universal causal network.[26] However, for al-Ghazālī, particular events cannot be depicted by descriptions. Similarly, Al-Ghazālī emphasizes that particular things cannot be depicted by universal, rational knowledge, since rational knowledge may include only universal concepts that are applicable to many particulars. Thus, he argues that for philosophers, especially for Ibn Sīnā in this context, God does not know particulars, i.e., particular events or things.[27] Al-Ghazālī seems to translate Ibn Sīnā's claim that "God knows particulars in the universal way" into "God knows only universals."

A similar conclusion was drawn by Michael Marmura. He takes al-Ghazālī's argument a step further and extensively discusses the issue of the depiction of particulars by universal/ rational knowledge. He argues that "the corruptible particulars are not known individually by God. It is only their general features and their universal aspects that are known by Him."[28] To establish this claim, Marmura takes into account Ibn Sīnā's criteria for rational knowledge. For Ibn Sīnā rational knowledge is grounded on definition and individuals cannot be defined.[29] Since definitions apply to species, individuals that are the one and only member of their species can be rationally known, but not all particulars can be known in this way. Since corruptible particulars are not the one and only members of their species, the definitions of their species do not pick them out in their individuality. Individuals can only be described. However, descriptions, in turn, may apply to more than one definite particular.[30] Marmura reaches a similar conclusion regarding the knowledge of particular events as well. He argues that even though God knows individual celestial events, God cannot know particular events in the realm of generation and corruption. This is because while the former kind of events may be traced back to particular things which are the only members of their species, events in the realm of generation and corruption are not immediately attributable to entities which are the one and only members of their species.[31] Consequently, events in the realm of generation and corruption are not individually known.

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26 Al-Ghazali, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, 135–36, par. 5.

27 Al-Ghazali, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, 136–37, par. 6–7.

28 Marmura, "Some Aspects," 77.

29 Ibn Sīnā, Kitāb *al-Shifā; al-Burhân*, ed. Abū al-'Alā' al-'Afīfī and Ibrāhīm Madkour (Cairo: Ministry of Education, 1956), 69.12; 118.18–21; 170.17–171.5; 221.20–222.3.

30 Marmura, "Some Aspects," 78–83.

31 Marmura, "Some Aspects," 87. For further discussion on the reception of Ibn Sīnā's position on God's knowledge of particulars, see Rahim Acar, "Reconsidering Avicenna's Position on God's Knowledge of Particulars," in *Interpreting Avicenna: Science and*

The major problem with interpretations concluding 'that for Ibn Sīnā God does not know either any particular, or at least some particulars' seems to be a confusion of two parts of Ibn Sīnā's explanation regarding God's knowledge of other things. The first part concerns the question (1) whether God knows particulars, and the second part concerns the question (2) how God knows particulars. Scholars who argue that for Ibn Sīnā God does not know particulars seem to make effort to apply criteria of rational knowledge applicable to human knowledge of other things to evaluate the divine knowledge of other things. Ibn Sīnā strongly warns us that particulars cannot be rationally depicted. In the case of human knowledge of particulars, we know them with the help of our temporal-spatial relations to them. For example, one may indicate a definite object and say that "this is an apple," even though the concept of apple does not by itself indicate that this specific object is an apple. But in the case of God, as the simple, eternal and immaterial being, there cannot be any temporal-spatial relation between the knowing subject and the object of knowledge. Ibn Sīnā tried to underline that the relationship between divine knowledge and other things as the objects of His knowledge is just the reverse of the relationship between human knowledge and other things as the object of knowledge. He frequently warned that divine knowledge is not obtained from already existing things. To the contrary, things exist because and in the manner God knows them to exist.[32] But some of his critiques tend to take already existing things as the criterion of divine knowledge and keep discussing whether they

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Philosophy in Medieval Islam, ed. Jon McGinnis (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2004), 142–56. See also Rahim Acar, "Yaratan Bilmezse Kim Bilir: İbn Sînâ'ya Göre Allah'ın Cüzîleri Bilmesi" ["If the Creator Does not Know, Who Can Do it? Ibn Sīnā's Position on God's Knowledge of Particulars"], *İslâm Araştırmaları Dergisi* 13 (2005): 1–23.

32 Ibn Sīnā, warns against conceiving the divine knowledge of things as if it is acquired from already existing things. Ibn Sīnā, *Ilāhiyyāt*, VIII.7, 364.7–15. In his discussion on Ibn Sīnā's position regarding God's knowledge of particulars, Peter Adamson takes into account not only Ibn Sīnā's conception of demonstrative knowledge, but also his argument that God's knowledge of things is not acquired from independently existing things. Still he is reluctant to accept that God knows particulars, given Ibn Sīnā's appropriation of the Aristotelian conception of demonstrative knowledge. Peter Adamson, "On Knowledge of Particulars," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 105 (2005): 287–92. Ibn Sīnā does not seem to use the term knowledge in a univocal sense, when it is predicated of God and when it is predicated of human beings. However, he did not develop a clear cut theory of theological language to indicate the degree of similarity and dissimilarity of perfection properties when they are predicated of God and of human beings. But if one does not take into account the difference in the meaning of the term knowledge when it is predicated of God and when its predicated of human beings, Ibn Sīnā's explanations turns out to be quite confusing. The debates about his position regarding God's knowledge of particulars seem to be the result of interpreting his position on divine knowledge, as if Ibn

could be identified without having sense perceptual organs, or they could be identified at the intellectual level given Ibn Sīnā's criteria for rational knowledge, based on definitions. One may see some discrepancy between Ibn Sīnā's explanation of the existence of things on the basis of divine knowledge and his saying that God knows particulars inasmuch as they have properties, to answer the question 'how a simple and eternal God can know particulars.' However, this discrepancy does not justify neglecting Ibn Sīnā's conception of the relationship between divine knowledge of other things and their existence: God's knowledge of other things is the cause of their existence, it is not acquired from already existing things. It seems that these critiques of Ibn Sīnā ignore the first part of his explanation and focus on whether particulars could be depicted by rational descriptions as they exist *in re*. Taking things inasmuch as they exist *in re* as the criterion to judge, and asking if God could know them, would be like asking if God could acquire knowledge of them. I think, it is an unfair and futile engagement, since it implies demanding that divine knowledge of other things, including particulars, meets criteria that are applicable to human knowledge of other things. One may argue, in principle, that Ibn Sīnā's explanation of how a simple, eternal God could know particulars is not successful. However, one may not argue that for Ibn Sīnā God does not know particulars without ignoring his answer to the question whether God knows other things.

5. Concluding Remarks

To sum up, for Ibn Sīnā God is omniscient, because God knows Himself and the universe, i.e., everything other than God. Since God is an absolutely immaterial being, God knows and is knowable. God knows not only Himself but all that is required by Him. Since we do not know God in Himself, our knowledge of God and His properties is limited. As a perfection property, knowledge is predicated of God, but not exactly in the same sense as it is predicated of creation. When it is predicated of God, its meaning is modified by relevant divine formal properties, such as simplicity, eternity and necessity. Creativity must also be taken into account in this regard. This is because it modifies, to a great extent, how the divine knowledge of the universe is. It just reverses the relationship between the knowing subject and the known object. Thus, God's

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Sīnā predicates knowledge, as a perfection property, of God and of creation univocally, i.e., in exactly one and the same sense.

knowledge of other things is not acquired from already existing things, but things exist insofar as they are known by God.

Hence, we can say that for Ibn Sīnā God is omniscient, even though some of his interpreters claim that for Ibn Sīnā God does not know particulars. For Ibn Sīnā God knows Himself and his knowledge of Himself requires that he knows what he creates. His knowledge is not acquired from things, but makes things exist. However, God's knowledge of other things is according to God's mode of being. Indeed, there should not be anything surprising in this. It seems to be the case with the human knowledge of things as well. We know things under space-time conditions, identify them with reference to definite material conditions and represent them by images etc. However, it does not seem to be proper to expect human epistemological conditions be required of the divine knowledge of other things. Demanding that divine knowledge of other things must satisfy the criteria applicable to human knowledge in rationally depicting particulars seems to take human epistemic conditions as the absolute conditions of knowledge. Is it necessary to suppose that only human epistemic conditions provide rational knowledge?

If we take divine creativity into account, major objections of Ibn Sīnā's critiques turn out to be invalid. The conception of knowledge cannot have exactly the same meaning, when it is predicated of human beings and when it is predicated of God. As far as human knowledge is concerned, things existing out there, or events happening independent of human beings, function as the criteria to determine if a person knows them or not. The truth of human knowledge may be justified by its correspondence to the reality. However, when it comes to divine knowledge of things and events, God's knowledge of them is the criterion insuring the existence of things or the happening of events. The correspondence theory of truth is reversed, when it comes to divine knowledge of other things, since God is the creator of the whole universe. In the case of God's knowledge of other things, it is not verified by its correspondence to independently existing facts. To the contrary, the facts themselves simply exist in and indicate the way they are known by God.

On God's Eternal Knowledge and the Problem of the Efficacy of Petitionary Prayers

Ebrahim Azadegan

> The men turned away and went toward Sodom, but Abraham remained standing before the LORD.[23] Then Abraham approached him and said: "Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked?[24] What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it?[25] Far be it from you to do such a thing – to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?"
> (Genesis 18: 22–33)

> Abraham pleaded with us on behalf of the folk of Lot. Lo! Abraham was mild, imploring, penitent.
> (The Qur'an 11:74–75)

1. Introduction

If our theology entails that all matters of fact are predetermined by an omniscient and omnipotent God, then finding a satisfactory justification for petitionary prayers would be extremely difficult. If God has predetermined that such a state of affairs will occur, then what would be the effect of petitionary prayers on whether or not an event will occur? In the case that whether we pray or not will not make a difference then, why should one ask God for something that is not in God's plan to be actualized, or, if it will definitely be actualized, then what is the point of prayer? Either way, petitionary prayer is seemingly pointless. Eleonore Stump[1] and several other philosophers have formalized and criticized this type of objection to the effectiveness of petitionary prayer. The formulation of Stump begins with the premise that "a perfectly good being never makes the world worse than it would otherwise be if he can avoid doing so," and "a perfectly good being always makes the world better than

1 Eleonore Stump, "Petitionary prayer," *American Philosophical Quarterly 16*, no. 2 (April 1979): 81–91.

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it would otherwise be if he can do so." If what is prayed for is or results in a state of affairs that makes the world either worse or better, then the perfectly good being will not realize it in the case of the former and will definitely realize it even if no prayer for its realization has been made in the case of the latter.[2] The argument concludes that prayers are non-efficacious. Stump objects to this type of argument by demonstrating that the actualization of certain state of affairs is dependent on prayer, and God will withdraw its actualization if no prayer is offered for it even if the world would be better if it were actualized. The reason is that God decides to preserve freewill. He wants people to come to His friendship freely, overwhelmingly without being spoiled, distrusted, or disappointed. Stump mentions that to establish a truly friendly relationship with God,

> (oftentimes) … God must work through the intermediary of prayer, rather than doing everything on his own initiative, for man's sake. Prayer acts as a kind of buffer between man and God. By safeguarding the weaker member of the relation from the dangers of overwhelming domination and overwhelming spoiling, it helps to promote and preserve a close relationship between an omniscient, omnipotent, perfectly good person and a fallible, finite, imperfect person.[3]

Therefore, Stump concludes that the classic argument against the efficacy of petitionary prayer is not sound, because the actualization of certain state of affairs is dependent on prayer. In the same vein, Michael Murray illustrated that "there are certain [outweighing] goods God wants to secure; goods he could only secure by making the provision of certain other goods depend on them being petitioned for."[4] He argues that God's acceptance of prayer demonstrates prayer as the ultimate power working in the world, that is, the hands of God. It preserves the believer who prays for herself from self-dependence and idolatry. One realizes that,

> the goods she receives have their source beyond human agency. While her food might still come from the grocer's hand and her drink from a tap, it is still God who brings the rain, provides the chemist with the intellect required to thwart whitefly infestations, and gives the physical strength to the assembly-line worker who constructs the tractors, which harvest the wheat. With each petition, the believer is made aware that she is directly dependent on God for her provisions in life.[5]

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2 Stump, "Petitionary prayer," 84.

3 Stump, "Petitionary prayer," 90.

4 Michael Murray, "Does God Respond to Prayer?," in *Contemporary Debates in the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Michael Peterson (Hoboken, NJ: Blackwell Publishers, 2005), 245.

5 Michael Murray, "Does God Respond to Prayer?," 246.

In addition, Murray argues that God can teach us about His nature and His purposes by accepting or denying petitionary prayer. For example, by accepting Elijah's prayer to manifest Himself for the Canaanites, God shows that He is the real and almighty deity. "We can generalize on this example, seeing that God could teach us a number of things about his own good nature and purposes in the world by responding one way or the other to our petitions."[6]

In a similar view, Thomas Aquinas also referred to such a good for prayer that is to acquire new knowledge about God's goodness and mercy. According to him our prayer is part of our participation in God's providence to invite us to be in companion with Him. Through prayer we *implore what God has disposed to accomplish*. For example, by petitionary prayer, we recall that we need God's help and this teaches us humility (Summa Theologica II-II, q. 83, a. 2, ad 1). God is glorified in prayer, because in it, God is recognized as the source of goodness, as omnipotent and merciful. As he says "we may acquire confidence in having recourse to God, and those we may recognize in Him the Author of our goods" (Summa Theologica II, Q83, 2).[7]

From the social perspective, the outweighing goods that God may preserve by making the realization of certain state of affairs dependent on our prayers for others can be the cultivation of community and interdependence. Other-directed prayer can lead believers to think of one another and to establish a unified community and society with solidarity and sympathy. However, the account of Stump, Murray, and Thomas in finding outweighing goods that support God's reason for making our prayers accepted seemingly cannot illustrate the *efficacy* of petitionary prayer. God does not actualize the state of affairs prayed for due to our prayers; instead, our prayers function as a necessary condition for the actualization. Truly, the requested state would not be actualized without prayer, but it is not because and for the sake of our prayer that the prayed for state will be actualized. It would be actualized, because it makes the world better, or it would result in positive consequences or several other reasons. If so, then how can we conceptualize the efficacy of our prayers? In other words: is our prayer causally responsible for the realization of the prayed for state of affairs?

Reflection on this question raises a dilemma: if our prayer is responsible for the realized state of affairs, then God had not willed the actualization of this state but decided to realize it after our imploration, or He decided to actualize

6 Michael Murray, "Does God Respond to Prayer?," 248.

7 For further elaboration see *Jean-Gabriel Pophillat "Prayer according to St. Thomas Aquinas", published online at* https://www.dominicanes.it/predicazione/meditazioni/1639-prayer-according-to-st-thomas-aquinas.html.

it, but our imploration overdetermined its realization. In the former case, God has changed His will, which is a denial of the divine immutability doctrine; in the latter case, our prayers are inefficacious while it remains beneficial to our relationship with God and the establishment of a better and united society. These are reasons that justify our praying and show the benefits of the world in which we hopefully pray God for our desired world; however, they cannot demonstrate the efficacy of our prayers that is the causal relation between our praying and the actualization of the prayed for state of affairs. A theist seemingly faces a dilemma that either one has to accept the doctrine of divine immutability and deny the efficacy of prayer; otherwise, one accepts that prayer will change the predetermined divine providence, such that one has to deny that God is changeless.

One may respond that God has decided the truth of a subjunctive conditional in the following form: if you pray for the state, then I will let the state be realized; otherwise, the state cannot be realized. We are then free to pray or not, and God's decree will not be changed. Therefore, we can accept both the doctrine of divine immutability and the efficacy of our prayers. Moreover, if one asks why God does not realize the state without prayer, one can respond that the justifying goods proposed by Stump and Murray or other similar reasons may be the potential grounds for God postponing and depending the actualization of the state on our implorations.

Once again, however, the problem of denying divine immutability has been raised in a new form. An objector shifts the changing point from God's will to God's knowledge of the future. God wills the truth of the subjunctive conditional, such that His will is changeless, but which of the horns of the subjunctive conditional will, in fact, be actualized in the actual world is dependent on our free decision to pray or not. In this manner, God's knowledge will change according to our free decisions.

The objector may reply that God's providence is so determined from eternity that He will realize the prayed for state of affairs in the actual world based on our free decision to pray. He has eternally chosen the world to be actualized, in which one prayed for a desired state and God accepts this prayer and realizes the desired state. In this case, God's knowledge and will are changeless, and petitionary prayer is efficacious.

However, in response to this view, distinguishing between two separate questions about the efficacy of prayer is significant. The first is whether or not prayer plays a causal role in the realization of the state of affairs. The second is whether prayers are causes by virtue of being-our-own-wanting property. A possibility exists that prayers are causes; however, they are not causes by

virtue of being our wanting. This is called the problem of the causal efficacy of petitionary prayer. The problem about the efficacy of prayer is the problem about how our wanting can be a cause of God's will to actualize a petitioned state of affairs. However, a problem about the role of prayer lies in the question why God does not actualize the prayed for state of affairs without our wanting. This second question is the concern of Murray and Stump. For example, in response to Murray's account of demonstrating the outweighing good of the possible world in which we pray, Smith and Yip[8] demonstrate that any of the good that Murray has enumerated in a world in which God makes us ask for certain goods and then supplies them in response to our petition can be actualized in a world in which God simply supplies such goods without our asking for them. Therefore, Smith and Yip illustrate that we need to find another outweighing good to answer the question regarding the role of prayer, because God can actualize the goods that Murray and Stump have proposed for our world in another possible world without our prayer. They propose "partnership with God" as the mentioned good. Far from criticizing their account, I want to say that my concern is the first question, namely, the efficacy of petitionary prayer. In my opinion, none of the answers they provide in their endeavors is a response to the first question. Vincent Brummer illustrates this problem as well.

> If God's intentions are immutably fixed from all eternity, he would not be able to *react* to what we do or feel, nor to the petitions that we address to him. He says that if He could not be said to do things *because* we ask him to do them. In fact an absolutely immutable God would be more like the neo-platonic Absolute than like the personal being the Bible represents him to be, and therefore not the sort of being with whom we could have a personal relationship.[9]

Another seemingly notable qualification is that we should distinguish between changing what our wanting makes in the physical world, which is the concern of the philosophy of action, and what prayer makes in God's will, which is the concern of the philosophy of religion. As famously described by Wittgenstein, an important difference exists between when one wants to raise the hand voluntarily or intentionally and when the hand has been risen unintentionally. He explains the problem as follows:

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8 Nicholas Smith and Andrew Yip, "Partnership with God: a partial solution to the problem of petitionary prayer," *Religious Studies* 46, no. 3 (September 2010): 395–410.

9 Vincent Brummer, *What are we Doing when We Pray?* (NY: Routledge, 2008), 40.

> But there is one thing we shouldn't overlook: when 'I raise my arm', my arm rises. And now a problem emerges: what is left over if I subtract the fact that my arm rises from the fact that I raise my arm?[10]

Therefore, the concern of philosophy of action is to determine the nature of our intentions and wants and distinguish an intentional action from mere bodily movement. The same problem has been subjected to the philosophy of the mind regarding the issue of how our mind can change the world.[11] However, the concern here is not the change that our wanting makes in the physical world but the change that it makes through divine will. However, if many theologians think that God is changeless and His will is impassible, then we are faced with an important theological problem.

After these qualifications, we now can review the claim of the objector that divine immutability can be matched with the efficacy of petitionary prayer. Consider a world that is predetermined according to divine providence and God foreknows eternally all events, even our prayers. Nevertheless, the question emerges: is it by virtue of our wanting that God realizes the petitioned for state? The question pertains to the influence of our wanting on God's will, that is, His eternal will. Therefore, even if God foreknows the states of the actual world and His eternal will in which He realizes the exact state of affairs even if our future implorations remain the same, the problem of the efficacy of petitionary prayer remains, because the question remains on whether or not our wanting can influence divine providence and eternal will.

One may propose a counterfactual account of the efficacy of prayer by illustrating that our prayer is efficacious, because the following counterfactual is true for a few people. If we had not prayed for the realization of the specific state of affairs, then God would not allow this state to be realized. Nevertheless, counterfactual dependency can exist without causal efficacy. The nature of causations, that is, two phenomena with a common cause have counterfactual dependency without causal relevance, is well known. Prayer can be counterfactually related to the realized and desired state of affairs, but it would not be by virtue of prayer that the state has been realized. For example, consider the case of a common cause that is both a physical cause fully determining the actualization of a specific state of affairs and, at the same time, the cause of a belief in the efficacy of praying itself. Because of my pain I will go to the

10 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical investigations*, 4th edn., ed. P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 261.

11 See Ned Block, "Can the Mind Change the World?" in *Meaning and Method*, ed. George Boolos (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Tim Crane, "The Mental Causation Debate," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplementary* 69 (1995): 211–54.

hospital to receive a physician's treatment and, at the same time, because of my pain, I pray God to cure my pain. Counterfactually, if we had not prayed, then the state of affairs (receiving the treatment for health) would not have been realized, which is true; however, it is not by virtue of prayer that the state has been realized (and I became fine). Nevertheless, the counterfactual analysis at most depicts the causal relevance of prayer but does not demonstrate that the requested state has been realized by virtue of our wanting property. Therefore, if we believe in the efficacy of petitionary prayer, then we seemingly need to develop a theological account according to which we can illustrate the *metaphysical* relationship between the property of prayer and that God has willed (perhaps eternally) the realization of the requested state of affairs because of prayer.

2. Theology of Prayer

Traditionally, theist theologians believe that God is immutable and impassible in addition to several perfect attributes such as omniscience and omnipotence. As Rice explains, according to the traditional dominant theology of Abrahamic religions,

> God dwells in perfect bliss outside the sphere of time and space. From his lofty vantage point, he apprehends the whole of created reality in one timeless perception: past, present and future alike appear before him. But though he fully knows and cares for the created world, he remains essentially unaffected by creaturely events and experiences. He is untouched by the disappointment, sorrow or suffering of his creatures. Just as His sovereign will brooks no opposition, his serene tranquility knows no interruption.[12]

Theologians have strongly believed that divine immutability and impassibility are the main attributes of God's perfectness. However, when we closely examine the biblical texts, we see a God who is active in the world and interacts with His creatures. The sacred texts, including the Qur'an, attribute a wide range of feelings and actions to God, including wrath, mercy, joy, grief, anger and talking, destroying, helping, answering, forgiving, defending, and throwing. God is present and works in the world every moment. He is near and with us.

12 Richard Rice, "Biblical Support for a New Perspective," in *The openness of God*, ed. Richard Rice, Clark Pinnock, John Sanders, William Hasker and David Basinger (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1994), 12.

> And when my servants question you concerning Me, then surely I am nigh. I answer the prayer of the suppliant when he cries unto Me. (Q 2:186)
>
> For the LORD takes delight in his people; he crowns the humble with salvation. (Ps 149:4)
>
> The LORD will again delight in you and make you prosperous, just as he delighted in your fathers. (Deut 30:9)
>
> 'I am the LORD, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight,' declares the Lord. (Jer 9:24).

Alternatively, Moses implores God to "turn from your fierce anger, relent and do not bring disaster on your people" (Ex 32:12; the same story is narrated in the Qur'an 7:152). God Himself relents and repents to people to put His mercy upon them: "Know they not that God is He who accepts repentance from His bondmen takes the alms, and that God is He who is the repenting [*tawwab*], the merciful" (Q 9:104). This verse in the Qur'an clearly says that God relents and repents. He not only accepts repentance and forgives the sins of the people, but He is who repents! In other words, God is the one who mercifully changes His face toward the people.

The sacred texts are full of the verses that demonstrate the emotions of God toward events and His activity in the world. Traditional theologians take such activities and emotions not as a sign of God changing His state; instead, they claim that when the text says that God "turns" from mercy to wrath or from guidance to astray, it describes a change in the way that people relate to God and not a change in God's state. However, stories in the Qur'an and Bible indicate that Abraham and other prophets, as pioneers of faith, believe in a God who can and may change His decisions and repent of an action that He said He would do. A well-known example is the story of Nineveh in which Jonah told the people that the city will be overturned within 40 days, because they did not change their way of life (Jon 3:4). Jonah left the city and went his way on to sea, but people fasted, prayed, and asked God for forgiveness. "When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened" (Jon 3:10). In the Qur'an, we see the same story in which God punishes Jonah for leaving his people aside to the extent that "he would have tarried in the belly till the day when they are raised" if he had not repented and "had not been one of those who glorify God" (Q 37:142–143). This passage demonstrates that God would like to change His decision according to the prayer of the people and expects a prophet to think about God as such.

In the same line, we can interpret the imploration by Moses to save Israel from God's wrath, which has been narrated in Exodus as an example of God's repentance in response to human intervention (Ex 12–14). This pattern is

reminiscent of Abraham bargaining with and challenging God to save the people of Sodom. Abraham asked God to save Sodom, because he thinks that it is "far from God to kill the righteous with the wicked" (Gen 18:25). Abraham expects God to change His decision about Sodom. This *expectation* warrants attention, and knowing what was in the mind of Abraham about God is important. According to the Qur'an, God admires Abraham's bargaining. Abraham "pleaded with us on behalf of the folk of Lot; Abraham was mild, imploring, penitent" (Q 11:73–74).

Seemingly, the God of Abraham, the God that introduced Himself through the sacred texts, and the God who expected Jonah to pray with his people to change God's decision from wrath to mercy reconsiders His plans in response to human requests.[13]

> If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, turn down and destroyed, and if that nation I wanted repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned. And if at another time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted, and if it does evil in my sight and does not obey me, then I will reconsider the good I had intended to do for it. (Jer 18:7–10)

3. Approaching the Problem

The problem regarding petitionary prayer is that ordinary people think that God knows the ways for solving their ordinary problems because He is omniscient. Moreover, He can find way and can act according to His merciful will to solve their problems, because He is omnipotent. They want everything about their own or their families' wellbeing. As Murray says, a really interesting aspect about this belief among ordinary believers is that many theologians have denied this aspect.

13 Saida Mirsadri in this volume argues in favor of protest theology according to which in response to the evils a faithful person can legitimately lament and protest against God's permission of them. Through this line of thought she wants to introduce mankind to a new path for life by refusing the current state and seeking for better life in front of this protest. However, I read the evils in the world not as a medium for protest against God but as a situation for rebuilding the new world through prayer and with the help of God. I read Abraham's challenge with God on His decision not as a protest against Him and His wrath but as a demonstration of an expectation from God to show His mercy. Saida Mirsadri's paper is titled: "Theodicy in a Vale of Tears": Towards an Islamic Theodicy of Protest.

> One might think such denials would be found only among contemporary liberal theologians who deny that miracles are possible or that God would deign to interfere in human affairs. But in fact, such denials can be found in the writings of the "founding fathers" of many religious traditions.[14]

Murray then asks,

> But why, one might wonder, would these traditional theologians deny the popularly held belief that petitionary prayer is efficacious, not only in the sense that it affects the heart of the petitioner, but also in the sense that it moves God to act.[15]

His answer to this question goes astray, because he views this question as one about the axiology of the world in which we pray for certain needs instead of focusing on the theological problem of causal efficacy of petitionary prayer. However, we are now in a position to answer this important question in our way. My answer is that theologians who cannot accommodate the efficacy of prayer need to revise their theology according to the outlook of Abraham in the Bible and the Qur'an.

Traditionally, theologians believe in the doctrine of divine immutability and impassibility, so they cannot accommodate the belief of ordinary people about petitionary prayer.[16] However, why do they believe in the doctrine of divine immutability? We can barely find Biblical or Qur'anic support that confirms this doctrine. As per my examination, the root of this doctrine comes back to the Greek idea of perfection. The doctrine is so widespread and thoroughly accepted by theologians in the history of Abrahamic religions, such that finding a unique source for this doctrine is extremely difficult. My opinion is that the source of this widespread acceptance should be the relationship between the concept of divine perfection and divine immutability. According to Plato, God is *the best possible*, such that God cannot change for the better (Republic II 381b). As Brian Leftow explains:

> Plato and Boethius infer divine immutability from God's perfection, Aristotle from God's being the first cause of change, Augustine from God's having created time. Aquinas derives divine immutability from God's simplicity, his having no parts or attributes which are distinct from himself. All of these arguments finally appeal to aspects of God's perfection; thus, the doctrine of divine immutability

14 Michael Murray, "Does God Respond to Prayer?," 242.

15 Michael Murray, "Does God Respond to Prayer?," 242.

16 For a good survey on traditional views about petitionary prayers and recent accounts of the subject see Scott Davison, *Petitionary Prayer: A Philosophical Investigation*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

> grew from a convergence of intuitions about perfection. These intuitions dominated Western thought about God well into the nineteenth century.[17]

Recently, several theologians and philosophers of religion endeavor to deny the entailment of the doctrine of divine immutability from God's perfection. The first argument the idea of which dates back to al-Ghazālī is the argument that God knows particulars, because He is omniscient, and if particulars are constantly changing, then God's knowledge is constantly changing. Therefore, God's intrinsic property regarding His knowledge of particulars changes, because knowledge is an intrinsic property of every individual, including God. God's intrinsic properties are His essential properties. Therefore, God's essential properties change. Therefore, God is not immutable.[18] Wierenga has challenged this type of argument.[19] He argues that what is true for God does not change, such that His eternal knowledge about particulars does not change, because all truths are eternally true. My response to the account of Wierenga is based on the nature of human knowledge. When I know that a computer is front of me, the case is less on that I have a mental state that relates to the proposition that "a computer is in front of me" but more on that a form of Kantian conception of I- or self-consciousness is attached to my epistemic relationship with the proposition. "I" know that the world from "my own perspective" is so, such that the state of affairs that a computer is in front of me is a true fact. This alive knowledge cannot be separated from me and my consciousness. In my opinion, this Kantian conception accompanies all of our knowledge. Furthermore, knowledge is a relationship between the self and the world and one cannot separate the spontaneity and consciousness of the knower from the knowledge. Seemingly, in God's knowledge, we cannot separate Him from the known world. If God knows everything, He lively and consciously knows everything, such that He is living in the world. Therefore, I think that if we accept that the world of particulars is definitely changing, then we ought to accept that God's knowledge is changing.

Another possible response to the account of Wierenga is related to the lively presence of God in the world as one who intervenes and acts in the world in a lively manner. As Kretzmann explains, according to the view that if God eternally knows all particular events in the world,

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17 Brian Leftow, "Immutability," 385.

18 Ebrahim Azadegan, "On the incompatibility of God's knowledge of particulars and the doctrine of divine immutability: towards a reform in Islamic theology," *Religious Studies* 58, no. 2 (June 2022): 327–44.

19 Edward Wierenga, *The Nature of God* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 175–90.

> (then) the knowledge an omniscient being has of the entire scheme of contingent events is in many relevant respects exactly like the knowledge you might have of a movie you had written, directed, produced, starred in, and seen a thousand times. You would know its every scene in flawless detail, and you would have the length of each scene and the sequence of scenes perfectly in mind. You would know, too, that a clock pictured in the first scene shows the time to be 3:45, and that a clock pictured in the fourth scene shows 4:30, and so on. Suppose, however, that your movie is being shown in a distant theater today. You know the movie immeasurably better than do the people in the theater who are now seeing it for the first time, but they know one big thing about it you don't know, namely, what is now going on the screen.[20]

In other words, Kretzmann proposes that the God who eternally knows the changes of the world is not alive and active in the world and only watches the movie of the world. However, the God of Abraham who bargains with Him is alive and responsive. If God acts upon His knowledge and if He is present and alive in the world, then His actions are dependent on the changes that have already happened.

Buber distinguishes between recognizing God as "believed in" and acknowledging God as "lived with." A God in whom we only believe in, whose providence we faithfully accept, and who has His own plans, desires, and transcendent attributes is an it-God. In other words, He is a subject of speculation but never the being to whom we can pray and say thou, "that Being that is directly most nearly, and lastingly, over against us, that may properly only be addressed, not expressed."[21] Buber thinks that, in praying,

> the man who prays pours himself out in unrestrained dependence, and knows that he has – in an incomprehensible way – an effect upon God, even though he obtains nothing from God; for he no longer desires anything for himself he sees the flame of his effect burning at its highest.[22]

Buber understands changing or becoming God not as changing toward becoming better but as manifesting Himself in a changeable world in a new form moment by moment, then letting human beings and all material beings freely engage in these *becoming* processes to become holy and return to God. When we pray, we ask God to act in the world to manifest Him in the world, and He acts upon our request, which means we effect on God to become manifested

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20 Norman Kretzmann, "Omniscience and Immutability," *Journal of Philosophy* 63, no. 14 (July 1966): 412.

21 Martin Buber, *I and thou*, 2nd edn., trans. Ronald G. Smith, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), 80–81.

22 Martin Buber, *I and thou*, 83.

in a new form. Thus, a mutual relationship would exist between the requester and God the requestee and through this *I-Thou* relationship, God manifests Himself. The immutable God cannot be experienced and expressed in the *I-Thou* relationship, *I* can merely address His transcendent majesty. When we pray to God as Thou, we speak to God, and then God's silence will be broken. Our prayer affects God to break His silence, to speak with us and to manifest Himself. Without our prayer, God would not manifest His special mercy for us, as the Qur'an says: "My Lord would not concern Himself with you but for your prayer" (Q 25:77). By understanding divine concern and the establishment of the *I-Thou* relationship with God as the Lover, we can find the meaning of our life and our role in it as the redeemer and overcome the existential meaninglessness that emerges for modern human beings. As Guilherme explains,

> ... it is only by trying to re-establish a dialogue with God that this situation of 'existential meaninglessness' can be overcome. This re-connection with God, this *religare* (which is the root of the word religion) is the only way of bringing back meaning to life and of bringing an end to God's silence.[23]

The philosophy of Swinburne also echoes another important objection to the doctrine of divine immutability. He insists on the understanding of the concept of God's perfection as a free agent. According to Swinburne,

> (an) agent is perfectly free at a certain time if his action results from his own choice at that time and if his choice is not itself brought about by anything else. Yet a person immutable in the strong sense would be unable to perform any action at a certain time other than what he had previously intended to do. His course of action being fixed by his past choices, he would not be perfectly free.[24]

By denying the doctrine of divine immutability, we can shed light on our understanding of other divine attributes, especially His omniscience. God can change His providence according to our prayers, and His knowledge of the future can change accordingly. However, one may deny that petitionary prayer is efficacious in the sense that I defended. I think one can eventually show that our world is a good world in which we falsely believe that God may accept our prayer and occasionally change the world upon our requests, but one cannot show that God does not deceive us when He promised that He would answer our prayers. Contrary to this view, I think that God has honestly promised us

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23 Alexandre Guilherme, "God as Thou and Prayer as Dialogue: Martin Buber's Tools for Reconciliation," *Sophia* 51, no. 3 (September 2012): 373.

24 Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 222.

to accept our prayer, and He will do His best to accept them. Evidently, many of our petitionary prayers are immoral or, perhaps, require certain negative consequences to others, in which God, the most benevolent, cannot accept their actualizations.[25]

Seemingly, we can still believe in God's perfection and free our theology from a certain form of Greek attachment and conception that force the doctrine of divine immutability. Paying attention to the importance of the concept of prayer in Abrahamic religions will help us to know the God as worshipped and even pleaded by Abraham.

4. Conclusion

Although I think that the abovementioned arguments against the doctrine of divine immutability are cogent, I attempted to argue in favor of another argument. I call this the argument on the efficacy of prayer: God commands us to pray and promised that "pray unto me and I will answer your prayer" (Q 40:60; Jer 29:12). We faithfully pray God for our needs. If our petitionary prayers are efficacious, such as by virtue of prayer, then God acts in the world and brings about a specific state of affairs. Moreover, God is not impassible, because He has been affected by our prayers. If God is not impassible, then He is not immutable. Lastly, if He is changing and becoming, then His knowledge of the world is changing.

25 See Smilansky's example in this regard: Saul Smilanskey, "A problem about the morality of some forms of prayer," *Ratio* 52, no. 2 (June 2012): 207–15.

Does God Know What Time It Is?

Brian Leftow

If God is all-knowing, it seems, He knows what time it is. Avicenna suggests that if time exists, an atemporal God does not. As he sees it, then, an atemporal God cannot be all-knowing if time exists. I now argue that atemporal God can be all-knowing even so. I first set out what there is to know about what time it is. I then explain Avicenna's argument, and offer a reason he is content to accept its conclusion. Finally, I suggest a way to deal with it.

What Time it is

When The Folk ask what time it is, they mean, "what time is it now?" They are asking which time is the present time. Suppose one answers, "at noon, the present time is noon. At each time, the present time is that time." That's not what they want to know. The Folk want to know what time this time is. Beyond that, they want to know where in time the present is. The Folk suppose the following: there is an objective dividing-line between what is past and what is future. The time at which the line falls is special, distinguished in some way from other times. The dividing line "moves." First one time is the present, and then another is. The Folk are asking which time now has this special status.

I think, further, that The Folk are presentists. That is, The Folk think that what makes the present special is that it is the only time that exists. The present, so viewed, is not a dividing-line between an existing past and an existing future. Time so viewed never has past or future parts. It is always only an instant thick. The present "divides" time so viewed only in the sense that what is wholly before it is one species of non-existence and what is wholly after it is a different species of non-existence.[1] Presentism is a substantive, controversial philosophical claim. Most analytic philosophers reject it. But it is, I think, the folk view of time, and Avicenna supposes it. In what follows, the present is always a presentist present.

1 Presentists will recognize here a famous remark by A.N. Prior.

Avicenna

I now present Avicenna's argument. Avicenna tacitly assumes that in sentences like "the eclipse does not exist," the present tense is essential to the content stated. That is, he assumes that it is not possible to state the same truth without use of that tense or some equivalent device. This has been denied, but I think it is true. So I note the assumption, but do not contest it. Avicenna writes that

> If (God) knows such-and-such an object does not exist at this time and exists tomorrow, [then] His knowledge will be changing. (If) this object does not exist now and exists tomorrow … either [i] He knows it in that manner, in which case [His knowledge] is changing or [ii] His knowledge of tomorrow is [the same] as His knowledge of this day, in which case it is not knowledge. Hence, it is impossible that His knowledge of tomorrow be [the same] as His knowledge of this day; rather, [His knowledge] has changed.[2]

This is because if

> at one … moment I know that this eclipse does not exist, and then at another … that it does … knowledge of the former does not remain … rather, a different knowledge comes about … At the moment the (eclipse) passes, I cannot be what I was before the passing. This is because I am temporal and exist at a present moment.[3]

But

> As for (God), Who does not enter into any time and its status, it is completely inconceivable to apply to Him any status concerning this time or that time, as being in it, or as a new temporal status or temporal knowledge being applied to it.[4]

Thus

> It is not possible that [God] knows, temporally and individually, these changing things inasmuch as they are changing … For it is not possible that He knows, once temporally, that changing things exist and it is not the case that they do not exist, and once knows that, temporally, they do not exist and it is not the case

2 Avicenna, *al-Shifāʾ: Ilāhīyyāt*, ed. S. Zāyed, G.C. Aanawātī, S. Dunyā and M. Yūsef (Qum: Maktabah yatullāh al-Marʿashī, 1984), 13, as translated at Amirhossein Zadyousefi, "Does God Know the Occurrence of a Change Among Particulars?," *Dialogue* 58 (2019): 629.

3 Avicenna, "The Salvation," in *Classical Arabic Philosophy*, ed. and trans. Jon McGinnis and David (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2007), 218.

4 Avicenna, "The Salvation," 219.

> that they exist. (For) in that case, there is for each situation a distinct intelligible form and none of them exists while the other exists … (He) changes.[5]

Avicenna's argument implies that God does not know what time it is. To show this, let's substitute talk of a time t's being present – of the claim that it is now t – for talk of an eclipse now occurring or not occurring.

Suppose that God knows that it is now t – that t is present. Then He has some mental state with this content ("there is for each situation a distinct intelligible form"). What time is present changes as time passes. So if God believes that t is present, then when t is past, His cognitive state changes. The change is at least that He no longer has a true belief that t is present. But it goes further. If He no longer has that true belief, He either does or does not still believe that t is present. If He does still believe it, He now has a false belief ("in which case it is not knowledge"). Avicenna tacitly assumes that God cannot have false beliefs ("Hence, it is impossible that His knowledge of tomorrow be [the same] as His knowledge of this day"). If He does not still believe it, a state of His has passed away. If a state of His passes away, He changes.

For Avicenna, this alternative is also ruled out. For God "does not enter into any time." That is, though He exists, no time is a "place" He has "entered." His existence is never located at any time. Instead, He is atemporal. An atemporal being does not change. Something changes only if it has a property at some time and lacks it at some other. If something has a property at a time, it exists at that time: that time is a location of its existence. So only something whose existence is located at at least one time can change. It may not take two location at two times. Something that exists only at an instant has a property then and never has it afterward. It exists then and never exists again. It is not located at a second time. But we might say that it changes, in going from existing to not, and so from having the property to not. Still, change does require location at at least one time. What is not located at any time, cannot have a property at a time and not have it at another. So what is not located at times cannot change.

Summing up the argument,

1. (At t, God believes that t is present, and God exists after t) → (God has a false belief or God changes).
2. God cannot have false beliefs.
3. God cannot change. So

5 Avicenna, "The Salvation," n. 1, 20, as translated at Amirhossein Zadyousefi, Avicenna, "The Salvation," n. 1, 630.

4. ¬(At t, God believes that t is present, and God exists after t)
5. God is eternal. So
6. God exists after t. So
7. ¬(At t, that God believes that t is present).
8. What God does not believe, He does not know. So
9. God never knows what time it is.

He never even has beliefs on the subject. Presumably He knows that some time is present. But He has no opinion about which.

Norman Kretzmann independently re-discovered this argument in the early 1960s.[6] Analytic philosophers have debated it at length since. They largely think that Avicenna has correctly identified an inconsistent set of claims: it cannot be the case that God is immutable, God is omniscient, and there is a fact for Him to know about what time it is, in the sense described above. If the claims are inconsistent, the only rational course is to reject at least one. The upshot would likely have dismayed Avicenna. A great many philosophers infer that God is not immutable, and so not atemporal.

God's Ignorance

One might wonder why Avicenna did not draw that conclusion himself. Avicenna would reply with a well-developed if controversial position. Times are particulars. Perhaps they are sui generis simple points- instants- or periods composed of these. Perhaps they are relativistic hypersurfaces. Perhaps they are constructions from, and so reducible to, classes of events. Perhaps they are propositions of some sort.[7] On any tenable view, if there are times, they come out particular. Notoriously, for Avicenna, God cannot have certain sorts of knowledge of particulars.[8] Thus Avicenna was quite prepared to accept that God does not know what time it is. There were many other things of this broad kind he thought God could not know. One more didn't bother him. It just fell under a general category he thought God could not access: the wrong sort of knowledge of particulars. I now explore this. I first set out why Avicenna thinks God has this limitation. I then suggest that it would in fact keep Him

6 Norman Kretzmann, "Omniscience and Immutability," *Journal of Philosophy* 63 (1966): 409–21.

7 So Thomas Crisp, "Presentism and the Grounding Objection," *Nous* 41 (2007): 90–109.

8 For texts and discussion, see Michael Marmura, "Some aspects of Avicenna's theory of God's knowledge of particulars," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 83 (1962): 299–312.

from knowing what time it is, unless a particular approach to what times are is correct.

God and Reference

I now set out one cognitive limit Avicenna thinks God suffers. God has no body. As Avicenna sees it, senses require bodily organs. So for Avicenna, God has no senses. Nor has He a sensory imagination. (His thought may be that one can't perceive, one can't imagine, either. Plausibly, someone blind from birth can't imagine colors.) Thus for Avicenna, God has available only the kind of mental content an intellect can generate. For Avicenna, that meant pure "universal" concepts, plus contents composed of these. Pure universal concepts are concepts more than one particular can satisfy, which do not contain concepts of particulars unless these concepts are themselves wholly composed of pure universal concepts. For any Aristotelian, this is the sort of content human intellects generate. Avicenna in effect assumes that this is a limitation of intellects just as such, rather than one that applies only to our own sort of intellect. He thus assumes that at least in this one respect, God's intellect works as ours do.

All this limits what God can refer to. As He has no senses, nothing can make impressions on His senses. He cannot see and then point to what He sees. Nothing can affect Him in any other way either. Avicenna's God is wholly impassible. So He cannot refer by means of other causal pathways from particular things to Him. He cannot refer to things as the source of any other causal impact. Thus for Avicenna, God can refer only to things concatenations of pure universal concepts can pick out. He can single out particulars only if some combination of universal concepts suffices to single them out. He can know any singular truth about particulars only if He can refer to them this way. If He cannot refer to them this way, He can know only non-singular truths about them. That is, He can know only quantified truths about all or some particulars insofar as they have properties those truths figure in: He e.g. can know that (x)(Fx), and so know that any particular is F. But He cannot cash this in, to know of some one particular that it is F, unless He can refer to it by way of pure universal concepts. I now apply this limitation to His knowledge of time.

God and Reference to Times

Perhaps some being without exterior senses could sense time with some sort of internal time-consciousness. It is controversial whether we do or could have

such a thing. Avicenna's God could not. Were He conscious of flowing time internally, it would flow through His mind, so to speak. So His awareness would change. But He is atemporal, and so (again) cannot change. Thus, to single a time out, He would have to refer to it as an external reality. Let us ask how He could do that.

Avicenna's God is all-knowing about the things a pure intellect can know.[9] So He has all universal concepts. "Present" is a pure universal concept. So is "the," understood as a definite-description operator (e.g. Russell's "ιx"). A rough gloss: something is "the" just if it is the sole F, for some F. This is not an attribute Avicenna is likely to have believed in. Aristotelian logic in his day didn't pay much attention to "the." But it's there regardless. So Avicenna's God has this concept. Avicenna's God thus can use "the" and "present" to single out the present. Further, if He singles out the present, and t is present, He thereby singles out t. But He does not single t out under that description. He does not know that it is t He has singled out. A fortiori, He does not know that t is present, i.e. that the time is now t. Perhaps He cannot even form the proposition that t is present. For on its face, "t" does not express a pure universal concept. It is a name for a particular time. He could possess the name only if some description composed entirely of universal concepts sufficed to pick out t. If it did, He could (in effect) use the name to abbreviate that description of t.

Let us therefore ask whether combinations of pure universal concepts could pick out a particular time in some way that would involve knowing which time it is. Avicenna held the common view of Muslim falsafa, that time is infinite pastward and futureward. If it is, every time, considered independent of what occurs at it, shares all its pure universal properties with all other times. Each is a time, one minute after another, two minutes after another, etc. Of course, 3 p.m. is also a minute after another particular time, 2:59. But to single out 3 p.m. as the time a minute after 2:59, one would have to refer to 2:59. One thus would need to explain how God could single out 2:59. Being 2:59 is not a pure universal property. "2:59" names a particular. So one would have to show that "2:59" abbreviates a description in terms of pure universal concepts. If one could do that, one wouldn't need to use "2:59" to refer to 3 p.m. One could just do the same thing to "3 p.m."

If pure universal concepts won't pick out particular times independent of what occurs at them, let us see if bringing in what occurs at them can do better. Times differ in what happens at them. This time is the time I say one word, that time the time I say another. So we can refer to a time as the time at which a particular event happened, if we can refer to the event. We can refer to an event

9 Avicenna, "The Salvation," n. 1, VIII. 6, 359.

by sensing it and pointing, or using ostension in combination with a partial description. Avicenna's God can't sense or point. All such means are unavailable. He can only refer by description. He can pick out only events He can uniquely describe. So now let us ask how He might uniquely describe an event.

On Kim's popular view, events are subjects' having properties at times.[10] Other views build events out of fewer constituents. But even if an event must in fact have all three of Kim's constituents, one need not specify all three to uniquely describe it, if one is lucky about the event. Suppose that it just so happens that only once in all history does a universal property F get exemplified. Then "the exemplifying of F" – whose sense is a combination of pure universal concepts – refers to that event. (I hereafter call such events unique-Fs.) So "the time of the unique-F" will pick out whichever time(s) that event happened at. Thus Avicenna's God could refer to any time that hosts a unique-F.

If He arranged things suitably, then, perhaps Avicenna's God could refer to any time at all. Time is continuous. Suppose, then, that God had at His disposal continuum-many universals, and rigged things so that each was instanced exactly once in all of history, at a single instant. Occurring at t would then amount to occurring simultaneous with a particular unique-F. Given enough universals, then, on this account of instants, Avicenna's God could refer to any instant or time-period at all. Further, He might even know which instant/period they were. Each would be at least the instant of that unique-F. But in such a case, it's open to us to say that unique-Fs <u>are</u> the instants. "Unique-F" would then pick out an instant, and Avicenna's God would know which instant it was.

If unique-Fs were not instants themselves, though, there would still be a problem. Suppose that instants are sui generis points or hypersurfaces. Then "the time of the unique-F" would pick out some instant, but Avicenna's God might not know which. For consider a pairing, every such time paired 1:1 with some unique-F. Now consider a pairing in which the unique-Fs are shifted one minute earlier. Avicenna's God could not know which pairing He co-exists with. For He has no means to "track" the times independent of the unique-Fs.

Again, suppose that instants are classes of events. Just to have an example, let's say with Russell that an instant is a class of events C, everything in C overlaps everything else in C, and nothing outside C overlaps everything in C.[11] Then the time of a unique-F is the C to which it belongs. Now one can uniquely describe a class without referring to its members, e.g. as Smith's favorite class.

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10 Jaegwon Kim, "Events as Property Exemplifications," in *Action Theory*, ed. Myles Brand and Douglas Walton (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1976), 310–26.

11 Bertrand Russell, "On Order in Time," *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philosophical Society* 32 (1936): 216–28, 216.

But it seems unlikely that some such description will be available for every Russellian event-class. If no such description is available for a class, one can single it out from all other classes only by referring to its members, e.g. as the class consisting of A and B. Here is where Avicenna's God would have trouble. In the actual world, such classes will be full of events happening to physical particulars. Very plausibly, such particulars are not just "bundles" of universals and do not conform to a principle of Identity of Pure Universal Indiscernibles. If they are not and do not, pure universal concepts do not suffice to pick them out. If a Russellian event-class contains any event happening to a particular, and that event cannot be picked out by some combination of pure universals exemplified uniquely in it, then Avicenna's God will not be able to refer to the event. So He won't be able to refer to the class, nor then to the instant it "is."

If times are propositions, what to say depends on their natures. If propositions are simple particulars, they are no more within the grasp of Avicenna's God than simple sui generis instants are. If they are structured, then if they can serve as times, it will be because they "contain" all particulars to which things happen at those times. So difficulties above will ensue. So apparently, whether Avicenna's God can refer to times or know which times they are will depend on their natures. It is a very live option that He cannot, or cannot do so with enough of them to guarantee that He can even frame the proposition that t is present. Perhaps, then, that is a reason for Avicenna to rest content with the conclusion of (1)-(9).

A Solution

I think that God is not in time. I am not content to deny divine omniscience. So I need a different approach. I now offer one. I begin by noting that while (1)–(9) is about change, its nub is not. Its nub, rather, is that what there is to know about what time it is depends on one's temporal location. Now, t is present. So that t is present is what there is to know about what time it is. At t+1, I can't know that t is present, because that isn't true. The change in what there is to know as time passes generates the push for a change in a God who knows what time it is. But actually, one can create a problem for divine timelessness just by considering what there is to know at a single time, and the way knowing it depends on one's temporal location.

Suppose that the time is now t, I exist, but I am not at t. This might be so on a "growing block" theory of time.[12] On such a view, past and present exist, and

12 For which see e.g. Charlie D. Broad, *Scientific Thought* (N.Y.: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1923).

time's "passing" is the adding of ever-new layers of being to the later end of the "block" of existence. If I died a year before t, I am not at t. But on the growing block view, it is still true in the present that I exist – in the past. On these assumptions, t is present, but I cannot know that t is present, because I died before t. One has to exist at t to know that t is present, or that it is now t. The reason is that "now" or "present" always pick out the present of the one who tokens them. That is just how these words work.

If God is atemporal, He exists, but not at t. So if t is present and God is atemporal, it seems, there's something He doesn't know – that t is present. He cannot get His token of "present" to pick out t, for He is not at t. Suppose, further, that He says "t is present for them," as it were pointing at the occupants of t from outside time. Then the problem is that for a God outside time, all times (and their occupants) are equally real. They are all spread before Him. It has to be that way. If He saw each present instant as it became present, or the "growing block" growing, His awareness would change. So He would be in time. If He saw only some of time, changelessly, that would raise unanswerable questions: why He does not see more, and why the bit that is "there" for Him ends just where it does. But if He sees it all, and says "t is present for them," something parallel is true for every time's occupants. Knowing only that t is present at t, t+1 is present at t+1, etc., is not enough to grasp which time is the present, let alone a presentist present.

Thus just given that the time is now t, there is something an atemporal God does not know – or so it seems. We did not bring in change to get this conclusion. The argument concerns knowledge of just one "what time it is." I now address this argument. I do so by a parallel between God's relation to time and His relation to space. If I'm successful, this will also disarm Avicenna's (1)–(9).

Time/Space Parallel

If God is atemporal, His existence has no temporal location. No time contains it, though at every time it is the case that He exists timelessly. This parallels God's relation to space. God has no spatial location. No place contains God, though at every place it is the case that He exists spacelessly.

Some might jib at the claim that God has no spatial location. God is supposed to be omnipresent. Some would infer that He is located everywhere, not nowhere. But consider: if I walk from here to there, I pass through whatever is located in the intervening places. I pass through the air. (I part it around me.) I pass through neutrinos. I do not pass through God. I do not part Him around me, and I do not cause Him to go through my lower intestine. If I do not pass through God, then God is not located in the intervening places.

Again, if I am located here, this place surrounds me. The objects around it surround me. But nothing can surround God. That's not because He's immaterial. I could get my hands around a small ghost, though I couldn't touch it by doing so. If I cup my hands and say to God, "I have You surrounded," I'm wrong. For one thing, in whatever sense He is inside my hands, He is also elsewhere. So He is not surrounded in the way one army might surround another. But more basically, He is not surrounded because my hands do not bear to Him such relations as above, below, or to the left of. No-one would say "my hand is just to the left of God." But if He had a location, my hand would be. For if it is to the left of a location, it is to the left of whatever is located there. My hand would also be at every distance from God, if He is also located everywhere else.

Nothing can surround God, or have a positive distance from Him, because God has no location. God is indeed omnipresent. But as Christians cash this out, it means that He gives being to, knows immediately about, and controls every place and its occupants.[13] This is not being located in these places. It's more like action at a distance. God's presence to places is causal and cognitive, not the bearing of a location relation. Thus I submit that in fact, an atemporal God is related to times as God is related to places. I now consider what this relation entails for God's knowledge of times and places.

God and "Here"

I occupy space. Thus I can use "here" to refer to where I am. In different contexts, it indicates different places. If I say to an audience, "I am speaking here," my audience knows that "here" refers to the room we're in. If I say that the weather is warm here, "here" refers to New Jersey. The rule for this kind of use is that

R. "here" denotes a place containing the speaker.

The conversational context determines which place I mean.

If God has no location, then God has no here, in the (R) sense.[14] Let us consider how this affects His knowledge of space. People in a warm room know that

10. It is warm in the room.

13 See e.g. Aquinas, Summa Theologiae Ia, 8.

14 We also use "here" to indicate places we're not. The dentist taps a tooth and says "does it hurt here?," but the dentist is not in the tooth. In that sense of "here," God could say, as it were pointing at the room, "it's warm here."

They also know that

11. It is warm here,

where "here" refers to the room. They know both because for them, the room is here. We can know only the (R)-here facts that go with our spatial location. If God has no spatial location, God has no (R)-here. So there are no divine (R)-here facts.

Thus God knows (10) but not (11). But there is no fact He misses. It's not the case that the room is here, but He can't know it. For God, the room is not here. From God's spatial standpoint, not "in" space," (11) is not a fact, if its "here" is an (R)-"here." It is not warm where God is, because God is nowhere. So in not knowing (11), there is nothing He misses. He knows that for us, (11). From His spatial standpoint, that is all there is to know. He misses nothing.

Cashing it in

That's my spatial story. Now I use it as an analogy. Just as God is not in space, He is not in time. He knows that t is present for us – is now for us – as He knows that the room is here for us. But He does not know that t is present, because for Him, it is not. Just as to a God not in space, no place is here (the place He occupies), to a God not in time, no time is now (the time He occupies). So no time is present. For presentists, the notion of the present has at least two notes. It is the speaker's time – "now" picks out the speaker's place in time, as one use of "here" does for space. It is also the objectively distinguished time. For presentists, the objective distinction is that it's the only time. Playing the second role entails playing the first. For if there is no other location to be at, then if the speaker exists in time, the present is the time the speaker occupies, its temporal "here." Thus if for God, some time were objectively distinguished, were the only time, He would occupy it.

No time is God's temporal present. He does not occupy any time. Thus for Him, no time is objectively distinguished, the sole existent or occurrent time. For Him, then, t is not present. So there is nothing God misses by not knowing that t is present. For from His standpoint, that just is not true. Just as it is not warm where God is because He is nowhere, t is not present when God is because God is no-when. Temporal things have a temporal now. God does not. He knows that for us, at t, t is present. From His standpoint, that is all there is to know. So, *pace* Avicenna, time passes, God is atemporal, and yet there is nothing God does not know. At His standpoint, the facts that constitute time's passing just are not facts. It is not the case that first only t exists, then only

some later time exists. If this were the case for Him, He would have a temporal now. God has no temporal now. For God, that is, there is no temporal now. So for God, it is not first now t, then now t+1. For God, time does not pass, though it does for us.

Response

Some might reply that if no time is the present for God, no time is the present, period. No time is special, distinguished from all others, if it is not so for God. For how things are for God is how they really are. So if for God, there is no objectively distinguished now, there is none. But that God has no here does not imply that we have no here. For God, no place is here. But I am here. The two things are compatible. It would not be sensible to say "for God, no place is here. The way things are for God, is the way things truly are. So no place is here. You're just wrong that you're here." To infer "God has no here, therefore I have no here" is like inferring "I have no money, therefore the central bank has no money." Just as God has no here, He has no now, no temporal present. I submit that just as God's having no here doesn't imply that we have no here, God's having no temporal now doesn't imply that we have no temporal now. Just how this can fail to follow becomes clearer below.

Another Response

Another response is that my analogy falls short because here and now differ importantly. There is no objectively distinguished here for anyone. But there is (for us, in time) an objectively distinguished now. Further, if this place is here, it does not follow that no other places exist. If t is present, the reply goes, it does follow that other times do not exist. If there is a special, moving present, the future is unreal. This is so, in a way, even on "moving spotlight" theories.[15] On these, all events at all times are equally real. But the "spotlight" of the present hasn't yet lighted some of them, and so the future in which it does has not yet happened. The event of my dying, on such views, is as real as the event of my typing this. Still. the event of that event's becoming present has not yet occurred. Only once it does has my death happened. Of course, the future that has always been real includes that event, in some sense. But there has to be a

15 For such views, see Ross Cameron, *The Moving Spotlight* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2015).

second sense in which it does not – in which presentness is something that happens to it.

In that sense, even on moving spotlight views, the future is not real. But if time does not pass for God, then the future is real for Him. Were that not so, it would never exist for Him, and (again) we would face the unanswerable question of why the time real for God ends at one particular point rather than some other. The objection, then, is this. On my analogy, what is real is relative to one's standpoint. The future is real for God. The future is unreal for us. This cannot be true. It must simply be one or the other.

Well, every analogy falls short somewhere – that's why it's only an analogy. But I do not think the response points out ways this one falls short. For if the present is special, as the objector supposes, what is real is relative to temporal standpoint. For us, tomorrow is not real. Its events are not occurring. That is simply because of where we are in time. Were we at tomorrow, that day's events would be happening. If the present is ontologically special, then what is real depends on one's temporal standpoint. It's precisely because the present is special that this is so.

Here's a stranger way to see that what is real depends on temporal standpoint. In the special theory of relativity (hereafter STR), there is not one absolute present – one instant that is present at all places and in all states of motion. Rather, what is present is relative to one's state of motion.[16] Suppose that a rocket passed me, going much faster than I. Then things in my past or future would be in its present. That follows from the math of the theory. Now the same present instant cannot both not include the signing of the treaty of Westphalia (a property my present has) and include it (a property (let's say) the rocket present has). So the rocket has one present and I have another. Whether the treaty-signing is real differs depending on which present one is in. The rocket is in my present, and I am in the rocket's. But they are two different presents, and what is real depends on which one is one's present. Thus if the present is "special" and STR is true, reality is relative to temporal standpoint in a second way. This has led some to argue that STR and a "special" present are not compatible.[17] I disagree. How things are if STR is true and the present is "special" is complex. But a theory including both does not seem to me unworkable. On such a view, events occur at times, just as we think. It's just that (speaking very crudely) there are more times than we had thought. On

16 For a basic exposition of the theory, see Wesley Salmon, *Space, Time and Motion* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980).

17 So e.g. Hilary Putnam, "Time and Physical Geometry," *Journal of Philosophy* 64 (1967): 240–47.

this picture, time still flows. But its river has a microstructure, of many smaller flows. But this is how it is with rivers. In the large, there is one mighty flow. On closer inspection, it consists of many moving molecules, each on its own path.

Relativized Passage

Let us now face the second hurdle for my analogy. We must make sense of passage depending on facts about temporal location. Something like this is in fact part of STR. Consider the rocket again. STR tells us that time passes slower for those inside than for those outside. If the rocket is near light-speed, one second inside might take thousands of years on the outside to pass. This is called time-dilation- one second inside the rocket dilates, or gets longer, relative to seconds outside. It has been confirmed by experiment. The faster the travel, the more the dilation. From inside the dilated rocket, time passes ever faster outside- thousands of outside years pass in a second. From outside, time passes ever slower inside: one second takes thousands of years to elapse. But to those inside the rocket, time is passing normally. They aren't aware of slowing down or speeding up. The speed of passage, inside and out, depends on which present one is in.

An Analogical Leap

The closer the rocket to light speed, the slower the time inside as those outside see things. This approaches a limit: going so fast that relative to the outside world, there is no passage in the rocket. Mass cannot reach this limit, on STR. Massless photons do. Photons travel in null geodesics. They have no "proper time" within STR. Speaking crudely, for them, time does not pass at all.[18] This is the truth about them from their own standpoint, though of course from our own standpoint, light has a finite speed and takes time to get from place to place. The atemporalist can say that God's temporal standpoint is as if it were

18 See e.g. https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spacetime#Spacetime_intervals_in_flat_space. For popular expositions, see https://phys.org/news/2014-05-does-light-experience-time.html, https://www.forbes.com/sites/startswithabang/2016/09/30/how-do-photons-experience-time/?sh=248c86f5278d; https://www.forbes.com/sites/startswithabang/2018/12/22/ask-ethan-how-does-a-photon-experience-the-universe/?sh=40c90692df80.

at the absolute limit of time dilation. As time dilates in the rocket, more events outside the rocket fits into smaller intervals within the rocket: 10,000 external years go by as one second passes. Taking that thought to the limit, we can suggest that at God's standpoint, time dilates so much that the whole of time occurs during God's single occupation of that standpoint. It's not part of STR that this is so for photons. Nor is it part of STR that such a thing is so much as possible – physically. But the physics suggests this analogy – as it were, a meta-physical extension beyond it. Positing such a thing is a small conceptual step beyond what STR does say. This extension is just what atemporalism has always believed in.

Let me sum up. I grant Avicenna's argument. An atemporal God cannot know what time it is. But I deny that there is a fact He does not know. I base this on a parallel between the God/space and God/time relationships. I have confronted an objection: my view leads to the claim that reality is relative to temporal standpoint. My reply has been that it is. In time there are many nows, many temporal standpoints. Relative to each, a different class of events goes on. It is therefore not so odd if there is another standpoint relative to which yet another class of events goes on. Because God is not in time, He does not have a temporal now. So for him, no time is present. He knows what time it is now at every point in time. From His standpoint, that is all the "what time it is" facts there are. Asking Him to know in addition what time is present, full stop, is like asking me now to know that it is now tomorrow. It doesn't count against my knowledge that I don't. Knowledge is only of what is true. What is true depends on one's temporal standpoint.

Divine Knowledge in Classical Shīʿī Theology

Divine Knowledge of Particulars and of the Present Time

Muhammad Legenhausen

Introduction

Discussions of divine knowledge and power are among the earliest in Islamic theology. In what follows a sketch is provided of how discussions of the divine attributes of knowledge developed among the Shīʿah. Some of the important texts, authors, controversies, and topics are mentioned. Part One offers a brief outline of some early discussions of divine knowledge in Shīʿī theology, followed by a discussion of the problem of God's knowledge of particulars according to Ibn Sīnā, who had a tremendous influence on the subsequent theological tradition. The dominant trend in this history is one in which God is held to be incorporeal and atemporal, beyond time; although some early Shīʿī theological sources refer to God as if He were a temporal existent; and opinions have even been recorded of Shīʿah who thought God was corporeal. One of the objections to the atemporal view of divinity that came to dominate is that it makes it difficult to explain various types of knowledge that are usually taken to be implied by divine omniscience, such as knowledge of particulars, sensory knowledge, knowledge of change, and knowledge that involves indexical reference to the present, which is often presented as the problem of whether God knows what time it is. In this volume, Rahim Acar has provided a careful and concise review of the position of Ibn Sīnā and the controversy that ensued. Since the influence of Ibn Sīnā is especially profound in Shīʿī *kalām*, I will address some of the issues that he raises in hope that my remarks may be found complementary to his. Brian Leftow has provided a defense of divine timelessness in view of the problem of how God can know what time it is with his characteristic clarity and careful analysis, that requires extensive discussion; so, in Part Two, remarks are provided with regard to the extent to which his proposed solution to this problem is in harmony with the views that have become accepted among many philosophically inclined Shīʿī theologians, although the solution to the problem of God's knowledge of the time that I offer is one for which I know of no sources in the Shīʿī literature.

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* Prepared with the assistance of colleagues from the Encyclopedia of the Intellectual Sciences of the Imam Khomeini Education and Research Institute.

Among the Shīʿah, there have been and continue to be differences in approach to theological issues. Some have a distinctly philosophical understanding of divinity, others take a more scriptural approach, yet others concentrate on mysticism (*ʿirfān*). Often what is found is an amalgamation of these tendencies, especially from the Safavid period forward. This is not to deny that there are important discussions of what might be called political theology or social theology among the Shīʿah, but these areas of theological research, like Islamic jurisprudence, do not have their own distinct approach to the concept of God; rather, they draw on the concept of God that is developed on the basis of scripture, philosophy, and/or *ʿirfān*. Generally speaking, Shīʿī political theology invokes the unity of God and divine justice to back calls for unity among God's creatures in service to Him, justice in human society, and a rejection of subservience to worldly powers.

The concept of God in the Shīʿī world is controversial. Some Muslim scholars are suspicious of the philosophical and mystical currents among the Shīʿah, and prefer a theological approach that is grounded purely in the Qur'ān and hadiths. This controversy has roots that go back to the earliest debates in Shīʿī theology and are recurrent.

According to the Shīʿah, it is the responsibility of the believers individually to arrive at the fundamental principles of their religious beliefs, to the extent of their abilities, through reason; and imitation in these matters is expressly forbidden, although imitation is required for practical matters, e.g., ritual performance, for all those unable to derive the rules themselves from their sources.[1]

Islam teaches faith in the God of Abraham, the Creator of the world. The proper name used for God in the Qur'ān is "Allah" (الله). God addresses the Prophet Muhammad (*ṣ*) in the Qur'ān as follows:

> We have indeed revealed to you as We revealed to Noah and the prophets after him, and We revealed to Abraham and Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, and the Tribes, Jesus and Job, Jonah, Aaron, and Solomon, – and We gave David the Psalms – and apostles We have recounted to you earlier and apostles We have not recounted to you, – and to Moses Allah spoke directly – apostles, as bearers of good news and warners, so that mankind may not have any argument against Allah, after the apostles, and Allah is all-mighty, all-wise. (4:163–165)

In this *āyah* and many others there is a linked allusion to the power and knowledge of God: He is all-mighty and all-wise. The theme is often connected with the establishment of monotheism and the rejection of idolatry. Idol worship

1 See the discussion in the first chapter of Jaʿfar Sobhani, *Doctrines of Shiʿi Islam*, ed. Reza Shah-Kazemi (London: I. B. Tauris, 2001).

is condemned since the idols have no power and are unable to do anything for those who worship them. To the contrary, everything that happens happens only through the power of God. God requires His servants, however, to be good; and they should be aware that He knows everything, even their hidden deeds and innermost thoughts. Thus, the question of the attributes of divine power and knowledge were initially connected with *moral* concerns; and were by no means merely – or even primarily – matters of metaphysical speculation.

According to Islamic teaching, Jews, Christians, and Muslims worship the same unique God.[2] It is clearly stated in the Qur'ān that the followers of the Abrahamic faiths believe in the same God,[3] but the concept of God that is presented in the Qur'ān is that of a strict monotheism, and the strictness of this monotheism received particular emphasis in Shīʿī theological discussions. Muslims are in agreement with Christians and Jews in interpreting their scriptures (at least in what may be considered their classical theological traditions[4]) to indicate that the divine attributes include omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence, and eternity. The fact that the views of God found among Muslims should coincide with those found among Jews and Christians is no cause for surprise, since the Qur'ān describes itself as "*confirming what was revealed before it*."[5] But this does not mean that the Muslims simply adopted previous theological views. For example, one of the early discussions about divine power and knowledge concerned itself with how God is described in the Qur'ān. He is described as knowing and powerful, not as having knowledge and having power. So, disputes arose about whether reason provided authority to go from the scriptural description of God as knowing, or being a knower, to His possession of knowledge, as a divine attribute. Is God a knower by means of this attribute of knowledge? Or can He know without being in possession of something by means of which He knows? All the theologians, both Shīʿī and Sunni, agreed that God is powerful, knowing, living, hearing, seeing, etc., because these claims could be proven on the basis of scripture. The majority later came to agree that God had the attributes of power, knowledge, life, and

2 See Narjes Javandel Soumeahsaraie, "On Believing in the Same God: A Semantic Analysis," in *Proofs for the Existence of God: Contexts–Structures–Relevance*, ed. Christian Kanzian and Muhammad Legenhausen (Innsbruck: Innsbruck University Press, 2008), 113–25.

3 "So, summon to this and be steadfast, just as you have been commanded, and do not follow their desires, and say, 'I believe in whatever Book Allah has sent down. I have been commanded to do justice among you. Allah is our Lord and your Lord. …'" (42:15).

4 See Charles Hartshorne and William L. Reese, *Philosophers Speak of God* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 76–77, where the views of Maimonides, Aquinas, and Ghazali, among others, are described as "Classical Theism."

5 (6:92); also see (10:37), and many other verses.

others, although it is not difficult to find authors in this tradition who take a more strictly apophatic stance. Subsequent discussions then focused on the question of whether the attributes were additional to the divine essence or not. Consensus quickly arose among the Shīʿah that the divine attributes are identical to the divine essence, and this became a fundamental principle of their doctrine of *tawḥīd*. Although the position is similar to that taken by Augustine (*The City of God*, XI, 10), there is no textual evidence of direct awareness of the *mutakallimīn* of Augustine's writings.

Kalām is the approximate equivalent in Islam to scholastic theology. Its practitioners were known as *mutakallimīn*; and this term is usually used for the early Muslim theologians, particularly for the Ashʿarites, Muʿtazilites, the Shīʿī theologians and others who engaged in or reacted to their discussions. With regard to the concept of God, the primary doctrine that was explored and developed by the *mutakallimīn* was that of *tawḥīd*, the affirmation of divine oneness.

God is presented in the Qur'ān as both transcendent and immanent. "He knows that which is before them and that which is behind them, and they do not comprehend anything of His knowledge except what He wishes." (2:255); "Glorious is He and exalted above what they attribute" (6:100); "Certainly We have created man and We know to what his soul tempts him, and We are nearer to him than his jugular vein." (50:16); "To God belong the east and the west: so whichever way you turn, there is the face of God. Indeed God is Pervasive [or All-Embracing or All-Bounteous] and All-Knowing." (2:115).

Although the proper name used for God in the Qur'ān is "Allah", the Qur'ān also mentions many other names and attributes. There are many ways of categorizing the divine attributes. One of the most common ways divides them into the attributes of beauty (*jamāl*) and the attributes of majesty (*jalāl*). According to a frequently cited hadith, God's mercy takes precedence over his wrath. Perhaps there is an allusion to this in the following *āyah*,[6] as well.

"Call upon Allah, or call upon the All-merciful – whichever you call upon, to Him belong the Names most beautiful" (17:110).

The main divine attributes discussed by the *mutakallimīn* were Life, Power, and Knowledge. The Shīʿī theologians, Kulayni (d. 941) and Shaykh Ṣadūq (d. 991) divided the divine attributes into attributes of essence and attributes of act. The attributes of essence are those that apply eternally to God independent of His acts, such as the three mentioned. The attributes of act are those that involve the production of effects in time; these were understood to be God's

6 The verses of the Qur'ān are called *āyāt* (sing., *āyah*), literally signs.

hearing, seeing, willing, and speaking. Life was applied to God by the *ḥukamā* (philosophers) on the basis of divine power and knowledge. So, knowledge and power, in this respect were traditionally the most fundamental of the attributes of essence. Much later, in the tradition of Mullā Ṣadrā, the divine will was shifted from the attributes of action to the attributes of essence and was explained in terms of divine love in the works of Imam Khomeini.

Shaykh Mufīd's theology of the divine attributes is based on a rationalism that he shared with the Muʿtazilites. Like the Muʿtazilites, Mufīd (d. 1022) accepts neither the Ashʿarite realism of attributes nor a strictly negative theology. The Ashʿarites held that God is Knowing because of the possession of knowledge. According to Shaykh Ṣadūq's negative theology, to attribute knowing to God is merely to deny that He is ignorant. The position of Mufīd is that God is Knowing by His essence.

Shaykh Ṣadūq had offered what amounted to a proof that the method of relying strictly on narrations (at least in the Shīʿī corpus) would itself lead to an endorsement of some of the most central elements of rational theology. It was this idea that opened the way for the more explicitly rational theologies of Shaykh Mufīd and Sharif al-Murtiḍā (d. 1044), and this rationalism, in turn, paved the way for the philosophical theology of Khwājah Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī (d. 1274). Nevertheless, the reliance on narrations did not prevent Shaykh Ṣadūq from offering philosophical proofs as commentaries on some of the narrations he transmitted. Thus, in his collection, *Al-Tawḥīd*, we find the following:

> The proof that Allah – the Exalted, the Mighty, and the Most High – is All-Knowing, Ever-Living, and All-Powerful in and of Himself – not by knowledge, power, and life, that is other than Him – is that if He were All-Knowing by means of knowledge, then His Knowledge could only be two things: eternal or created. If His Knowledge is created then He, glorified be His Praise, was without knowledge before its creation. This would be an imperfect attribute, and every imperfection is caused, as we explained previously. If His Knowledge is eternal, then it becomes necessary for something other than Allah, the Mighty and High, to be eternal. This is infidelity by consensus. The same argument can be applied to the All Powerful and His Omnipotence and the Ever-Living and His Life.[7]

Shaykh Ṣadūq concludes that the divine attributes do not have any existence of their own. To say that God has the attribute of knowledge is just a way of saying that He knows. It has no further ontological significance. This could be interpreted in two ways. Shaykh Ṣadūq himself was inclined to accept a negative

7 Muhammad ibn Ali Ibn Babawayh, *Kitab Al-Tawhid*, trans. A. R. Rizvi. (Qom: The Savior Foundation, 2009), 228.

theology according to which we are to interpret the statement that God knows as a way of saying that He is not ignorant. The majority of Shīʿī theologians, however, followed the suggestion of Shaykh Mufīd that the divine attributes are identical to the divine essence. They do not have any existence of their own, but are all identical with the divine essence. The human comprehension of the divine essence is limited in such a manner that what are understood as different attributes are predicated of God. The attributes have different names because human beings comprehend the divine essence in limited ways, but these limited conceptions all refer to the single divine essence.

Ṭūsī's most famous work of theology, the *Tajrīd al-Iʿtiqād* (*Abstract of Beliefs*), is divided into six main divisions called targets (*maqāṣid*, sing., *maqṣad*). The first *maqṣad* is about general matters, and is subdivided into three chapters: (1) on existence and nothingness; (2) on quiddity and that which pertains to it; and (3) on cause and effect. These chapters deal entirely with general metaphysical issues, and there is no revealed theology in them at all. The second *maqṣad* is on substance and accident, and is divided into five chapters: (1) on substance; (2) on bodies; (3) additional issues about bodies; (4) on immaterial substances; and (5) on accidents, including problems on quantity, quality, and relations. Like the first *maqṣad*, as is obvious from the chapter headings, the second is also about metaphysics. The first two parts take up more than a third of the entire work. The third *maqṣad* finally arrives at theology in the specific sense with a discussion of the proofs for the existence of God. The three chapters of this *maqṣad* are: (1) on divine existence; (2) on the divine attributes; and (3) on the divine actions. In these matters, the influence of Ibn Sīnā is quite clear. The fourth *maqṣad* is on prophethood, the fifth on imamate, and the sixth and final *maqṣad* is on the resurrection.

The philosophical theology of Ṭūsī led to treatments of *tawḥīd* as consisting of four principles: (1) *tawḥīd* of essence; (2) *tawḥīd* of attributes; (3) *tawḥīd* of actions; (4) *tawḥīd* of worship. The first three are doctrinal; while the fourth is practical. Our concern is with the second. *Tawḥīd* of attributes means that the divine attributes of essence are identical to the essence. This leads to the puzzle of how two attributes that are distinct, such as omniscience and omnipotence, can yet both be identical to the divine essence. We have already seen the standard reply to this articulated by Shaykh Mufīd.[8] Nevertheless, defenders of negative theology continued to appear among the Shīʿah, one of the

8 For more on the differences in the theologies of divine attributes in Shaykh Ṣadūq and Shaykh Mufīd, see Martin J. McDermott, *The Theology of al-Shaikh al-Mufid* (Beirut: Librairie Orientale, 1986).

most notable being Qāḍī Saʿīd Qummī (d. 1696), who wrote a commentary on Shaykh Ṣadūq's *Tawḥīd*.

Part One: Divine Knowledge

Given the importance of the topic of divine knowledge, there have been discussions of it since the beginnings of Islam. Particular attention was first given to the moral idea that since God is aware of all the thoughts, words, and conduct of human beings, they should be motivated to correct themselves in view of the fact that God knows all of this. This point is found in numerous *āyāt* of the Qur'ān and in narrations. The municifent Prophet and the infallible imams informed the Muslims about divine knowledge so that they would try to be obedient to God and remove themselves from the pollutions of their sins. Reflection on the comprehensiveness of divine knowledge led from the earliest times to doubts about whether divine knowledge is not incompatible with human freedom. So, a second set of discussions concerns this issue. In this regard, particularly prominent was the idea that God knew what would happen before it occurred. A third issue was whether changes in events would not necessitate changes in divine knowledge. There are allusions to these three issues in the Qur'ān or narrations, and they are treated by Shaykh Ṣadūq in a chapter of his book, *al-Tawḥīd*, on knowledge, which contains sixteen narrations with regard to divine knowledge (separate from narrations in which divine knowledge is merely mentioned along with other divine attributes).[9]

Early discussions among the Shīʿah about divine knowledge were often centered on the problem of how to admit the existence of divine knowledge without introducing multiplicity in God. Those who advocated an apophatic or negative theology sought to avoid making the items of divine knowledge parts of God by reinterpreting all positive knowledge attributions as denials of ignorance. For God to know the thoughts of His servants, for example, is not for there to be some kind of mental representation of them in a divine mind, but merely for these thoughts not to be hidden from Him, where the claim that something is not hidden from God is taken as a denial of divine ignorance of it. Later, the Muʿtazilah and Shīʿī theologians debated various alternatives to negative theology designed to prevent multiplicity in God without resorting to apophaticism. For example, Abū Hāshim Jubāʿī (d. 933) held that God is a

9 Ibn Babawayh, *Kitab Al-Tawhid*, 255–63.

knower in the sense of having a fixed state (*ḥāl*) of knowing, which itself is neither existent nor non-existent.

Another threat to divine unity came with reflections on the diversity of things known by God. If God knows several things, this would seem to imply that there are distinct instances of knowledge in God. God's knowledge of the oceans, for example, would be something other than His knowledge of the birds. With regard to this problem, the theologians used the template for resolving the differences in the attributes: God's knowledge is one, and is the same as the divine essence. Humans divide God's knowledge into knowledge of the oceans and knowledge of the birds; but these are just ways to direct the human mind to different objects that are included in God's single comprehensive knowledge.

In the course of the development of Shīʿī theology, the dominant views came to be that God has knowledge of his own essence, and what is other than it, of universals and particulars, both prior to their creation and after it. Divine knowledge is unlimited and *qadīm* (eternal, uncreated), and identical to the divine essence. Most of the Shīʿī *mutakallimīn* and philosophers accepted this position, while the view that became predominant among the Sunni theologians was the Ashʿarite teaching that divine knowledge is additional to His essence. Although many Muʿtazalites held that God is knowing without there being an attribute of divine knowledge, this view died out, except in the form of negative theology, as with Ḍarār ibn 'Amru (d. 815), who held that God is a knower only in the sense that he is not ignorant.

As Rahim Acar has explained in this volume, two problems about divine knowledge were particularly prominent in the works of Ibn Sīnā and the ensuing debates: How can God know that which changes without there being any change in His knowledge? How can God know material particulars when His knowledge is immaterial? The key to Ibn Sīnā's answer to these and other questions can only be found if we abandon attempts to model divine knowledge on human knowledge and instead consider the theological requisites for predicating knowledge to God. Acar identifies three requisites of divine simplicity: (1) God's essence is God's existence; (2) God's knowledge is the divine essence or being; and (3) God does not have distinct properties. Acar also draws attention to the thesis that divine knowledge is not a passive reflection of things external to it, but is the same as the divine imparting of their being. In view of these assumptions, we can turn to the question of how God can know particulars.

Acar explains that knowledge of particulars requires their identification. Humans identify particulars by ostension, which depends on the relations between the human and the known in space and time. The problem of individuation was discussed extensively in Islamic philosophy and among the Christian scholastics. The late Jorge Gracia (1942–2021) identifies

several competing principles of individuation that were debated among the scholastics:[10] some held that the accidental features of a thing are responsible for its individuality and, so, could be used to individuate a thing, to pick it out as a particular object to be known. Among the most important accidents for the individuation of a sensible thing were the thing's location. In theories of individuation by ostension, it is because each thing is held to have a unique location that ostension can individuate. In later scholasticism, the idea of a *haecceity*, introduced by Scotus, was much discussed as a sui generis principle of individuality. An earlier commonly accepted theory was that, at least in the case of material things, they were individuated by their matter. It is this idea that is behind Ghazālī's criticism of Ibn Sīnā's account of divine knowledge: since God is immaterial, divine knowledge can only be of forms; but if it is matter that distinguishes material particulars of the same species, then what distinguishes them cannot be known by God; and so, God will lack knowledge of particulars and know only their universal forms. Although the majority of the Shīʿī theologians defended Ibn Sīnā's position in this debate, there continue to be others who argue that God's inability to know particulars is a consequence of the view of the *ḥukamā* (the Muslim philosophers), and demonstrates that their views about the nature of God and his knowledge should be rejected in favor of a more strict reliance on religious sources.

The theories of individuation debated in the works of the Muslim philosophers had a profound influence on subsequent discussions. Gracia writes:

> Even a cursory look at the work of Avicenna and Averroes will reveal how heavily Latin discussions of individuation relied on Islamic sources. The view that substantial form is the principle of individuation can be easily traced to the commentaries of Averroes on Aristotle, and the prominent position given to existence in individuation is clearly evident in texts of Avicenna. Indeed, until the very end of the period that concerns us, Averroes was identified as the source of the first and Avicenna as the source of the second. As we have seen in an earlier chapter in this volume, Suárez follows in this tradition. But it was not just doctrines of individuation based on substantial form and existence that Latin authors found in Islamic sources. They also found views concerning the role of matter, considered as prime matter or as matter under certain determinations. Early medieval authors had not really explored these possibilities. No one in the early Middle Ages seems to have thought of substantial form, existence, or even matter as principles of individuation.[11]

10 See his introduction to Jorge J. E. Gracia, ed., *Individuation in Scholasticism: The Later Middle Ages and the Counter-reformation (1150–1650)* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994).

11 See J. J. E. Gracia, "Epilogue: Individuation in Scholasticism", in Jorge J. E. Gracia, ed. *Individuation in Scholasticism: The Later Middle Ages and the Counter-reformation (1150–1650)* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 544–45.

The view of individuation that Gracia himself defends is that the distinguishing element that makes a thing an individual distinct from all others is its existence; and, as indicated above, he notes that this view was usually attributed to Ibn Sīnā by the scholastics.[12] Existence escapes the hylomorphic division. It is neither form nor matter. Although Ibn Sīnā classifies existence as an accident, the term "accident" here only means that for contingent beings, it is "accidental", that is contingent, whether they exist; it does not mean that we are to place existence among Aristotle's categories of accident, such as quality, quantity, position, and so forth. Existence is not an extra twist in a universal form that distinguishes a real object from one that is merely possible.[13] So, God cannot be said to know particulars by knowing their universal forms, for any individuating existence will fail to be universal.

A suggestion that will solve the problem of the divine knowledge of material particulars is provided by Allan Bäck's analysis of Ibn Sīnā's account of determinate reference to sensory particulars by humans:

> Avicenna says, we have a direct, intuitive experience of the existence and individuality of a sensible individual. Our conception of being a real, singular existence is immediate and given by direct acquaintance. So the individuality of a sensible individual substance is an intrinsic feature of its existence *in re*. This individuality has the consequence of every individual's having a unique set of accidents at each time. But it is the material existence of the individual substance, the presence of the substantial form in matter that provides the active principle of persisting through time with a unique, though constantly changing, set of accidents.[14]

In order to apply this suggestion to the problem of divine knowledge, it is useful to use the distinction between *knowledge by presence* (*'ilm al-ḥuḍūrī*) and acquired knowledge, or conceptual knowledge (*'ilm al-ḥuṣūlī*), although the

12 Jorge J. E. Gracia, *Individuality: An Essay On the Foundations of Metaphysics.* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 271, for acknowledgment of Avicenna; and 170–78, for his argument that only existence can serve adequately as the principle of individuation.

13 For Ibn Sina's distinction of "accidental" in the sense of Aristotle's categories and in the sense of what does not follow necessarily from a thing's nature, that is, "accidental" in the sense of Porphyry's *Isagoge*, see Shahram Pazouki, "From Aristotle's Ousia to Ibn Sina's Jawhar," in *Substance and Attribute: Western and Islamic Traditions in Dialogue*, ed. Christian Kanzian and Muhammad Legenhausen (Frankfurt: Ontos Verlag, 2007), 163–71, 168.

14 Allan Bäck, "The Islamic Background: Avicenna (b. 980; d. 1037) and Averroes (b. 1126; d. 1198)," in *Individuation in Scholasticism: The Later Middle Ages and the Counterreformation (1150–1650)*, ed. Jorge J. E. Gracia (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 39–67, 49–50.

distinction was not made explicit in Ibn Sīnā's works, but came into prominence with the *Shaykh al-Ishrāq* (*Master of Illumination*), Shihāb ad-Dīn Yahya Sohrevardi (1154–1191). Nevertheless, what Bäck calls "direct intuitive experience of existence" would come to be classified as knowledge by presence. Furthermore, the intuitive apprehension of the self in Ibn Sīnā's "flying man" argument suggests that the individual existence of the known object can be apprehended by the intellect without the aid of any sensible qualities.[15] Self-awareness was considered a paradigm case of knowledge by presence in the subsequent theological/philosophical tradition.

Deborah Black has also considered applying the idea of direct awareness of particular existence to the problem of God's knowledge of particulars both in connection with self-knowledge in the "flying man" argument and in divine knowledge of particulars; but she expresses disappointment that Ibn Sīnā himself had all the pieces that would have been needed for a new account of the intelligibility of particular individuals, yet failed to take the final step.[16] She observes that Ibn Sīnā repeatedly falls back on the bundle of accidents view of individuality despite the fact that he indicates a principle of individuation which she sees as foreshadowing a Scotistic account. Instead of Bäck's "direct intuitive experience of existence" she uses Ibn Sīnā's own phrase, *maʿnan mutashakhaṣṣ*, which she translates as "individuated intention"; and she quotes Ibn Sīnā as saying that what specifies a thing as an individual is its existence and an individuated intention,[17] although he fails to refer to this as a general principle of individuation.

This is enough to enable us to take Acar's conclusion to his contribution to this volume one step further. Acar writes that we need to recognize that Ibn Sīnā held that God has knowledge of particulars, even if we conclude that Ibn Sīnā has not successfully explained how God has this knowledge. But he also indicates that it is a mistake to think of God as looking down from the atemporal realm and trying to find antecedently existing particulars. If all God had to go on were universals, bundling universals together will never be able to narrow the possible instances to one. So, Acar suggests that we take heed of the fact that the particulars only exist because they are known by God. But

15 For an insightful discussion with a good bibliography for the "flying man" and other related arguments in Ibn Sīnā, see Seyed N. Mousavian and Mohammad Ardeshir, "Avicenna on the Primary Propositions," *History and Philosophy of Logic*, (2018) 1–30.

16 Deborah L. Black, "Avicenna on Individuation, Self-Awareness, and God's Knowledge of Particulars," in *Philosophical and Theological Explorations in the Abrahamic Traditions*, ed. Richard Taylor and Irfan Omar (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2012), 255–81.

17 Black, "Avicenna on Individuation, Self-Awareness, and God's Knowledge of Particulars," 259.

whether the divine knowledge is receptive or creative, there still needs to be a direction of the divine knowledge to the particular. Black suggests that Ibn Sīnā failed to heed his own advice, namely, that we should not confuse the immaterial with the universal. The *existence* of a particular material thing may be immaterial in itself, as a particular existence, yet not be universal. Using the language of the subsequent Shīʿī theologians, we could say that God knows all things through knowledge by presence. The particular existence of each thing is directly present to God (or is present to Him in its individuality through the mediation of other intellects). It is in virtue of this presence that existence is bestowed upon particular contingents; and it is in virtue of this same relation of presence that these contingents are known to God. The existence of each particular is the *sui generis differentia individualis* created and known by God. It is this relation by which a contingent entity is related to that whose existence is necessary that is called both the bestowal of existence on the contingent and the divine knowledge of the contingent.

Part Two: Divine Knowledge of the Present Time

While the previous part provides an outline of some discussions in Shīʿī theology about the knowledge of God, one of the persistent philosophical puzzles about divine knowledge concerns the questions of how God can know that a particular moment is present, how He can be aware of change, and how He can know the truth of propositions in which there is an essential temporal indexical, such as what might be expressed by the sentence "Now I am typing".[18] Brian Leftow has graced this volume with a contribution that addresses these questions in a manner that is fundamentally consistent with a kind of philosophical theology that has become current in the Shīʿī seminaries in Qom. Furthermore, Leftow addresses in some detail the views of Avicenna on this issue, which are also given attention in the seminaries.

Leftow rehearses Avicenna's argument in *The Metaphysics of the Healing*[19] that God's knowledge does not change, and, following Norman Kretzmann,[20] draws the conclusion that Avicenna's position implies that there is something

18 These issues are also treated in Muhammad Legenhausen, "Lecture Ten, Eternity," *Al-Tawhid*, XII(3), 109–37.

19 Avicenna, *The Metaphysics of the Healing*, ed. Michael E. Marmura (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 2005), 287–90.

20 Norman Kretzmann, "Omniscience and Immutability," *The Journal of Philosophy* 63, no. 14 (July 1966): 409–21.

God does not know, namely, what time it is. By and large, the consensus among analytic philosophers who have studied the issues is that Avicenna identified an inconsistent triad made up of the doctrines of divine immutability, divine omniscience, and the proposition that there is a unique particular instant that is the present time. In his *Physics*, however, Avicenna goes to some lengths to demonstrate that time is real and that it is flowing. The now is real as a division between past and future, however, only insofar as such a division can be made. The now is considered to be *flowing* because of the coordination of temporal and spatial locations during motion, and not because of some metaphysical privilege for the present.[21]

To understand the precise sense in which God does not know what time it is, given Avicenna's premises, two issues need to be clarified. First, there is the well-known problem of knowledge of particulars; and second, there is the problem of restricting the present to a particular time. As for the first issue, the present time is assumed to be a particular and there are limitations on how an immaterial being can know particulars if their particularity depends on their being instantiated in matter. Even if instants are taken to be abstractions of some sort, these abstractions are made on the basis of bodies in motion. It is not a limitation on divine knowledge if it does not extend to the particular, since this is a necessary consequence of immateriality. God knows all things in the most minute detail, but stripped of their materiality. Avicenna allows that God does know particulars, but His knowledge of a particular only occurs insofar as the universals that describe it happen to apply only to one thing. One does not have to be a "presentist" to think of the now as metaphysically privileged. For presentists, the privilege is that other times do not exist at all. But one might hold that although past and future moments are (timelessly) equally real, only the present is (temporally) real. Past moments *were* real and future moments *will be*. Avicenna does not appear to have held any such view. If there is no unique privilege that necessarily picks out the present moment, then presence will reduce to simultaneity of events described by sets of universals that are not multiply instantiated, which Leftow calls "unique-F's". Leftow thinks that the required unique-F's may be lacking, since the potential for multiple instantiation will not be eliminated by specification of details; and he suggests that this may be why Avicenna would accept the argument that God does not know what time it is. I think that Avicenna would accept what Leftow calls the principle of the Identity of Pure Universal Indiscernibles, so, I am less pessimistic about the potential for picking out particulars by unique-F's; but I

21 Jon McGinnis, "Ibn Sina on the Now," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 73, no. 1 (Winter 1999): 98.

agree that Avicenna is committed to the position that God does not know what time it is (relative to His own atemporal standpoint). In other words, even if an immaterial being is able to know particulars by using unique-F's that are only contingently successful at uniqueness, this will not be sufficient for this immaterial being to know what time it is. In addition to picking out unique instants, He needs to pick out the right ones.

Even if we have, with the help of Acar, solved the problem of particularity, there is still a question of how to figure out which particular instant is the present one. This is where Leftow's solution to the problem begins. For there to be a unique referent of "now", the word must be uttered (or keyed in). "Now" will refer to the time of utterance. But if all times are equally present for God, as in the definition of "eternity" due to Boethius, God will not know what time it is, that is, He will not know any particular time as "now" in the way that we do, since for Him every time will be now, while for us the present is restricted.

Leftow provides an illuminating analogy between spatial limitation and temporal limitation. Just as the fact that there is no place that could be identified as "here" to indicate the position of a being that is not spatially extended does not mean that "here" cannot be used by finite extended beings to indicate their locations, likewise that fact that "now" cannot be used by God to indicate *His* temporal location does not imply that temporally limited beings cannot do so. If we push the analogy further, we observe that just as the referent of "here" is relative to the context of speaker utterance, so too, the interpretation of "now" is relative to the context of speaker utterance.

To follow the analogy yet further, Leftow observes that according to the special theory of relativity (STR), events e_1 and e_2 can be mutually simultaneous, relative to some inertial reference frames, although they will not be simultaneous relative to other inertial frames. Consider some inertial frame, F. For any event *e*, F will determine a set of events that will be simultaneous with *e* relative to F, S*e*F = $\{e_x: e_x$ is simultaneous with *e* in F$\}$. These sets of simultaneous events will be such that for some possible different inertial frame, F_i, S*e*F_i will have both e_1 and e_2 as members, although $e_1 \in$ S*e*F_i but $e_2 \notin$ S*e*F_j. In the 1960's, Hilary Putnam argued that STR was incompatible with there being a metaphysically privileged present time, because the present time would be simultaneous with some events relative to some reference frames but not simultaneous with them relative to other frames. Leftow suggests that Putnam was wrong about this. If I understand him correctly, I would concur that it remains possible for there to be privileged present times, but relative to events in frames, because the time of a given event would be identified with its simultaneous set relative to a frame, and for different frames these sets will differ. Frames may be taken to determine simultaneous sets for a given event, such as an act of uttering, "now,"

with or without any of these sets determining a metaphysically privileged present. Leftow further suggests that we could understand the divine standpoint with respect to time as though God's inertial framework were one relative to which all events are simultaneous, or, as he explains it by analogy, time dilation is infinite from the divine perspective.

Leftow's analogy helps us to understand how events might be present, and hence simultaneous, for God that are past, present and future for us. But we should not be misled by the analogy into thinking that God occupies some inertial frame. It is clear that Leftow would agree that God transcends all inertial frameworks no less than He transcends time.

Although I agree with the main points of Leftow's position, there are two points about which I should express reservations, a minor point and a major one. The minor point concerns whether God has propositional knowledge at all. According to the tradition outlined in Part One of this paper, at least as that tradition developed subsequent to Khwājah Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī in the seventh/thirteenth century, divine knowledge is entirely knowledge by presence. God does not know by having true beliefs but by directly, that is, without mental representation, having awareness of all things. The distinction between knowledge by presence and representational or conceptual knowledge is often illustrated with the distinction between knowing the sweetness of honey and knowing *that* honey is sweet. Divine knowledge is like the direct experience of the sweetness of honey, although it is not mediated by sense experience; so, it is not knowledge through a proposition that represents the truth that honey is sweet. For the purpose of our discussion about whether God knows what time it is, however, we can ignore the difference, for the question could be translated as that of whether God is aware of the presence of some event as "now" in the way that we become aware of the sweetness of honey. What we learn from Leftow is that the now-ness of the present moment is not comparable to the sweetness of honey. It is not a quality that an event either has or lacks, just as there is no quality of a given location that makes it "here". We can denote places by using "here" only because our positions in space are limited.

The major reservation is about the denial that God truly can be said to know what time it is. I agree with Leftow that in the sense he gives to the question, God cannot know what time it is, no more than He can know the limits of His wisdom, life, or other divine attributes, since He has unlimited wisdom, life, etc. Knowing what time it is, as this is usually understood, implies being limited in a manner that does not apply to God. Nevertheless, I think there is a perfectly ordinary sense of knowing what time it is that is suggested by Leftow's own examples that show how God may be said, truly, to know what time it is.

Normally, a statement that it is 12:54 in the afternoon is made for others in the same time zone. With meetings that take place over the internet with participants in different countries, we have all found that occasionally there is confusion about times because the time zone is not specified. If from Iran, I ask someone in Germany what time it is, it will normally be assumed that I am not asking what time it is in my time zone, but in the time zone of the person addressed. But sometimes this is not clear, and the person addressed might calculate the time in my time zone so as to tell me the answer that is correct relative to my position. The question, "What time is it?" has no absolute answer. It is relative to time zones.

Suppose you are in a rocket for which there is time dilation with respect to Leftow's inertial frame. Relative to your frame in the rocket, Leftow's typing is simultaneous with the signing of the Treaty of Westphalia, while the typing and the signing are not simultaneous relative to Leftow's frame. Suppose Leftow were able to ask you what time it is by sending a physically impossible instantaneous message to the rocket. You might answer by looking at the clock on the rocketship wall and reporting what you see by another impossible message. But you might, instead, realize that this information would be useless to Leftow. So, you might report to Leftow what time it is relative to Leftow's inertial frame, by sending a message to Leftow stating the time on the clock on *his* wall simultaneous to his question relative to Leftow's frame of reference. If you could do this, we might say that you know what time it is for Leftow. Likewise, God could send an angel to announce the time whenever anyone asked in such a way that the angel would announce the accurate time relative to the framework and time zone of the questioner. In that case, after checking the accuracy of the angelic announcements on numerous occasions, the questioner could reasonably conclude that God does indeed know what time it is.

In the explanation of God's knowledge with reference to an angel, the angel should be understood as an aid to the imagination, in the sense that divine knowledge is not dependent on whether and how the angels are dispatched. The point is that God's knowledge can be described relative to a particular set of inertial frameworks, those *we* occupy, without any need to single out any divinely priviliged framework. Independent of us, there is no present time for God, because independent of us, there is no absolute present time at all. What determines the present is a set of events held to be simultaneous, where this set of events can be imagined to include that of someone saying, "It is now 2:24 pm" on some particular date at a given location. Which events are held to be simultaneous with the announcement depends on how things are moving

relative to others. If the physical locations and motions of things are not sufficient to pick out a unique simultaneity set for a particular event, our own intuitions of presence will only specify how things appear to us. We can say that God knows what time it is for me as I write this because the time is sufficiently determinate from my own point of view, not because there is any specific present time for God, or a unique simultaneity set that includes the event of my writing.

Earlier, we saw that in the Shīʿī theological tradition, problems about the reconciliation of divine unity with the plurality of things known by God was achieved by positing that divine knowledge remains simple even while having a multiplicity of objects, just as the divine essence is simple despite incorporating a multiplicity of attributes. Likewise, God's knowledge of that which changes does not require God's knowledge to change, as Ibn Sīnā and Ghazālī each explained in their own ways. Analogously, God can know what time it is for me here now even if there is no here and now for God.

The negative theologian might explain God's knowledge of what time it is by saying that it merely means that God is not ignorant of the time. Mufīd was able to go beyond negative theology by holding that God knows many things in a single act of knowing. The multiplicity in the objects of knowledge is compatible with the simple unity of the knowing subject. Likewise, God can know what time it is at different times, and the single divine act of knowing can include knowledge that I report by reading the clock, and that we attribute to God by confessing that God has the ability to make revelations to us that are appropriate to our own circumstances, including the circumstances I am in with respect to the positions of the planets and stars, their relative accellerations, the clock on the wall, and the imperfect ways in which we understand time.

I think that this can also help us understand how time could be flowing, even for an immutable atemporal God. God can know, timelessly, how time seems to flow for His creatures relative to the inertial frameworks they occupy. God can also know how time seems to flow relative to any inertial framework (unless there are exceptions for massless photons or infinitely fast rockets). So, God could truly affirm that time flows (for finite creatures), even though it does not flow through His mind, as it were. Divine knowledge by presence of the flowing of time would be vicarious, by virtue of His knowledge by presence of the innermost phenomenology of His creatures' experiences of time.

In sum, I would suggest we have three conceptions of knowledge that are at issue in the discussion of whether God knows what time it is. First, there is the

idea that knowledge is true warranted belief, as Alvin Plantinga understands warrant.[22] Second, there is knowledge by presence. Third, there is knowledge that is attributed to someone who is able to answer questions correctly. I agree with Leftow that God does not have warranted belief about what time it is relative to the divine perspective, because there is no time or set of times within which God is restricted and relative to which the question *could* have an answer. God is not confined to any inertial frame just as He is not confined to any time zone. But this does not mean that God does not know by direct awareness what time it is for those in my time zone at any given moment. God can know what time it is for us now, that is, relative to our inertial framework at the time I am typing this. God can also have vicarious knowledge by presence of our experience of the flowing of time. It is due to this sort of knowledge about how things appear to creatures that we may also attribute to God the ability to respond correctly to questions about what time it is, and in this dialogical sense, to know what time it is.

22 Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

PART II

Justice and Mercy

Justice and Mercy as a Paradoxical Task?

The Perspectives of Friedrich Schleiermacher and Paul Ricoeur on Evil, Accountability and the Question of Reconciliation

Maureen Junker-Kenny

Enquiring into the relation between justice and mercy as two of the divine attributes, theorists find themselves at a number of intersections. They include, one, that of the three monotheistic religions, two, of philosophy as the general consciousness of truth, and of theology as the systematic reflection on the content of a particular faith tradition, and three, of analytic philosophy as one approach in relation to other schools in philosophy.

My contribution is situated mainly at the second intersection. Its title which contains the concept of "evil", as distinct from "suffering", shows that it includes a practical ethical interest. Thus, the encounter between philosophy and theology will take place more precisely at the point of transition from ethics to philosophy of religion, and from there to a philosophically informed Christian theology. The frameworks for relating justice and mercy proposed by the theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (2) and the philosopher Paul Ricoeur (3) will be examined in the central two parts. First, however, the two perspectives that are being contrasted in the project invitation – one "traditional theological", the other "analytic philosophical" – will be compared regarding the epistemological question of the provenance of the different attributes of God (1). In my concluding fourth part I will return to a comparison of these two traditions of thinking in light of the problems of evil, accountability and reconciliation that involve conceptions of human agency and of God's essence (4).

1. Identifying the Two Sides to be Bridged: "Traditional Theological" and "Analytic Philosophical" Debates

Before this field can be entered, some preliminary clarification needs to be reached on how the assumed counterpart to an analytic approach, "traditional thought" or "traditional theological discussions", is constituted internally. The claim of faith traditions that there is a God challenges the restriction of thinking to terms of immanence (1.1). How do the two approaches reconstruct the origin of knowing about divine attributes (1.2)?

1.1 *"Traditional" by What Criteria?*

The project of "building bridges" between "traditional theological" debates and those in analytical philosophy is important. But each of these discourse traditions is far from monolithic. The danger of constructing an abstract unity in each religion increases when the diverse positions they have elaborated in their histories of thinking are assembled under the term "traditional". It makes it easy to *historicise* theology as an approach that, while internally coherent, is time-bound and is now faced with a new paradigm which might replace it. Observing discourses in ethics, one learns to become sensitive to the use of concepts that contain an implicit shifting of the burden of proof. For example, it could be said that "traditionally", societies applied the concepts of human dignity and moral autonomy to each individual human being. Yet recent scientific insights are held to have uncovered how determined human beings are – neurologically, genetically and culturally/environmentally, making it questionable whether our self-understanding as free agents can be maintained. This conflict shows how hitherto guiding assumptions, even those enshrined in international legal documents, can suddenly be turned into museum pieces by the term "traditional" without any discussion on criteria of validity, contexts of enquiry and premises.[1] If this is true for contemporary ethics, it may be even more the case for truth claims about the transcendent reality of a God. These claims are linked to foundational scriptures some of which originated three millennia before our time. Is this fact enough to dismiss such texts as "traditional" in the sense of belonging to a bygone era? Or can they be regarded as offering options for determining one's life also for today's citizens? Must they be considered as contenders in the range of actually existing choices and even allowed to challenge constraints of particular views of what is compatible with modern assumptions? The concepts of God, of creation, of resurrection, of ultimate forgiveness would then not just be "traditional", conventional, or marked too much by their "otherness". They would then be open to be argued for as worthwhile candidates that should not be subdued immediately to a middle line of what is held to be plausible. It means to become aware that contemporary modes of thinking may be conventional or "traditional" in other ways, depending on the criteria used. Also the historical research into religious traditions can be in danger of short-changing its subject if it does not take

1 In *Innere Freiheit. Grenzen der nachmetaphysischen Moralkonzeptionen* (*Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie*, Sonderband 36) (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2014), 96, Fn. 89, Herta Nagl-Docekal points out that the term "traditional" can be used to "push off into history (*in die Geschichte abzuschieben*) a philosophical response that opposes an increasing replacement of the theme of 'morality' by a theory that gives priority to self-interest".

into account the horizon of "possibility", rather than "plausibility".[2] This hermeneutical rule formulated by the feminist New Testament scholar Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza is rooted in an understanding of theology as ultimately practical, a condition which I will come back to in my fourth part.

1.2 *Speaking About "Divine Attributes": From Which Sources is Such Knowledge Attained?*

Having clarified the location of my enquiry as pertaining to the intersection of "philosophy" in general, and "theology" – both umbrella terms covering a variety of approaches –, the assumptions that guide my reading of the sequence of "divine attributes" need to be spelled out next. So how do I answer the question posed by the organizers of how to "perceive the attributes of Omnipotence and Omniscience, Justice and Mercy, Simplicity and Divine Action"?

Many theologians and philosophers would agree that "simplicity" is an attribute that relates to a *philosophical* concept of God. There are reasons, however, to question whether also divine "omnipotence" can be derived from human reason.[3] "Justice" and "mercy", for sure, cannot be known a priori merely from

2 Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "Re-visioning Christian Origins: *In Memory of Her* Revisited", in *Christian Origins: Worship, Belief and Society*, ed. Kieran O'Mahoney (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003), 225–50, 244–45. In order to avoid both literalism in reading the sacred scriptures of a tradition, and a suspension of all claims to historical truth, it is necessary to research the historical traces of the revelatory figures and events portrayed in these writings but to do so in a hermeneutics that is critical in two directions. If only a "plausibility" criterion is followed, an existing consensus may prevail. Academic rigour demands a more stringent procedure that takes into account existing power relations: "then history/historiography, in contrast to the prevailing view, is not simply an objective science but a critical social practice" (225).

3 This has to do with its link to the "creation" of an independent "other" to God, involving both the freedom and the goodness of God. It is instructive that the late medieval Franciscan theologian John Duns Scotus includes omnipotence under the revealed attributes, not taking for granted that the Creator God which the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament profess can be accessed from philosophy. The motif is to regain God's freedom in creating the world against a view of the God-world relationship that bordered on determinism. Noting the necessitarian implications of the Aristotelian system and its Arab and Persian interpreters, Scotus succeeded in elaborating a framework that sets out from God's freedom yet makes space for free human counterparts. This qualification, that God restricts the absolute divine power by a *potentia Dei ordinata* for the sake of the human creatures, can only be won from the experience of the goodness of God that is reflected in the Bible. Natural reason is able to attain the concept of a non-contingent being to whom the bare concept of *ens infinitum* can be attributed. The perspective from the human subject is part of the course of argumentation that extends solely to God as the "first known" but no longer establishes in an objectivist way the existence of a highest being. Scotus thus breaks with the fusion of philosophical and theological statements in the High Middle Ages. In *Selbstmitteilung Gottes. Herausforderungen*

a general idea of God. They require a foundation in history and are thus based on "tradition" in the constitutive sense which marks theological epistemology. These attributes are only accessible through divine revelation, not deducible from human reason. Revelation is a specific kind of "divine action". But how are human subjects able to claim an action to have God as its author? An analysis of the anthropological presuppositions of revelation is needed to clarify what makes divine action or revelation understandable and significant for the human person. A concept of human freedom will be required to spell out their capability to be addressed by God. Its effect regarding the use of divine "omniscience", however, will be to limit this seemingly automatic implication. At least the question must be raised if God has foreknowledge of human deeds, or if human action in contrast must be captured as something unforeseeable also by God. In that case, God would be understood to have created humans with their own capability of decision-making and as counterparts in an *open* history.[4] This history will include good and evil actions of fellow humans towards each other. It is the place where the question of God's justice and/or mercy appears, in relation to God's judgement on each human agent. But how can both attributes be connected? The philosopher Jürgen Habermas has summarized why linking these two qualities constitutes a dilemma:

> An egalitarian universalism is implicit in the powerful image of the Last Judgement when God will perform the paradoxical task of pronouncing a differentiated, at once just but merciful (and ultimately redemptive) judgement [*ein zugleich gerechtes und gnädiges* (*letztlich erlösendes*) *Urteil*] on the actions and omissions of each person in the light of his or her individual life history.[5]

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einer freiheitstheoretischen Offenbarungstheologie. ratio fidei 56 (Regensburg: Pustet, 2015), 367, Fn. 212, Magnus Lerch refers to an "abstract concept of omnipotence respectively absolute divine freedom resulting in a slippage (*Gefälle*) in which the essential goodness of God is subordinated to (*unterliegt*) God's contingent decision". God puts a break on God's freedom in committing to preserve the world and in leaving space for the human creatures' freedom even to counteract God. The link of omnipotence to creation thus needs further differentiation. In *Offenbares Geheimnis. Zur Kritik der negativen Theologie*. ratio fidei 14 (Regensburg: Pustet, 2003), 144, Fn. 164, Magnus Striet explains why a theory of *creabilia*, of possible entities for creation, is required which interrupts an assumption of immediacy between "willing" and doing in God: the "doctrine of *creabilia* with its distinction between divine reason and divine will" corrects the necessitarianism of Arabic cosmology. For an analysis of Scotus's use of Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā) regarding "being" as a "self-evident concept" and of his alternative emphasis on divine freedom, cf. Dirk Ansorge, *Gerechtigkeit und Barmherzigkeit Gottes, Die Dramatik von Vergebung und Versöhnung in bibeltheologischer, theologiegeschichtlicher und philosophiegeschichtlicher Perspektive* (Freiburg: Herder, 2009), 353–59.

4 Thomas Pröpper, *Theologische Anthropologie*, 2 Vols (Freiburg: Herder, 2011), 1:608–609.

5 Jürgen Habermas, "The 'Good Life' – A 'Detestable Phrase': The Significance of the Young Rawls's Religious Ethics for His Political Theory", in *European Journal of Philosophy* 18, no. 3

In the history of "traditional" Christian thinking, marked, as it is, by encounters with different eras and philosophies, quite opposite answers have been given already in Antiquity: such as those by Irenaeus, Origen, and Augustine, based on different readings of the Bible, when just one verse can become dominant. For Augustine, the incorrectly translated line from Romans about "one man" (Adam) "in whom all have sinned" (Rom 5:12) became the foundation stone of the new doctrine of an inherited original sin. It has called forth decisive efforts of elaboration and contestation in Christian anthropology and doctrine of God ever since. These demonstrate that so-called "traditional" theological approaches constitute a history of thought consisting of *disputes* that remain unresolved. In the positions taken, philosophical assumptions can be discerned as well as different understandings of the core of the biblical message.

In the following two sections, a ground-breaking theological approach of the nineteenth century will be compared to philosophical reflections developed in the face of the excesses of evil committed by human agents in the twentieth century. What are the premises for the "Father of modern theology", Friedrich Schleiermacher, to opt for an all-merciful ending of world history that places his position in strong contrast to Augustine's and Calvin's (2)? And why does the French hermeneutical thinker Paul Ricoeur present "forgiveness" as a *limit concept* between ethics and religious thinking, in contrast to the philosopher Hannah Arendt who puts it on the same level of human action as promising? For her, "forgiveness" as turned towards the past accomplishes the same thing as "promising" does in relation to the future, renewing and securing the capability to act (3). We shall see that both Schleiermacher's and Ricoeur's positions include elements of the other side: Ricoeur's is open for biblical symbolic resources; Schleiermacher draws on a concept of God which he seeks to justify philosophically in the Introduction to the *Glaubenslehre* and which he spells out in the material dogmatics as including "perfection". How does this originally Greek inheritance influence his theological view of God's agency?

2. Evil and Reconciliation in Friedrich Schleiermacher's Conception of God and Redemption in the Second Edition of *The Christian Faith* (1830/31)

God's "justice" and "mercy" need to be inscribed into an overall doctrine of God. The decisive change that modern theology owes to Schleiermacher is his break

(September 2010), 443–53. Repr. in *Postmetaphysical Thinking II*, trans Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017), 175–88.

with pre-critical conceptions of God. They either assumed an unquestioned authority of the Bible – which after the Enlightenment critique of tradition was no longer a generally shared premise; or they argued from the metaphysical tradition of establishing the existence of God from the external world as its cause – a connection that had been regarded as unproblematic before Kant analysed the limits of reason. In keeping with Kant's destruction of the proofs for God's existence, the *Glaubenslehre* opens up a different avenue of justifying religion as a constitutive, valid and not inherently flawed pursuit of humanity: an analysis of human self-consciousness with the means of a philosophy of subjectivity (2.1). Schleiermacher's theological anthropology construes sin as a natural imbalance and his Christology highlights redemption as speaking to human freedom. How does God's agency which is analysed under the idea of "causality" and seen to consist in the one divine decree of creation and redemption relate to theological anthropology and Christology (2.2)? Which type of eschatology does his doctrine of God lead to, and what are the reasons for the election of all and the fulfilment of world history in a universal reconciliation, retrieving Origen's conception of an *apokatastasis panton* (2.3)?

2.1 *Implementing Kant's Anthropological Turn in Theology*

As the first theologian to accept and radically transfer Kant's anthropological turn into the structure of a Christian dogmatics, Schleiermacher takes a subject-theoretical approach that makes the "feeling of absolute dependence" its foundational point.[6] His concern is to explicate the Christian faith as a rationally defendable decision while maintaining that it can neither be deduced from metaphysics nor reduced to practical reason. He thus opens up a third position besides Hegel's and Kant's perspectives on religion. His key achievement is to elaborate an alternative to the objectivism of deducing God from the outside world by putting forward a transcendental philosophical analysis of human self-consciousness. In the second edition of *The Christian Faith* of 1830/31, the basis of the argument for the "absolute dependence" (§ 4) of human existence is our facticity. While this point cannot be refuted (it can, however, be ignored that contingency is a basic factor, as Hegel's system does), Schleiermacher

6 Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* (Second edition 1830/31), trans. H. R. Mackintosh/J. S. Stewart (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1928, repr. 1986), 5–18 (§§ 3 and 4), and *Christian Faith. A New Translation and Critical Edition*, 2 vols, trans. Terrence N. Tice, Catherine L. Kelsey and Edwina Lawler; ed. Catherine L. Kelsey and Terrence N. Tice (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016). In *Self, Christ and God in Schleiermacher's Dogmatics. A Theology Reconceived for Modernity* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2020), 42–44, I offer a critical comparison of the new English translation (2016) to the German original regarding the two foundational par. 3 and 4 of the second edition.

takes one step further by concluding that every human being is "in relation with God" (§ 4.4). The material dogmatics which distinguishes the genuinely Christian doctrines from inherited metaphysical explanations uses the Christian pious self-consciousness as its principle of reconstruction. Reached in the fourth section of § 4, the claim of a general human God-consciousness – which comes to its clearest awareness in the monotheistic religions – is determined in its Christian particularity by the historically given experience of having been redeemed by Jesus of Nazareth (§ 11).

This architecture of providing an "Introduction" (where previous Protestant dogmatics moved immediately to the Bible as the document of supernatural revelation) before treating the doctrines in the two material parts is a monument to the insight that the human *process of knowing* must be portrayed at the same time as the *object of knowledge*, here, God's existence. Schleiermacher connects to the general consciousness of truth to show the validity of faith in God while equally safeguarding the historical nature of redemption by the person of Jesus. It is not by chance that as one of the co-founders of the Berlin University which opened in 1810 he was able to defend the place of Theology also at a modern reform university against other positions, such as that of the philosopher Fichte, to discontinue Theology as a Faculty. But having elaborated why an orientation towards God as the ground of human existence can be justified as universally true for humans, not just as an institutional claim of religious traditions, how does he outline human conduct that makes redemption necessary and that leads to the question of God's ultimate exercise of justice and mercy?

2.2 *Human Evil as Reconstructed From the One Divine Decree of Creation and Redemption*

It is important to take account of the interests that Schleiermacher wishes to reconcile in his critical examination of theological doctrines. In his concern to keep theology compatible with the increasingly important findings of the natural and historical sciences, he emphasises the interconnectedness of nature: one element causes another. Theologically, this leads to the priority of preservation over creation (§ 41.1), of continuity over the idea of a completely new beginning, which remains unthinkable for humans. It also means that their own agency is inscribed into a course of development in which their "original perfection" is stated as a presupposition but actual sin must also be accounted for. This is done by explaining sin as a natural imbalance between the God-consciousness ascribed to each individual as an actualised relationship to God, and the role of their sense-related self-consciousness that inevitably detracts from this "higher" orientation towards God. "Redemption" takes

place through the appearance of Jesus Christ as the "archetype" (*Urbild*) of the human God-consciousness (§§ 93–94), having been part of God's plan from the beginning of creation. All other humans are accredited with both the need and the ability for redemption, refuting both Pelagianism and Manicheism as contrasting heresies (§ 22). The "total impression" (§ 14, postscript, and § 99, postscript) Jesus Christ makes in the unsurpassable strength of his God-consciousness speaks to human freedom (§ 100.2).

This reconstruction of the Christian understanding of salvation and its premise in sin have been critiqued as a naturalisation of sin which is based on a discrepancy between two constitutive strands in human nature. It does not really allow to speak of "evil" in the sense of a freely chosen human action. Why is this quality eclipsed, and why is "sin" blamed on the temporal priority and weight of the sensible self-consciousness rather than explored as a deed of the human spirit (as the religious thinker Søren Kierkegaard does in his analysis of human freedom)? The reason for this view of sin and redemption is a theological one: In relation to God, the *Glaubenslehre*'s overarching concern is God's perfection. Making God appear changeable is interpreted as arbitrariness and would reduce God to the sphere of human limitations. This is why a reciprocal relationship between God and humans is deemed impossible (§ 47.1). It would also allow for the human feeling of freedom *towards* God which again would be irreconcilable in Schleiermacher's view with absolute dependence from God (§ 32.2). Striving to avoid all anthropomorphism and any sense of change or new action that could detract from God's perfection, Schleiermacher argues for the unity of the two decrees of creation and redemption. As stringent as this argumentation appears, there are turning points which can be questioned: Based on the fear that concrete action in history would make God finite, even God's agency is subordinated to God's eternal decree. This is where Karl Barth, his programmatic critic from an opposite starting point, God's Word, one hundred years later does have a point: God becomes a "prisoner" of his own decree.[7] How do these premises shape the idea of the Last Judgement?

2.3 *A Priority of Mercy Based on Which Reasons? Schleiermacher's Arguments for an* apokatastasis panton

It is a remarkable stand to take within the tradition of Augustinianism to defend a final reconciliation in which God's "justice" and "holiness" are

7 Karl Barth, *Die kirchliche Dogmatik*, 4th edn., vol. 2.1 (Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1958), 596, quoted in Susanne Schaefer, *Gottes Sein zur Welt. Schleiermachers Subjektanalyse in ihrer Prinzipienfunktion für Glaubenslehre und Dialektik*. ratio fidei 12 (Regensburg: Pustet, 2002), 209.

subordinated to God's "love". It is true that positions in the Pietist movement in which Schleiermacher had been raised have supported this conception of a gracious ending of the history of humanity. In question are only the arguments and the kind of reconciliation envisaged. Which assumptions of his doctrine of God lead to this conclusion? Both an ethical and a theocentric argument are made.

One, any other outcome would put the beatitude of everyone destined to be saved into doubt: it could not be happiness with God if we knew that some fellow humans were not elected but abandoned and condemned. Schleiermacher appeals to human solidarity here and breaks with a tacit competition between believers on who turns out to be elected and who condemned. Second, his serious critique of double predestination is based on the view that the concept of predestination needs to be understood in a strict sense as an affirmation of the "omnipotent and thus irresistible will of God".[8] "Irresistible", however, means that human freedom is not a factor to be considered and God is alone in providing this ending. The eternal plan of salvation is key, and in the pre-planned and determined relationship between God and the world, humans are to fulfill God's "irresistible" will.

A counterproposal to this understanding of *apokatastasis panton* is put forward by Thomas Pröpper and Susanne Schaefer. It takes the human creatures seriously as free partners of God in an undetermined relationship. The possibility of innovative, unprecedented action in history must be safeguarded. This perspective, however, radicalises the question about the outstanding eschatological fulfilment: faced with the victims of history who were not in Schleiermacher's view as they are in ours, which version of *apokatastasis panton* could be defended? The paradox stated by Habermas attains a previously unrealised sharpness. How can one imagine God to act in view of what humans did with their freedom? Instead of simply forgiving, and imposing a divine and irresistible will, would God not have to hope for the victims' own answer? An adequate reason for the limit idea of an *apokatastasis* of really everyone would be that even the victims would be willing to share in God's prevenient love.[9] The key question about the role of human freedom is also to be put to the next position to be consulted, that of the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur.

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8 Matthias Gockel, *Barth and Schleiermacher on the Doctrine of Election. A Systematic-Theological Comparison* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 28, with reference to the 1819 Essay on election, "Ueber die Lehre von der Erwählung", Schleiermacher, Friedrich D.E., *Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (= KGA) I/10 (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter), 195.

9 Thomas Pröpper, *Evangelium und freie Vernunft* (Freiburg: Herder, 2001), 274, and Schaefer, *Gottes Sein zur Welt*, 260.

3. Evil, Accountability, and the Problem of Forgiveness in Paul Ricoeur's Theory of Agency

While Ricoeur summarises the symbolic resources offered by the Bible as pointing to a "logic of superabundance", as a philosopher, he restricts his statements to what is possible for humans. Here he defends the unsurpassable role of the human agent in her freedom against a different view of forgiveness, that of Hannah Arendt with whom he shares an originally phenomenological starting point. As a hermeneutical philosopher, he takes the symbolic worlds and social imaginaries of a culture seriously as resources for individual orientation. The point of departure is the agent's perspective in her capability of ethical and moral self-reflection. I will first compare his analysis of forgiveness to that of the author of *Vita activa* (3.1).[10] One can see in his alternative outline a similar vantage point to the theological critique of Schleiermacher's view from above, from the perspective of the one divine decree. Arendt's structural analysis leaves out what is crucial for forgiveness: the separate steps of an interaction between human agents, first, to actually grant, and secondly, to accept forgiveness (3.2). A brief comparison of the premises from which Schleiermacher and Ricoeur argue will conclude the section (3.3).

3.1 *Forgiveness and Promising as Two Modes of Human Action in Hannah Arendt's Analysis*

From her interest in the plurality of perspectives that citizens bring to the political forum, Arendt seeks to uncover generic dimensions of agency. In view of the unpredictability of factors, initiatives and responses, she identifies two aspects that extend action in the present both to the uncharted future, and to the past. As the philosopher Heiner Bielefeldt summarises:

> Promising and forgiving are human possibilities that originate from agency itself because they are set under the conditions of plural communality (*Miteinander*) [...] Through mutual promises humans bind themselves as free and equal to each other without abolishing freedom [...] While promising directs itself immediately towards the future, forgiveness is oriented backwards to the past; yet it provides for (*sorgt dafür*) future action to remain possible.[11]

10 Hannah Arendt, *Vita activa oder Vom tätigen Leben*, 5th edn. (Munich/Zurich: Piper, 1987). It is a further elaboration in German of *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998, orig. 1958).

11 Heiner Bielefeldt, *Wiedergewinnung des Politischen. Eine Einführung in Hannah Arendts politisches Denken* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1993), 46–47, with reference to Arendt, *Vita activa*, 240.

The equivalence assumed between the past and the future is connected to a view of agency that abstracts from its moral dimension, considering harm as unintended: "human life could not at all go on if humans did not liberate each other on an ongoing basis of the consequences of what they have done without knowing what they do".[12] The reciprocity of being set free by forgiveness is thus premised on a shared need to be relieved of the burden of unforeseeable outcomes. Since evil intentions are not thematised, the asymmetry between a person harmed and the perpetrator does not come into view. There is an immediate assumption of mutual liberation between agents in their finitude who are unable in principle to calculate the outcomes of their deeds since these take place in a context of plurality.

3.2 *Ricoeur's Diagnosis of the Problem of Forgiveness as Relating to a Past That Cannot be Undone*

A contrasting point of departure is taken by Ricoeur in the conflict between the two persons involved, one acting, the other suffering the effects of that conscious deed. He insists on distinguishing the steps of asking for forgiveness, of the victim granting it, and the first subject accepting the gracious relief from the burden of guilt. The two sides are not exchangeable: one of them has been wronged and the other needs to initiate an expression of her insight into the injustice she caused and become liberated to a new freedom of action that does not tie her to her past. The problem Ricoeur regards as paramount is how the capacity of the agent can be renewed and reopened after failure and guilt, as distinct from shortcomings due to finitude. Among the perspectives appearing in the Epilogue of *Memory, History, Forgetting* are the limit questions to religion which already Kant identified as key to restoring agents to their moral capacity after having committed an evil deed. Reopening the sources of goodness is a defining ability of religion: the agent can be separated from her act and her agency renewed, rather than being identified with this past. The Epilogue of Ricoeur's last major work can be understood as pointing to an already existing forgiveness ("Il y a le pardon")[13] prior to the actions of individuals; having been opened up independently of the specific human agents involved, it can be availed of. At the same time, it "is not, and it should not be, either normal, or normative, or normalizing. It should remain exceptional and extraordinary".[14]

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12 Arendt, *Vita activa*, 235, quoted by Bielefeldt, *Wiedergewinnung,* 47.

13 Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 466, (French original 2000), with a reference to Emmanuel Levinas's concept of *illéité*.

14 Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 469.

In contrast to its treatment by Arendt as a parallel to promising, he highlights the "vertical asymmetry" of forgiveness. It is a "paradox", situated "at the heart of selfhood and at the core of imputability", a consciousness "sharpened by the dialectic of repentance in the great Abrahamic tradition."[15] What status this "voice" and "hymn" of forgiveness has, is left in suspense; but quotes from the Bible include it into what St. Paul's Letter to the Corinthians states of the theological virtues faith, hope and love which will "endure".[16]

3.3 *Comparing Schleiermacher's Premises to Ricoeur's*

While both thinkers leave behind objectivist analyses that do not take the position of subjectivity into account, they are separated by a gulf in their temporal horizons. Schleiermacher shares the optimism at the beginning of Modernity that the advancement of reason and Christian piety will continue. Writing after two World Wars and the Holocaust, Ricoeur is one of the few philosophers to have devoted in-depth analyses to the theme of human evil. In his comparison of Ancient Near Eastern myths and philosophies, he identifies the "Adamic myth" as the one symbolic narrative that traces evil back to its human authors.[17] By moving the phenomenological method from cognition to an analysis of the will, Ricoeur continues the Kantian shift to practical reason. Unlike Schleiermacher's naturalisation of "sin", he examines the origin of evil in the human will. Which lessons can be drawn from their shared starting point, an analysis of human subjectivity, within the symbolic horizons and self-understandings shaped by the Bible especially in relation to analytic approaches?

4. Conclusions on the Relationship of Theology to Analytic Philosophy in the Context of Dialogue Between the Monotheistic Faiths

There is no doubt that analytical philosophy can contribute to an understanding of divine attributes. But the question whether it offers an appropriate method to find a "common ground" between Jewish, Christian and Muslim theologians is first of all faced with two alternative proposals: one, that only direct communication between the religious convictions of each tradition

15 Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 459.

16 Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 467–68.

17 Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. E. Buchanan (New York: Harper & Row, 1967) (French original 1960).

are fruitful, including their relationships to their foundational documents or Scriptures;[18] the other, endorsed also by the Kantian scholar and feminist philosopher Herta Nagl-Docekal, that a "common ground" can be found in the "need of reason" identified in Kant's critical philosophy.[19] It limits "knowledge" to what the faculty of understanding (*Verstand*) can establish about the world together with the senses (*Sinnlichkeit*), while reason (*Vernunft*) in its extension towards the unconditioned can justifiably argue based on practical reason for the reality of human freedom and of the existence of God.

As stated in the introduction, the project of comparing the resources of analytic and existing theological proposals for dialogue between the monotheistic traditions combines questions of philosophy of religion, ethics and avenues to the doctrine of God. Some preliminary conclusions shall be offered based on my impression of the particularity of the analytic approach. The tools of this school of thinking have been used by Ricoeur in the opening parts of his enquiries, for example, in *Oneself as Another* and in *The Course of Recognition*.[20] Viewed from the anthropological turn in modern theology, my questions relate to the following themes: since the programmatic designation of theology as a *scientia practica* by Duns Scotus, religions have come to be considered under the perspective of practical options of life. Has the rupture Scotus inaugurated from objectifying approaches to God been sufficiently taken on board, including a clear demarcation between avenues towards objective knowledge, human reason and revelation (4.1)? Secondly, from the nineteenth century onwards, "reason" has become differentiated into the irreplaceable task of philosophy and of the enquiries in the individual human sciences. Theology at the university must be capable and willing to exchange perspectives with other academic subjects regarding religion as a dimension of the human person, not just as a social fact. Does this approach foster such dialogue (4.2)? Thirdly, for the monotheistic religions, time is not cyclical and history is the venue of the

18 A model of "scriptural reasoning" has been developed, now extending beyond the monotheistic traditions to other religions in interfaith dialogue. Cf. David Ford, "The Wider Vision: Interreligious Solidarity and Hope", *Search. A Church of Ireland Journal* 44, no.2 (Summer 2021) 102–8, with reference to www.scripturalreasoning.org.

19 Herta Nagl-Docekal, "Moral und Religion aus der Optik der heutigen rechtsphilosophischen Debatte", *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 56 (2008): 843–55, 854. She spells out the way in which practical reason is open to religion in *Innere Freiheit*, 196–98, with reference to Kant, Kritik der Praktischen Vernunft, in Werke in zehn Bänden, ed. by W. Weischedel, Vol. IV 6 (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 981), 256–57 and 276–81.

20 Cf. Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). *The Course of Recognition*, trans. David Pellauer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

new. What role does this branch of philosophy of religion accord to history (4.3)?

4.1 *Religion as a Non-objectifiable Practical Option of Life*

The fact that religions constitute practical self-understandings has been highlighted as true already for Antiquity.[21] They give answers to the problem of meaning and are thus relevant for human life. A key objection from philosophical and theological colleagues who have engaged with analytic approaches, is that the practical core of religious faith falls outside of what is being analysed. Regarding Richard Swinburne, Martin Breul summarises his critique as follows:

> I want to formulate two basic methodological objections against Swinburne's approach [...]: the problem of over-intellectualising faith, and the problem of speculative metaphysics [...] he treats religious convictions exclusively on the forum of theoretical reason [...] This definition shows no sensitivity whatsoever for the fiduciary dimension of faith and ignores that religious faith can only be thought in interaction (*Zusammenspiel*) with an existential attitude that is constitutive for a praxis of life at the same time [...] Swinburne's unconcerned (*unbekümmerte*) theistic cosmology hides (*blendet ... aus*) the relevance of the practical dimension of faith for questions of its justifiability.[22]

In this context, he quotes the philosopher Friedo Ricken's objection against Swinburne's metaphysical concept of God: "It is completely legitimate for Swinburne to reconstruct a concept of God from the tradition of the three Abrahamitic religions. What I contest is the sequence of his steps in demonstrating (*Aufweis*) the reasonableness of a theistic profession of faith (*Glaubensbekenntnisses*)." With "sequence", Ricken means the need to give priority to the "whole" before the "part": "We have first of all the whole of religious faith as an encompassing interpretation of the meaning of human existence [...] Only this whole can carry the assent to faith (*Glaubenszustimmung*). A reconstructed concept of God and the corresponding proof of God are not able to be the foundation that carries everything else".[23]

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21 In *Selbstwerdung und Personalität* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018), 5–7, Theo Kobusch has again pointed out how the patristic era was marked by this perspective, identified also in Greek philosophies by Pierre Hadot, *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*, 3rd edn. (Paris: Albin Michel, 1993).

22 Martin Breul, *Diskurstheoretische Glaubensverantwortung. Konturen einer religiösen Epistemologie in Auseinandersetzung mit Jürgen Habermas*. ratio fidei 68 (Regensburg: Pustet, 2019), 217–18.

23 Breul, *Diskurstheoretische Glaubensverantwortung*, 217, Fn. 225, with reference to F. Ricken SJ, *Glauben weil es vernünftig ist* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2007), 48.

The "whole of religious faith" thus correlates with the "need of reason" that Kant identified as the philosophical meeting point between different historical religions. Having argued that the major breakthrough of Schleiermacher's reconceiving of theology in modernity consists in his turn to an analysis of subjectivity, any attempt – be it analytical, critical of the anthropological turn, monist, or interactionistic – that marginalises this question must be seen as insufficient and misleading. It circumvents the question of absolute meaning that can be uncovered in Schleiermacher's claim of an immediate self-consciousness of "being in relation with God".[24]

4.2 *A Thought Form That is Open for Exchange With Other Academic Subjects*

Having observed that some approaches to Christian ethics and theology take a position of missionising also in relation to their colleagues from other subjects in the university – assuming that the teaching position is entirely theirs and that listening belongs to the others[25] – I find another comment of Breul's worth asking about. He identifies a "second fundamental problem of Swinburne's approach in implying a precritical metaphysics since he takes the positions of theism and atheism as equally speculative comprehensive explanations of reality (*All-Erklärungen*)." This results not only in an understanding of truth according to which "one is able to demonstrate inductively" what is "more probable or less probable".[26] Breul also points out the consequences for interdisciplinary work when an approach to philosophy isolates itself by claiming a level of insight unconnected to other pursuits of knowing. He makes this comparison in the context of endorsing Jürgen Habermas's comment that "Kant's differentiation between faith and knowledge presupposed the break with the totalizing epistemic claim of metaphysics. This turn toward postmetaphysical thinking devalued a certain ontological conceptual apparatus and a certain structure of explanation; it was supposed to raise philosophy to the level (*auf gleiche Augenhöhe*) of modern science."[27]

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24 Cf. Pröpper, *Theologische Anthropologie*, 1:478.

25 In *Approaches to Theological Ethics. Sources, Traditions, Visions* (London: T & T Clark, 2019), 121–26, this was one of my critiques of Stanley Hauerwas's approach.

26 Breul, *Diskurstheoretische Glaubensverantwortung*, 218.

27 Martin Breul, "Eine Kritik des metaphysischen Realismus", in Saskia Wendel and Martin Breul, *Vernünftig glauben – begründet hoffen. Praktische Metaphysik als Denkform rationaler Theologie* (Freiburg: Herder, 2020), 157–269, 248–49, with reference to Habermas, "The Boundary Between Faith and Knowledge", in *Between Naturalism and Religion*, trans. Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge: Polity, 2008), 209–47, 244.

Breul concludes in relation to the "defenders of pre-Kantian metaphysical realism":

> Only when metaphysics stops developing encompassing ontologies or thinking in a speculative ontotheological way, can it participate in the interdisciplinary discourse of the sciences (*Wissenschaften*). For it does not raise the presumptuous (*vermessenen*) claim to gain a privileged insight into the structure of being and thus assert as the only academic subject (*Wissenschaft*) at all (*überhaupt*) an epistemic standpoint of God for itself. The disciplinary differentiation of the modern system of sciences would be negated if a science claimed again after all to be able to take a meta-perspective and generate in a kind of metaphysical flight (*Flug*) an overview image 'from above'.[28]

While there are theological approaches, such as Radical Orthodoxy, which promote the view that "secular" disciplines have usurped what rightly belongs to theology, the claim to constitute the key discipline from which all others are cast as satellites has been taken by different incumbents: from the natural sciences, from biology at the beginning of the twentieth century to genetic and neurological contestations of the philosophical concept and everyday premise of human freedom in our age. While this does not constitute a necessary consequence of analytic enquiries, it is instructive that a critical account of analytic theologies sees them as constituting an apologetic stance that goes without clarifying the conditions of knowability.[29]

4.3 *History as the Venue of the New*

As indicated in the first section, it is crucial to distinguish the sources of insight in theology. How can the idea of the resurrection of Jesus be argued for? Can it, as Richard Swinburne has proposed, be constructed on the basis of human reason? Or is it to be seen as an utter reversal of human knowledge which requires the hermeneutical effort of critically comparing Jesus' era with contemporary culture in which plausibility ranks higher than possibility and where the thought of divine action in history counts as an illegitimate idea? It remains

28 Breul, "Kritik des metaphysischen Realismus", 248–49.

29 In his critical survey, *Kritik der analytischen Theologie* (Hamburg: Hoffmann & Campe, 1973), 40, Peter Etges points out that analytic philosophy "can be used because it leaves the problem of theological knowledge (*die theologische Erkenntnisproblematik*) untouched". In his Preface (*Vorwort*), Hans Albert ventures the "assumption that the concentration on problems of language would go along with a neglect of epistemological enquiries (*erkenntnistheoretische Fragestellungen*) which makes it "serviceable for apologetic interests, to save the tradition" (10). While almost half a century later, it can be doubted whether apologetic intentions themselves disqualify theological work, the need to distinguish sources of insight has not lost its relevance.

important to follow the lead of Duns Scotus on which divine attributes can be known from reason and which ones from the history of God's revelation. How clear is the insight in analytical philosophy that "God's actions" which the Hebrew Bible presents as the manifestation of God's loyalty to the promises made to humanity cannot be derived from reason? The first such action which has allowed generations of faithful people, ever since the Genesis stories of the Hebrew Bible were written, to draw inferences to God's goodness, is creation. The most convincing theological interpretation that offers insight into the "mode in which God's will happens" is to acknowledge

> God's action of creation as a letting free of the world in which the freedom of the human person that is recognised by God finds its highest possibility. This means understanding creation as a deed in which God restricts God's power due to God's omnipotence. When and because God remains loyal to God's self and to creation, human freedom as divinely willed will be respected for good.[30]

By creating space for others in their freedom, the mode of God's will is not direct but is mediated by humans. Against Schleiermacher's understanding of divine perfection, "acts of self-limitation" are part of God's praxis.[31] The divine respect for the freedom of the human counterparts does allow unpredictable acts of evil as well as those of care and generosity. As a consequence, the core of each historical religion constitutes a *further determination* of what philosophy of religion can elaborate as proper philosophical requirements for the concept of God. Insights into the divine essence are owed to God's historical self-communication to individuals and peoples, in which God continues to "risk an open history with them".[32]

The three points mentioned in conclusion are shared by the three monotheistic traditions: one, religion as chosen and affirmed in one's practical self-understanding; two, as justifiable and not assumed to be disconnected from the general consciousness of truth, as pursued by reason; three, as open to new actions of God in history.

Are analytic discourses able to capture these dimensions? Instead of locating the diverse positions developed in the histories of theological thinking

30 Michael Bongardt, "Verlorene Freiheit? Von Gottes und der Menschen Handeln in einer unüberschaubaren Welt", in *Freiheit Gottes und der Menschen*. FS Th. Pröpper, ed. Michael Böhnke, Michael Bongardt, Georg Essen, Jürgen Werbick (Regensburg: Pustet, 2006), 335–57, 355.

31 Cf. the critiques of Schleiermacher's doctrine of God by Thomas Pröpper, *Theologische Anthropologie*, 1:441–87, 480, fn. 176, and Schaefer, *Gottes Sein zur Welt*, 254–62.

32 Pröpper, *Theologische Anthropologie*, 1:608.

and biblical research in the past by declaring them to be "traditional", analytic approaches must show that they are capable of taking up these questions of human subjectivity. As long as self-reflection is still a human capacity – a capability that Habermas regards as being undermined by scientism – such issues constitute touchpoints for supporting religious faith in its relevance for human existence. Communities and their theologies responding to divine self-disclosure in the history of humanity are thus tradition-based, but not passé.

Human Suffering and the Riddle of Divine Goodness

Answers from the Book of Job

Georg Gasser

1. Classical Theism

In contemporary discussions in philosophy of religion personal theism is often distinguished from classical theism. Personal theism claims that God is a person and among God's primary and foremost interests is to enter into a loving relationship with other persons such as human beings. Classical theism, instead, points out that the concept of God is difficult to connect with our familiar concept of person and personal relationship. John Cooper, for instance, writes: "[C]lassical theism asserts that God is transcendent, self-sufficient, eternal, and immutable in relation to the world; thus he does not change through time and is not affected by his relation to his creatures".[1]

Thus, far more central to classical theism than person-like divine properties such as omnipotence, omniscience and omnibenevolence are the attributes of divine transcendence, simplicity, eternity or immutability. These are what mark out classical theism from other versions of theism that think of God in rather personal categories. These attributes emphasise that – as Brian Davies puts it – "God is primarily the Creator. God is [...] causally responsible for the existence of everything other than himself".[2]

Taking God as the transcendent and sole creator of everything that exists implies that everything other than God is radically dependent on God for its very existence. Prioritising God's role as creator has wide-ranging consequences for the question in what sense personal categories can be ascribed to God. For instance, one metaphysical consequence is that God bears no "real" relation to creation because creation as a whole in its being created is radically dependent on God as Creator. This understanding needs a bit of explanation: Within an Aristotelian framework one would say that a real relation is to be explained in terms of an accident "inhering in" a substance. The relata are substances and the relation among them is an accident. According to the

1 John W. Cooper, *Panentheism: The Other God of the Philosophers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 14.

2 Brian Davis, *The Reality of God and the Problem of Evil* (London: Continuum, 2006), 2.

classical analysis, all relata jointly constitute their accidental relations in question, where each substance has an inhering accidental relation. In the case of A's being equally high to B, for instance, both A and B have an accident which is the basis of the relation of A being equal to B: For A this is the accident of being equal to B, and for B it is the numerically different accident of being equal to A. From this standard analysis of "real" relation Aristotle distinguishes the category of psychological relation, e. g. the relation between the knowing subject and the known object.[3]

The reason for this distinction is the insight that psychological relations do not seem to fit into the standard analysis of relations. For in the case of A's knowledge of B, the accident of A which is constitutive for the relation of A to B is A's knowledge about B. A's knowledge establishes A's relation to B. But a corresponding accident of B, which puts B into a reciprocal relation to A, seems to be missing. For this reason, many medieval theologians distinguished between real relations (*relationes reales*) and conceptual relations (*relationes rationales*).[4]

A real relation from A to B, which is not met by a real but only by a conceptual relation from B to A is not two-but one-sided. It exists, so to speak, only "in one direction" – it is an "ontological one-way-street". As such an ontological one-way-street classical theists conceived of the relation of the creation towards God. A real relation from God to creation, instead, was denied as God, standing outside the created order, created everything "ex nihilo", that is, in terms of this categorial scheme, conceptually.[5]

In other words, God as creator is not a part of the created world. God's *esse* is absolute, and not relative like the world. Mark Henninger explains this doctrine as follows:

> Thomas held the common but by no means universal doctrine that creatures are really related to God and God is related to them only by a relation of reason. I believe this technical formulation is ultimately based on a religious intuition that all creatures are absolutely dependent on a transcendent creator. The scholastics formulated this intuition in terms of Aristotle's category of relation: each creature has a real relation of dependence on God, while He is in no way dependent on them.[6]

3 Aristotle, Metaphysics V, 1020b26.

4 Mark G. Henninger, *Relations: Medieval Theories 1250–1325* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

5 See, for instance, Thomas Aquinas STh I q13 a7c: "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."

6 Henninger, *Relations*, 31–32.

Given this understanding of the God-world-relationship it is obvious that no creature can have any kind of impact on God and thus, no creature can cause God to change. Radical metaphysical independence implies immutability and existence outside time as existence in time would constitute – again – some form of dependence from it. And a being existing outside time and bearing no real relation to us is, ultimately speaking, also radically incomprehensible to us.[7]

Against this conceptual background it is not surprising that classical theism puts into question the view of God being a moral agent analogous to humans. Moral questions have an essential this-worldly direction: Typically, we think of moral agents as human beings living in this world and capable of bringing about good or bad actions. One may disagree about the central concepts to apply when making moral judgements such as duty, obligation, virtue, vice, intentions to act or agential consequences. However, all these concepts refer to human beings and what it is for them to be moral agents. If God is not a human being but radically different and independent from anything created, then all these concepts are not applicable to God. These reflections point out, at the very least, that we should be careful when describing God as a person and moral agent, since this way of speaking is neither without presuppositions nor does it stand unchallenged.

2. Evil, Goodness and Classical Theism

Classical theism challenges the overall framework of the problem of evil: Once God's goodness and benevolence is not spelled out primarily or exclusively in moral terms because God as the transcendent Other is no member of our moral community within creation, one does not have to think of there being a moral problem for God because of evil and suffering in this world. This "non-moral account" is in strong contrast to what many philosophers of religion take for granted. Consider, for instance, Richard Swinburne's claim in his *The Coherence of Theism*:

> In claiming that God is by nature perfectly morally good, I suggest that the theist be interpreted as claiming that God is so constituted that he always does the morally best action (when there is one), and no morally bad action. […] I suggest

7 An illuminating explanation of the doctrine of divine incomprehensibility provides Karl Rahner, "Über die Verborgenheit Gottes," in *Dogmatik nach dem Konzil*. Vol 1b. Karl Rahner: Sämtliche Werke 22: 640–55 (Freiburg i. Br.: Herder, 2013).

> that in our sense of 'moral' all theists hold that God is perfectly good, and that this is a central claim of theism.[8]

Swinburne seems to suggest that the core of divine goodness is moral goodness as confirming to moral principles and demands which are somehow independent from God. Similarly, William Rowe writes: "Since God is unsurpassably good, he has all the features that unsurpassable goodness implies. Among these is absolute moral goodness. [...] God's moral goodness has long been thought to be in some way the source or standard of what it is for human life to be moral."[9]

Once divine goodness is identified with moral goodness, it is but a small and logical step to ask why a morally perfect God would allow the existence of so many and terrible evils. Those defending God explain why God is morally justified to do so and what possible higher goods can only be brought about by permitting these evils. God's critics, instead, argue that some of these evils are so horrific and heart-breaking that no possible higher goods can justify their existence, and as a consequence, the existence of the God of theism is denied. Without going into the details of this normative means-ends-debate, the structural similarities to a court trial are obvious, in which God as defendant is defended by one side and accused by the other in the light of (more or less) commonly accepted moral principles.

If proponents of classical theism do not share this normative precondition, then one may wonder what alternative possibilities for conceptualising God's relationship to creation are at hand. One assumption, given the central attribution of God as Creator, is that God takes pleasure in the world's existence. Central to the goodness of God is not moral but creative goodness: A central aspect of God's goodness is God being the source of being of everything created.[10]

Thomas Aquinas, for instance, tackles the question of divine justice along these lines. He does not say that God is just by observing in a perfect manner given moral laws; rather, God is just by being the creator who within his providential care, makes things to be what they deserve to be given their creaturely nature. Aquinas writes:

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8 Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 184–87.

9 William L. Rowe, *Philosophy of Religion: An Introduction*, 3rd edn. (Belmont, CA: Thomson-Wadsworth, 2001), 9.

10 A detailed discussion on the question of God and moral judgments from the perspective of classical theism is given by Davis, "God's Moral Standing," chap. 4, in *The Reality of God and the Problem of Evil* (London: Continuum, 2006).

> As then the proper order displayed in ruling a family or any kind of multitude evinces justice of this kind [distributive justice] in the ruler, so the order of the universe, which is seen both in effects of nature and in effects of will, shows the justice of God. Hence Dionysius says (Div. Nom. viii, 4): 'We must see that God is truly just, in seeing how He gives to all existing things what is proper to the condition of each; and preserves the nature of each in the order and with the powers that properly belong to it.'[11]

Applied to instances of suffering and destruction such an interpretation may be unfamiliar to modern ears, but it is by no means beyond comprehension. It proposes a change of focus – away from moral categories towards values such as existence, creativity, order or adaptability. Take, for instance, a natural disaster such as an earthquake. We tend to emphasise its destructive power and the feeling creeps in that it would be better if such events did not happen, as lives are destroyed, and landscapes profoundly transformed. A different view describes the early environmentalist, John Muir, when witnessing an earthquake in Yosemite in 1872:

> Nature [...] then created [...] a new set of features, simply by giving the mountains a shake – changing not only the high peaks and cliffs, but the streams. As soon as these rock avalanches fell every stream began to sing new songs [...]. Storms of every sort, torrents, earthquakes, cataclysms, "convulsions of nature" etc. however mysterious and lawless at first sight they might seem, are only harmonious notes in the song of creation, varied expressions of God's love.[12]

For Muir the forces of nature causing destruction and death are at the same time those forces that give rise to new landscapes, eco-systems and species. Although Muir's interpretation of nature may have a romantic tendency, it is ultimately a scientific insight that life quickly returns to destroyed landscapes because organisms show a remarkable ability to access new habitats or to adapt to changing environmental conditions. Thus, Muir's positive description of the earthquake and its consequences reminds us that there is goodness even in such disasters and this goodness is a low reflection of God's creative goodness. To put it in more anthropomorphic terms one might say that God as creator takes delight in nature's overall fecundity, creativity and order, even if suffering is an integral and unavoidable part of it. With the help of scholastic terminology this view might be described as follows: God does not want suffering and evil in the antecedent will, but he allows them in the consequent will in order

11 Thomas Aquinas STh I q21 a1c.

12 John Muir, *The Wilderness World of John Muir*, ed. Edwin Way Teale (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1954), 169.

to be creatively active at all and thus, bringing the goodness of created things about. The fundamental laws of creation involve a dynamic exchange of matter and energy, determine becoming and decaying and indicate that struggle, competition and death is at the very heart of living beings.

Note that such an account does not imply that moral categories entirely fall out of the picture. Classical theism reminds us not to project familiar moral categories onto God. This is not to be conflated with an account such as ananthropocentrism who holds that humans are completely irrelevant to the divine purpose and do not matter to God at all.[13] The view proposed here says that a central aspect of divine goodness is that 'God gives to all existing things what is proper to the condition of each'. Since human beings are part of the creaturely order and social and moral concerns are essential to the human life-form[14], it would be odd if these aspects would completely fall out from God's perspective on creation. Rather, moral categories are part of the grand picture of creation because humans are part of it, but these categories are neither the centre nor the primary determinants of this picture. Moral goodness can be seen as a reflection of divine goodness and it shows us something of what God is. But this is just one aspect of the overall picture. To see more of it, it is crucial to broaden the view towards a more holistic understanding of creaturely being as goodness.

A final point: Saying that the goodness of God is reflected by both, the creaturely goodness of being and moral goodness, comes along with a certain tension because both concepts are fundamentally distinct. This is so because the moral sphere seems to separate the human and the non-human realm. Responsibility, justice, empathy and orientation towards others are essential coordinates of the human but of no other life-form. The moral sphere is one feature distinguishing humans from all other living beings. Thus, creaturely goodness comes along with a "global" view and understands the human being as one creature among others. Moral goodness, instead, goes hand in hand with a "narrow" view and is directly related to the human being as addressee of moral concerns.

13 Tim Mulgan, "Alternatives to Benevolent Theism: Ananthropocentric Theism and Axiarchism," in *Current Controversies in Philosophy of Religion*, edited by Paul Draper, 129–45 (London: Routledge, 2019), 129–45.

14 See Michael Tomasello, *Becoming Human: A theory of ontogeny* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2019) who argues from the perspectives of evolutionary psychology and comparative anthropology that the uniqueness of humans within the animal kingdom consists in the fact that social behaviour is not determined primarily by selfishness and domination but by cooperative relations.

3. The Story of Job

At this point, one may wonder how the biblical understanding of God fits into this picture. Is the biblical God not primarily conceived in personal and moral categories? It is true that the God of classical theism is often presented as a result of philosophical reflections opposed to the biblical understanding of God. However, this juxtaposition is misleading, at least. In the biblical tradition itself, references can be found that recoil from an overly personalised and relational God, or so I claim by referring to the Book of Job. Taking off from lines of interpretation of the philosopher Wes Morriston and the biblical scholars Carol A. Newson, Steve Chase and Athalya Brenner, I argue that the divine speeches to Job draw attention to the fact that God is primarily creator and sustainer of a vast, wild and awesome universe where anthropocentric and moral standards do not lead to an adequate understanding of God's overall relationship to creation. The universe is as ordered and divinely controlled creation valuable and admirable, and not only or primarily because humans are part of it. If this line of interpretation is correct, then a central teaching of the story of Job is to shift our attention from a primarily anthropocentric to a less anthropocentric and more holistic view of creation. As soon as moral standards for our understanding of God's creation fade into the background, a theist is able to value creation as it is – with its remarkable beauty and with its destructive and painful features. Such an understanding does not imply that the world becomes a less tragic place or that suffering should be taken less seriously; rather, certain questions regarding divine justice and creaturely suffering, which we tend to ask, seem misplaced in the light of this change of perspective. This is what the divine speeches call for, and this is the difficult lesson to learn for Job (and for us). I unfold this argument in the following sections.

3.1 *The Dialogues Between Job and His Friends*

Since the story of Job is well known, I will not dwell on it. The rapid succession of tragic misfortunes gives Job not only no time to recover but it may even arouse in Job the suspicion that the hitherto familiar order of creation no longer exists for him. Personal meaning of human existence expresses itself in the active integration of experiences made in one's understanding of life. Through this active integration a kind of narrative is construed which relates singular experiences to one another in meaningful patterns and a coherent unity of a life.[15] This sense of coherence and unity has been shattered for Job.

15 See, for instance, Schechtman's narrative self-constitution view in Marya Schechtman, "Complexity and Individual Unity," chap. 4.2, in *Staying Alive: Personal Identity, Practical Concerns, and the Unity of a Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

He has become incapable of leading a life, strictly speaking, as he finds himself a defenseless victim of unpredictable and uncontrollable blows of fate.

After seven days of silent mourning together with his friends, Job's suffering bursts out of him. Job does not merely mourn about his tragic losses and his unexpected change of fortune. Rather, he is concerned with his life as a coherent whole because it has become dark, inscrutable and pointless to him as the concluding verses of chapter 3 indicate: "Truly, the dread thing I dreaded has arrived, and what I feared has come upon me. I have no ease, no quiet, no rest; what comes is turmoil" (3:25–26).

All that remains is turmoil ("*rogez*"), incessant events of suffering without apparent meaning. Carol Newsom characterizes this turmoil as "a moment frozen in time, starkly isolated, an apparently untranscendable present".[16] For this reason, Newsom argues, an essential effort of Job's friends is to show him a sense of the narratability of his life despite all suffering and loss of orientation. A central element for construing such a narrative is to highlight a moral order pervading creation which consists in the contrast between the hope of the pious and the fate of the wicked. The long dispute between Job and his friends, thus, takes its starting point from the issue of whether we are in a position to understand Job's situation or not. Can we think of a narrative which is able to make sense of Job's fate?

Job's friends offer a powerful one: The ultimate order of reality gives hope for prosperity to the pious and concern of punishment to the wicked. The stories of the hope of the pious and of the fate of the wicked which is continuously evoked by the three friends does not provide specific explanations of events in this world; rather these stories serve as tropes for referring to the ultimate moral order of reality which is grounded in a transcendent divine will. Concrete success of a wicked person as we constantly experience does not speak against such a narrative. Such things can happen as anomalies because they have no grounding in the foundations of reality in contrast to the lot of the wicked overtaken by calamity or the story of the restoration of the good person. Thus, one can say that suffering in this world ought generally to be interpreted as a punishment for sin whereas prosperity is a sign of reward for virtue. Suffering calls for self-transformation and re-orientation towards God so that God can bring about a reversal of fortune by divine intervention.[17] Consequently, according to the friend's overall narrative, Job's fate is a

16 Carol Newsom, *The book of Job. A contest of moral imaginations* (Oxford: OUP, 2003), 97.

17 Newsome, *The book of Job*, 103, argues that particularly Eliphaz's narrative follows the trope of transformation.

consequence of sin and Job has to restore the order violated through sin by accepting the divine punishment and asking God for forgiveness.

Job rejects this account by referring to a counter-narrative. According to Newsom's interpretation, when Job describes the happiness of the wicked in chapter 21, he is not simply referring to anomalous, single counter-examples of the narrative provided by his friends. Rather, he is offering a "rival iconic narrative, linked associatively with the vivid personal accounts Job has already given concerning his experience of God's violence and injustice (chaps. 12, 16, 19)."[18] Thus, Job's radical claim is that the world is not structured according to the principles of justice as suggested by his friends. Not only in a few negligible exceptional cases, but frequently people do not get what they deserve. Therefore, reality has no ultimate recognizable order but it is based upon turmoil as tragically experienced by Job.

What is at stake in the long discussion between Job and his friends is the question whether the cosmic order is ultimately a moral one and as such the fundament for an overall moral understanding of human existence. For the friends the suffering of the righteous is a temporally limited and ultimately negligible anomaly in an overall divinely controlled moral order; for Job, instead, his suffering is no anomaly but a divinely intended evil which does not fit into this proclaimed moral order.

By rejecting the friend's account as inadequate, Job's focus becomes free for a profound process of moral and spiritual self-examination. Job is not just insisting that he is not wicked but God-fearing. Rather, a thorough examination of his life so far builds the confidence that he cannot think of any committed injustice or impiety so great which would justify his turmoil. And he has no worldview at hand within which to organize his experiences in any meaningful manner. The confrontation of the narrative suggested by his friends, on the one hand, and his own opposition to it without a powerful counter-narrative to tell, on the other hand, sets in motion a cathartic spiritual process in Job. Presumed moral and religious certainties prove as inadequate and, as a consequence, his religious horizon begins to widen. The long dialectic dispute about possible narratives of reality's ultimate structure and Job's insistence of his integrity has led him to the conclusion that any moral rationale for his suffering seems to be misplaced.[19] This transformation in the understanding of reality's ultimate structures remains alien to Job's friends as they continue to hold on to their fixe

18 Newsom, *The book of Job*, 124.

19 An impressive interpretation of Job's spiritual development throughout the dispute with his friends proposes Jeffrey Boss, *Human consciousness of God in the book of Job: A theological and psychological commentary* (London: Continuum, 2010).

idea of a divinely installed moral ordering of the cosmos giving prosperity to the righteous and punishment to the wicked.

Job has reached the boundaries of understanding.[20] He demands that God explains himself: "Here is my signature! Let the Almighty answer me!" (31:35).

3.2 *The Theophany*

Then God answers Job from out of the whirlwind but not in the way he had expected: God does not refer to any reasons for Job's suffering. Instead, God asks Job to answer a series of questions: "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? […] Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements – surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it?" (38:2; 4–5a).

As Carol A. Newsom points out, the two divine speeches direct Job's imagination to the remote points of creation beyond the sphere of human influence: to the foundations of the earth, the horizon, light and darkness, the gates of the underworld, the desert, barren mountains and nature where wild animals live.[21] The aim of these speeches is to widen Job's perspective from places of secure boundaries to places where human culture and an ordered universe is put at risk and the "primary symbol of the chaotic"[22] is experienced. God presents creation in all its splendour, wildness and impenetrable complexity. With astute biological knowledge is described how lions care for their cubs, young ravens search for food, hinds give birth to their offspring, the ostrich hatches its eggs in the sand or the eagle brings prey into its nest in the rocks. The places and creatures represent the alien other to human culture and domestication. Creation seen in this way evokes wondrous estrangement, attraction and anxiety at the same time. The detailed description of Leviathan as primordial beast that no human can capture and control continues this theme. Job is confronted with a wild and anarchic nature but God never leaves any doubt that also these features of reality are God's creation and under divine control. As Michael V. Fox remarks, "[…] the Theophany lacks any hint of a creation battle or even of

20 Interestingly, Thomas Aquinas, Expositio super Job, chap. 37, sec. 7, argues that Job is not responding anymore to the four speeches of Elihu because Elihu has not put forward any new arguments and Job is unable to prove his innocence with any better arguments than he had already used. Therefore, Job prefers to remain silent and to submit himself to divine judgement.

21 Newsom, *The book of Job*, 241–52.

22 Newsom, *The book of Job*, 243.

any hostility between YHWH and these creatures. They have been controlled and naturalized."[23]

Among the many points one can identify in the divine speeches, Wes Morriston finds three of particular importance[24]: First, God is the creator of everything and fully in control of all of creation, which also includes wild and chaotic elements. Even the primordial beasts, which no human can domesticate, are no threat to God. Second, the theophany contrasts God's wisdom and Job's ignorance. The numerous questions in the first speech almost ironically point out that Job cannot give any answers because he has no deeper understanding of the workings of creation. Third, the theophany celebrates the wisdom of the created order. It offers a "breath-taking vision of the majesty and beauty of the Creator's design"[25] and, as Newsom puts it, of "the tragic sublime"[26].

How should we deal with this finding and assess the role of divine speeches? I will discuss three possible interpretations in more detail.

4. Three Interpretations

4.1 *The Skeptical Response*

A common interpretation of the divine speeches focuses on the contrast between divine wisdom and human ignorance. God has reasons for letting Job suffer, but Job, due to his limited human knowledge, should not expect to have insight in any of these divine reasons. Call this interpretation the "skeptical theist's account".[27] Skeptical theists argue that not being able to imagine what reasons God might have for letting people suffer does not imply that there are not any reasons at all. Due to our limited cognitive capacities, we might simply not be able to see these reasons. This is exactly what happens to Job as the story makes clear: Readers of the book are aware of these reasons as the dialogue between God and Satan at the beginning of the story makes clear but Job himself is kept in the dark about them. In this world he is not able to find these reasons and God does not inform him about them. As human being, so

23 Michael V Fox, "God's Answer and Job's Response," *Biblica* 94, no. 1 (2013): 13.

24 Wes Morriston, "God's answer to Job," *Religious Studies* 32 (1996): 342–43.

25 Morriston, "God's answer to Job," 343.

26 Newsom, *The book of Job*, 252.

27 A good introduction to this position is given by Justin McBrayer, "Skeptical theism," *Philosophy Compass* 5, no. 7 (2010): 611–23.

this interpretation goes, Job cannot go beyond the inner-worldly realm, and therefore it is also not possible for him to access any reasons beyond it.

The problem of such a skeptical interpretation is twofold: First, the divine speeches do not point at the possibility of any reasons for the way God treats Job. Questions of morality and justice are not mentioned at all. Thus, a skeptical interpretation has few points of connection in the text itself. Second, the reasons given at the beginning are anything but good as it appears that Job is used instrumentally like a figure in a divine chess game. We are left with the impression that either God's character is such that God is willing to allow terrible suffering for proving human faith or, if divine justice is of any concern here, then it remains inscrutable to us because by human moral standards we have the strong intuition that Job is treated unjustly.

4.2 *Humble Fidelity*

An alternative, more literal interpretation argues that in the divine speeches God draws Job's attention away from the human realm and the question of the moral order of creation. The divine speeches no longer continue the dominant theme of justice as apparent in the long dispute between Job and his friends, but they present an image of creation where human life and culture play a rather marginalised role. Job was desiring a creation of order, value and meaning where human experiences make sense and are conducive to a rational explanation. God, however, by presenting nature in its wildness, highlights the nonmoral and even chaotic aspects of creation.

Newsom writes:

> [...] I would not be inclined to see the speeches as a rejection of God's role as source of moral order in the social realm. But the deity in the speeches takes pains to establish another relationship of congruence, that between God and Leviathan. Here the nonmoral and nonrational aspects of deity are highlighted. Knowing Leviathan, one knows something of the monstrous that is its own reflection of the numinous, wholly otherness of God.[28]

Job, so to say, begins to realise that there is more to God than just the role of guaranteeing an overall creational order which is also reflected in human moral standards. There is also an incomprehensible side of God that apparently values non-moral principles such as the creativity, power and bio-diversity in creation.

Job's reaction to the divine speeches can be seen as a conformity to this interpretation. His responses are brief and then he falls silent. Some interpreters

28 Newsom, *The book of Job*, 252.

read this as an expression of Job's regretful and humble submission in the face of an omniscient and omnipotent God. John E. Hartley, for instance, thinks that Job "humbles himself before God, conceding that he has misstated his case by speaking about things beyond his ability to know".[29]

According to Hartley, Job does not simply give in with this reaction; rather his attitude marks a new direction in his relationship with God: Continuing to pursue his own case would eventually distance Job from God because he would hold on to a conception of divine justice that does not match with the God experienced in the theophany. God points out facts that Job can see and (at least partly) understand, that is, God's creative and providential powers over all of reality. A world under divine control reflects a meaningful order which can be trusted even when it seems obscured or violated from a human perspective. God's care for the various living beings allows the inference that also human life is under the guidance of a caring God who makes sure that everything will work out for the best at the end. Robert Gordis expresses this view when he writes:

> The vivid and joyous description of nature is not an end in itself: it underscores the insight that nature is not merely a mystery, but is also a miracle, a cosmos, a thing of beauty. From this flows the basic conclusion at which the poet has arrived; just as there is order and harmony in the natural world, though imperfectly grasped by man, so there is order and meaning in the moral sphere, though often incomprehensible to man.[30]

The idea is that there is a match between the natural and the moral order. Analogous to the natural order reflected in the divine speeches, there is a moral order guaranteed by God. And analogous to the human incomprehensibility to fully grasp the natural order as pointed out by God, there is a divinely founded moral order which humans cannot fully understand as Job's tragic case makes clear. However, since communion with a mysterious and transcendent creator of an ordered reality is more important than understanding one's own fate in terms of merit and justice, Job reaches a state of inner equilibrium and satisfaction. Therefore, he does not feel the need to reply to the divine speeches anymore. Thanks to the trust in an ordered creation controlled by God, Job is able to render humble fidelity and unconditional faith to God.

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29 John E. Hartley, *The Book of Job: The New International Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), 536.

30 Robert Gordis, *The Book of God and Man: A Study of Job* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1965), 133.

4.3 *Going Beyond the Moral Order*

The above interpretation certainly has its merits. However, I think that for grasping Job's spiritual transformation to a fuller extent we have to go a step further. Job's reaction seems quite unlikely when one considers how steadfastly he held on to his own innocence in the dispute with his friends. He demanded an encounter with God to prove it and then, after a powerful demonstration of God's providential power, he backs down without having received an answer to his nagging questions? If there is an alleged correspondence between the natural order and the moral sphere, why does Job not ask for a better explanation of it? Why does he not ask for an insight in God's specific reason to let him suffer? Remember that predators kill prey animals from time to time in order to survive. There is no special reason why this bull is killed and not another one. That is just how predator-prey-relations work. There is no more to say. In the divine speeches these operations of nature are shown to Job in a detailed way. It is hard to see how from such an understanding of nature an inference can be drawn that God providentially cares for each individual person and that suffering as a necessary means to a higher (religious) end is an integral part of this divine care.

To overcome this apparent inconsistency, Morriston proposes an interpretation that has a stronger focus on the celebration of the overall cosmos and wild animal life and less on the possibility of deriving a moral order from it. He says:

> [Job] sees that he counts for no more (and of course for no less) in the total scheme of things than, say, the wild ox or the eagle. But while he is deeply moved by the wonder of it all, he is also bewildered. He does not (yet) see how his complaint has been answered, and he doesn't know how to respond to God's demand for a reply.[31]

The idea Morriston puts forward is that there is no intrinsic connection between the natural and the moral order. Job realises that God is in control of creation and that it is not intrinsically chaotic; from this insight, however, leads no path to a moral understanding of reality and the workings of human history. Rather, it is important to emancipate oneself from the expectations related to such a moral perspective. Due to the intense experience of the divine presence Job is able to liberate himself from an image of God primarily determined by

31 Wes Morriston, "Protest and Enlightenment in the Book of Job," in *Renewing Philosophy of Religion: Exploratory Essays*, ed. Paul Draper and John L. Schellenberg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 235.

moral standards. Once this is done, he is able to openly accept the "wholly incomprehensible character of the eternal creative power".[32]

To put it differently, Job reaches an insight of creation as it is, that is, outside the realm of human values. Once he accepts reality as it is, he is able to "see" God's joy in the sheer existence of creation. A consequence of this account is that man finds himself in a fractured creation. Man must work out structures of order to be able to live according to his rational and moral nature, and therefore it is understandable that a continuity between the natural and the moral order is presumed and desired. However, as the divine speeches make clear, creation also contains elements hostile to man that do not fit into such a sought order. There is a tension between reality as it is and reality as man is naturally inclined to see it from a human perspective. Newsom points to this tension: "What Job has just heard in the divine speeches, however, is a devastating undermining of his understanding of the unproblematic moral continuity between himself, the world, and God. It is a profound loss of unity, a recognition of the deeply fractured nature of reality."[33]

This insight has the consequence that Job leaves behind the claim to find a moral justification for his suffering. He has realised that creation does not follow moral principles that generally apply to the human social realm. As long as Job was asking for a justified reason for his suffering, he could not yet free himself from a strong moral image of God. The divine speeches, however, direct his attention away from the question of justice towards the splendour, beauty and wildness of creation. Accordingly, Job does not receive any new information about the why of his own suffering; rather, his paradigmatic view on creation and the creator radically changes. By no longer holding to the traditional insight (or the rejection of it) that God has to reward the just and punishes the unjust, Job is able to accept his own fate in a world controlled by a God beyond the moral order. Given this insight, continuing to ask for divine justice makes no sense as God as transcendent creator is not subject to moral categories. This interpretation differs from an anti-theodicy, such as that presented by Saida Mirsadri with reference to David R. Blumenthal: In this version of anti-theodicy, God continues to be conceived in moral categories, but divine benevolence is seen as limited and entangled with the evils in the world.[34]

Note that not asking for a justified reason of suffering anymore does not imply that we should renounce all personal claims and give up the human attitude to long for justice. The idea is not that such natural human attitudes erect

32 Wes Morriston, "Protest and Enlightenment in the Book of Job," 237.

33 Newsom, *The book of Job*, 255.

34 Mirsadri, "Theodicy in a Vale of Tears," 115.

a barrier between us and God. Rather, it makes no sense to demand that creation has to follow a moral order if there is none. We have, as Newsom writes, to accept that "[t]ragic rupture is the figure at the heart of human existence."[35]

As long as Job craves for a divinely guaranteed moral order, he sets himself in opposition to God and sees turmoil as an interpretative key for understanding (his own) reality. Once he liberates himself from this view, he is free to admire the wild and a-moral beauty of creation, which can also affect human existence in a tragic way. This new attitude reorders and deepens Job's previous relationship with God. This interpretation has clear advantages over the other two interpretations.

First, it is able to make straightforward sense of the divine speeches without taking it as metaphor for something else.

Second, it explains Job's attitude of repentance and silence without having to assume that Job was humbled and silenced by divine power and superiority.

Third, following the line of the second interpretation, Job's behaviour is in continuity with his previous desire to receive a fuller understanding of God. However, Job has to learn that his desire does not correspond to what he had originally expected, namely that God reveals a deeper moral ordering of creation. Thus, Job's trials can be seen as a spiritual journey one outcome of which is the insight that creation is a sphere that "carries with it no purely human-centered answers."[36]

Fourth, this reading, makes sense from a spiritual point of view: When we gain a deeper understanding of our own existence in an intensive experience of the divine, we may feel a kind of a liberation and joyful peace that takes away any form of anxiety or sorrow related to worldly things, at least for a moment. Worldly trials seem less burdensome than before, as one's entire attention is absorbed by the experience of the sublime. Instead of asking questions about morals, one simply "is" in the presence of the divine. Thus, from a spiritual point of view Job's brief answers and his subsequent silence can be interpreted as signs of such a deepened spiritual attitude.

Fifth, this interpretation can be linked to the dialogue between God and Satan in the prologue. This dialogue makes clear that human fidelity, not justice is the primary topic of the story of Job. As Michael V. Fox argues, "God's desire for human fidelity suggests a deep need, for he is willing to abandon justice in some cases to make this possible. […] The possibility of injustice can also be a comfort to sufferers, for they can know that their pain is not proof

35 Newsom, *The book of Job*, 257.

36 Steven Chase, *Job. A Theological Commentary on the Bible* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Know Press, 2013), 280.

of guilt."[37] Accordingly, Job experiencing God as creator and sustainer of the universe is able to give steadfast loyalty even in the face of an unrecognisable or inexistent overall moral order.

Sixth, the proposed understanding of God matches well with insights of classical theism: The moral order of the human sphere and the natural order of the non-human sphere are both distinctive expressions of divine goodness which cannot be reduced to one ultimate kind of goodness. This account appears to be preferable to, for example, Navid Kermani's interpretation of *The Book of Suffering* of the 13th century Persian mystic and poet Faridoddin Attar. Attar seems to call divine goodness into question, which results in a paradoxical attitude of piety: On the one hand, the goodness of God is questioned but on the other hand, worship and a religious relationship with God ought to be maintained.[38]

The position advocated here also involves a tension between the natural order and morality, which, however, can be defused: In that God, as the transcendent source of all reality, is not part of creation, God is also not part of the human moral order. Rather, God's goodness is primarily manifested in the multitude of creation, which also includes the moral order of human existence.

5. Two Possible Concerns

The view proposed in the previous paragraph faces, as indicated, a tension which requires further consideration. Newsom speaks of a profound loss of unity because there is no unified order that embraces the a-moral sphere of nature, the moral sphere of man and the transcendent sphere of God. Creation containing a-moral and moral animals implies that God relates to both realities without being able to bring them into complete alignment as no overarching perspective including the a-moral and the moral order exists.

The predominant perspective in the divine speeches understands the human being as a part of the larger universe in which moral categories have no direct point of reference. This perspective emphasises that all life is precious and is at the same time fully aware that suffering and death are intrinsic parts of the cycle of the living. Mark Wynn, for instance, draws attention to the fact that often "our conceptions of value fail to capture certain systematic features

37 Fox, "God's Answer and Job's Response," 22.
38 Mirsadri, "Theodicy in a Vale of Tears," 119.

of the goodness of the world"[39] and he argues that one way to remedy this deficiency is "to have extensive first-hand experience of nature"[40].

I take this to mean that certain axiological aspects of creation require a non-anthropocentric view on it. Experiencing the threatening majesty of nature can contribute towards a significant rethinking of our own concerns. The divine speeches call for a redirection of our perspective towards the worth of things in themself, independent from their instrumental value for specific human purposes. They relativise our natural egocentric perspective and remind us to complement it with one that assigns an intrinsic value to nature in its beautiful as well as dangerous and violent peculiarities. Job is drawn, so to speak, into a deeper understanding of the very nature of things – into their very dependence from God and as such, into the "exhibition of divine glory".[41] The central values that come into view are natural beauty, creativity, bio-diversity, remarkable strategies of adaption or the untamable forces of nature.

One might worry at this point that moral questions are of secondary importance only and that there is no need to grant them an integral place in our understanding of reality. We ought to keep in mind, however, that it is part of human nature to be endowed with moral and social capacities, and therefore, these central aspects of our existential constitution cannot be ignored. It makes sense to distinguish between human interpersonal relationships and the human-divine-relationship. While moral questions are intrinsically anchored in the human interpersonal sphere and, thus, must be tackled, it is less clear to what extent moral questions can be applied in the human-divine relationship.

The idea put forward is that the divine speeches want to draw attention to this by widening the view of moral issues that is natural from a human perspective and directing it to the goodness of creation as such. Be it as it may, the divine speeches make clear that man is the direct addressee of God. God listens to the servant Job. By answering him at length, even in an encrypted manner, God begins a dialogue with Job. God makes clear that we ought to live a life in a world that requires to accept the beautiful as well as inexplicable tragic dimensions of creation and our existence in it. As Athalya Brenner writes, Job "knows despite the new 'closeness' between them God is still mysterious,

39 Mark Wynn, "Natural Theology in an Ecological Mode," *Faith and Philosophy* 16, no. 1 (1999): 27–42.

40 Wynn, "Natural Theology in an Ecological Mode," 36.

41 Christopher Southgate, "Divine Glory in a Darwinian World," *Zygon* 49 (2014): 301.

remote, basically incomprehensible. Therefore, his only hope is for God to stay in contact with him."[42]

At this stage a second worry might arise, namely whether such a mysterious God is worthy of worship. According to Mark Wynn, worship can be defined as an attitude where "the believer relates herself to the marvel of existence, by placing herself in wonder and adoration before the one in whom all existence is contained."[43] Wynn is referring here to God as the ground of all existence and not to God conceived of as a maximally great and perfect moral agent. An attitude of reverence and gratitude is appropriate when one comprehends the wonder of one's own existence in dependence of a greater ground of being beyond our understanding.[44] God in the Book of Job appears to be worthy of worship because God holds the order of the entire cosmos, including its chaotic elements, in its hands. This cosmos is an ambiguous blend of beauty and wildness, pleasure and suffering. Job has managed to accept this view. He was asking to come close to God and he has encountered a God who is accessible, listens, answers and has a genuine interest that man is able to form an appropriate image of God, which entails a profound and even painful transformation towards less anthropocentric categories of the divine. Such a God can be considered to be worthy of worship because it dissolves the disturbing question of divine remoteness or injustice. The lesson that the story of Job wants to teach us is that we should come to accept our lives as they are. In addition, it poses, as philosopher of religion Wesley Wildman remarks, "a bracing moral challenge to human beings to take responsibility for themselves, for each other, and for the world."[45]

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42 Athalya Brenner, "God's Answer to Job," *Vetus Testamentum* 31, no. 2 (April 1981): 136. This view is similar to David R. Blumenthal, *Facing the Abusing God: A Theology of Protest* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 267.

43 Mark Wynn, *God and Goodness*, (London: Routledge, 1999), 151–52.

44 Ludwig Wittgenstein hints at this in his Lecture of Ethics when he speaks of a paradox that encompasses the inner-worldly fact of our existence and the extra-worldly ground of it. See Ludwig Wittgenstein, "Lecture on Ethics," in *Philosophical Occasions* 1912–1951, ed. James Klagge and Alfred Nordmann (Indianopolis and Cambridge, Hackett Pub Co, 1993) 37–44.

45 Wesley Wildman, *In Our Own Image: Anthropomorphism, Apophaticism, and Ultimacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 225.

6. Conclusion

The view proposed may not be easy to accept. It is intrinsically human to desire a world in which our fundamental moral intuitions are preserved and our demand for justice is respected. Perhaps, however, our world cannot meet this demand. I have argued that the story of Job suggests such an interpretation, at least partially, as it invites us to broaden our understanding of reality by focusing less on hidden divine plans for human suffering and an overall moral order ruling the course of the world and by celebrating more the fact of creaturely existence in the presence of a God who is close and remote at the same time.

Such an insight may be disappointing, but it can also be liberating: It makes clear why we cannot give a satisfactory answer to the problem of evil. And it reminds us that, at least in the sphere of human agency, it is about us taking responsibility and avoiding or alleviating suffering as far as we can. This does not make the problem of evil disappear, but it no longer makes us despair in front of a God whose plans we try to understand in vain.

The exceedingly diverse dimensions of reality, from the a-moral indifference of wild nature and the dark cosmos on the one hand to the fascinating diversity of animal cooperation up to human altruistic concerns and moral understanding on the other hand, cannot be grasped from one unified meta-perspective. The book of Job moves forward between these two poles, that is, the non-human and a-moral and the human and moral realm. It tries to reconcile the idea that God as ground of being is too mysterious and transcendent to enter into personal contact with created individuals and the idea that God exactly does so as the story of Job emphasizes. Wes Morriston quotes in this context a Hassidic teacher. He writes: "[T]he Hassidic teacher, Rabbi Bunam, said that 'A man should carry two stones in his pocket. On one should be inscribed, 'I am just dust and ashes'. On the other, 'For my sake was the world created'. And he should use each stone as he needs it."[46] The God in the whirlwind forces Job to use the first stone. God's dialogue with Job invites him to use the other one. How to use them both together and not alternately one after the other, may remain, after all, a permanent riddle in front of a transcendent God that – at least according to classical theism – bears no real relations to the world.

46 Morriston, "God's answer to Job," 356.

"Theodicy in a Vale of Tears"

Towards an Islamic Theodicy of Protest

Saida Mirsadri

If you are the dealer
Let me out of the game
If you are the healer
I'm broken and lame
If thine is the glory
Mine must be the shame
You want it darker
We kill the flame
...
Hineni, hineni
I'm ready, my Lord
("You Want it Darker" (2016) by Leonard Cohen (1934–2016))

The problem of evil is an age-old question, particularly challenging for monotheistic religions that believe in a God endowed with absolute power, knowledge, goodness, mercy, justice, etc., while also acknowledging the existence of evil. In recent decades, the discourse on evil, commonly referred to as the problem of evil, has emerged as a central topic in both theology and philosophy of religion. Atheist philosophers have been at the forefront of this discourse, questioning the rationality of monotheistic beliefs given the existence of horrendous and gratuitous evil in the world. The Roman Catholic theologian Hans Küng (1928–2021) famously termed it the "rock of atheism",[1]

* The title of this paper is a reference to the article by Evan Fales, "Theodicy in a Vale of Tears," in *The Blackwell Companion to the Problem of Evil*, 1st edn., ed. Justin P. McBrayer and Daniel Howard-Snyder (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 349–62.
My special thanks to Prof. Rabbi Reuven Firestone and Dr. Yaser Mirdamadi for their invaluable remarks, which greatly contributed to the improvement of this work.

1 Hans Küng, *On Being a Christian*, tr. By Edward Quinn (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1976), 431. Within the discourse on evil, this term is almost always attributed to Küng, whereas it was Georg Büchner (1813–1837) who first referred to *suffering* – not the *problem of evil* – as the "rock of atheism" (*Fels des Atheismus*) in his play *Danto's Death* (*Dantons Tod*), Act III (1835). In this play Büchner's character asserts that while *evil* can be denied, *suffering* cannot, labelling it the "rock of atheism". He also asserts that *reason* may continue to argue for the

as most accusations of inconsistency and arguments against the existence of God come from this camp. In addition to critiques of the *rationality of religious belief* in the face of evil, some critiques have been raised against the *theodicy discourse*. These have come from both believing and non-believing thinkers alike, predominantly from a moral standpoint. Such serious critiques, among other things, have prompted many Christian and some Jewish thinkers to reconsider their traditions and develop new models of God and/or more plausible responses to the problem of evil. These responses aim to encounter fewer challenges – whether logical or moral, or otherwise – and to be more viable in addressing the diversity, intensity, and multitude of evil.

In the Islamic tradition, however, there is minimal interest in re-examining the problem of evil, and little effort is made to revise traditional understandings of God, His/Her attributes, and His/Her relationship with humans and the world. Faced with this pressing question, even in its modern form, and confronted with recent serious critiques, Muslim thinkers continue to offer traditional philosophical and theological theodicies, with minimal revision, if any. These theodicies closely resemble those found in Jewish and Christian traditions, as most are rooted in Greek thought: evil as relative, evil as the privation of good (*privatio boni*),[2] evil for the sake of a greater good (or "the best of all possible worlds" theodicy)[3], etc. A detailed presentation and analysis of these theodicies are beyond the scope of this study.[4] My focus here is

existence of God and to seek to prove it, but *emotions* invariably *rebel*. He ends his statement with this rhetorical question: "Why do I suffer? This is the rock of atheism" ("*Man kann das Böse leugnen, aber nicht den Schmerz; nur der Verstand kann Gott beweisen, das Gefühl empört sich dagegen … warum leide ich? Das ist der Fels des Atheismus*").

2 These two theories are attributed to Ibn Sīnā. For more information on that cf.: Shams C. Inati, *The Problem of Evil. Ibn Sīnā's Theodicy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000).

3 This is attributed to al-Ghazālī. For more information on that cf.: Eric L. Ormsby, *Theodicy in Islamic Thought: The Dispute over Al-Ghazali's Best of All Possible Worlds* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984).

4 On the topic of the problem of evil in the Muslim tradition there is scant literature available in English, cf.: Nasrin Rouzati, *Trial and Tribulation in the Qur'an: A Mystical Theodicy* (Berlin: Gerlach, 2015); Tubanur Y. Ozkan, *A Muslim Response to Evil: Said Nursi on the Theodicy* (London and New York: Routledge/Ashgate, 2015); Safaruk Chowdhury, *Islamic Theology and the Problem of Evil* (Cairo, New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2021); Abla Hasan, *On Pain and Suffering: A Qur'anic Perspective* (Lanham, MY: Lexington Books, 2022) Muhammad U. Faruque, Mohammed Rustom, eds., *From the Divine to the Human: Contemporary Islamic Thinkers on Evil, Suffering, and the Global Pandemic* (London and New York: Routledge, 2023).
In my PhD dissertation, informed by all current critiques and taking them seriously, I aimed to develop a response to the problem of evil that, while theoretical in form (to address critiques questioning the rationality of religious belief in the face of evil), maintains a *practical nature* and a strong sensitivity to theodicy, cf.: Saida Mirsadri, *Beyond Evil, Facing Suffering;*

on developing a new response to the problem of evil that moves away from "theory" and "system building" – which are favored in the Islamic speculative tradition – towards a more practical approach. Instead of seeking material from the Islamic philosophico-theological tradition, I will explore Islamic poetry. However, throughout my exploration, I will use the Qur'an as the touchstone, so that in the end, the response remains "Islamic" in nature.

Endorsing Maureen Junker-Kenny's critique of analytic approaches to religion, which can sometimes overlook the practical core of religious faith,[5] I argue that Muslim thinkers, as well as philosophers of religion, need to expand their studies "beyond a stifling concentration on narrow and decontextualized versions of 'theism'". For that purpose, it is "important to seek fresh resources with which to engage from philosophical perspectives"[6]. In line with Burley, I suggest that one of the hitherto underexplored resources, with a rich potential, is poetry:

> Rather than attending to how religious practitioners actually struggle with or through religious commitment in the face of suffering (whether their own or the suffering of others), debates in the philosophy of religion routinely proceed at a higher level of abstraction, making reference to real-life horrors only to the extent that these can be adduced to illustrate the philosophical point that the proponent of a given argument is making. Heedfulness to poetry is one means of awakening the philosophical imagination, enabling alternative understandings of the divine to be heard and diverse lines of inquiry to be pursued. Moreover, encounters with poetry can themselves constitute an implicit critique of philosophy of religion as standardly construed, since poetic treatments of religious themes are capable of disclosing the constricted assumptions under which philosophers labor.[7]

In what follows, I will first present the qur'anic response to the problem of suffering and pain for two primary reasons. Firstly, because the Qur'an remains the primary source of inspiration for Islamic perspective on the issue of evil, whether philosophical, theological or mystical. Secondly, I will maintain the Qur'an as the benchmark in my effort to develop a new Islamic response to the

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Reconstructing the Islamic Theodicy By Deconstructing the Tradition (In Persian), (Qom: Taha Publication, 2022).

Recently, a book was published in which the author adopts a unique comparative approach to theodicy within the Christian and Islamic traditions, cf.: Lukas Wiesenhütter, *Hiobs Begegnung: Islamische und christliche Perspektiven auf Theodizee und Theodizeesensibilität*, Beiträge zur Komparativen Theologie 39 (Paderborn: Brill, 2024).

5 Junker-Kenny, "Justice and Mercy as a Paradoxical Task?," 69–86.

6 Mikel Burley, "Reproaching the Divine: Poetic Theologies of Protest as a Resource for Expanding the Philosophy of Religion," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 89, no. 4 (December 2021): 1229–1230.

7 Burley, "Reproaching the Divine," 1230–31.

problem of evil. This is because a response that diverges significantly from the overarching qur'anic worldview, and particularly one that contradicts it, while also disregarding traditional Islamic viewpoints, risks being perceived as no longer authentically "Islamic".

In the second part, taking cues from the Jewish and Christian movements against the theodicy discourse known as "theodicy of protest" or "anti-theodicy," I will explore the potential for constructing an *Islamic theodicy of protest*. I will examine which aspects of these movements I can utilize for my response and which aspects I will avoid. Drawing on Navid Kermani's investigations in Islamic literary tradition, and leveraging his identification of the Islamic motif of the "pious rebel" – akin to the biblical Job motif – I will further explore this motif within Islamic poetic tradition. This exploration aims to provide sufficient material for my endeavor to shape an *Islamic theodicy of protest*, as a novel *practical* response to the problem of evil within the Islamic thought.

Evil and Suffering in the Qur'an

The problem of evil is not as prominent in the Muslim speculative tradition as it is in the Jewish and Christian traditions. This is probably because in the Qur'an, which serves as the foundation of Muslim religious beliefs and dogmas and the highest source of Islamic scholarship, evil and suffering, and the human response to them, are not as prevalent as in the Bible. The Old and New Testaments embody these themes dominantly in the story of Job, the Psalms and Jesus' cry of dereliction on the cross. Nor does the Qur'an treat the issue as a theoretical problem to be dealt with – unlike the Bible where Job's companions speculate on the issue, or where Abraham disputes with God. Nor is it something to be protested against or complained about, as seen with Job, Jesus, and the Psalmist. In the Qur'an, pain and suffering serve different functions and are often instrumental for divine purposes. For instance, human misery is, at certain points, regarded as the context for the emergence of the prophets, with suffering interpreted thus as a means for a higher goal:

> The Qur'an suggests a variety of approaches. Its *Heilsgeschichte* offers a cyclical narration of God's reparative activity worked through prophets and saints, habitually defied by a human recidivism which engenders mass suffering, which in turn is overcome by a new Prophetic correction. This cyclic alternation of misery and vindication generally implies that in the nature of things virtuous endurance will tend to receive its due reward: Moses finally prevails over Pharaoh (Q 20:9–79), Joseph over his brothers (12:67–100) and Abraham over Nimrod

(Q 21:69). Job is washed clean by a holy spring, and his family are restored to him (Q 38:42–4).[8]

According to Winter, the geographical setting, in which the Qur'an appeared plays an important role in shaping such a *Weltanschauung:* "Life in the desert is precarious, and the wisest response to suffering is fortitude, maintained in the hope of a seemingly miraculous deliverance".[9]

Suffering understood as such can, thus, be a sign of "divine favour" since it befalls mostly the saints and prophets: "The Prophet's hearers in Mecca are heartened by the news that although suffering may seem entirely unmerited, it can be the enigmatic, perhaps entirely incomprehensible anticipation of God's miraculous work of deliverance". This "led to the frequent idea that distress is a sign of divine favour, an ascetical view which became widespread in some Sufi mysticism, which often identified the highest degrees of spiritual accomplishment with the virtue of *riḍā*, satisfaction with the divine decree". As a result, "the saint openheartedly and without hesitation accepts tribulations simply because they are from the God whom he or she loves. This disinterested and dysteleological faith position, which sometimes reduces the significance of otherworldly redress, is regularly encountered in the Sufi literature: life with all its hardships is a divine gift in itself".[10]

In some other passages, the Qur'an proclaims suffering to be the wages of sin, and warns that entire cities have been destroyed by earthquakes, deluges or gales because their inhabitants defied God, as were the fate of those who rejected Noah, Moses, and Lot. "This interpretation resonates in later Islamic historiography and preaching, which often sees natural disasters following human unruliness as the sobering tokens of God's punitive ways. In this fashion the depredations of Mongols and Crusaders were treated as the just consequence of Muslim religious sloth. On occasion, certain illnesses were understood to be specific divine retaliations for sin".[11]

What of the apparently unrequited suffering of the innocent? According to the Qur'an, not all virtue finds a happy repayment in this world, and not every struggle will end in a mysterious but splendid vindication. In any case, justice will ultimately be done, however not before the eschaton.

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8 Timothy Winter, "Islam and the Problem of Evil," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Problem of Evil*, ed. Chad Meister and Paul K. Moser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 32.

9 Winter, "Islam and the Problem of Evil," 32.

10 Winter, "Islam and the Problem of Evil," 35.

11 Winter, "Islam and the Problem of Evil," 33.

A further qur'anic explanation of innocent suffering identifies it as test and trial. God puts individuals to test, including the innocent, by giving them prosperous or evil times (Q 5:48; 21:35). Far from that, at certain points, "the text indicates that the purpose of creation itself is to test souls (Q 11:7; 18:7; 67:2; 76:2), so that misfortunes like hunger and poverty may be instruments for the discernment of spirits (Q 2:155). These trials may also double as an earthly atonement for misdeeds which otherwise would attract punishment in the next world".[12]

What is noteworthy here is that in all these answers, the Qur'an is either implicitly or explicitly inviting human beings to use evil as an opportunity to strengthen their faith and to improve themselves morally. While dissociating any act of injustice from the divine, the qur'anic God invites human beings to utilize evil as an opportunity in order to fortify their faith and grow spiritually and morally, and promises a due reward for those who are afflicted with undeserved suffering in the Hereafter.

The Qur'an, however, does not provide a systematic theodicy or a response to the problem of evil – and does not regard it a "problem" at all, in the first place; "the objective is not to engage man [*sic*] in abstract ideas but rather to help him [*sic*] realize the purpose of suffering and offer guiding principles in how to overcome various forms of evil".[13] Therefore, the qur'anic approach is rather practical, as religious faith by its very nature should be, and not at all theoretical.

Protest as a New Islamic Response to the Problem of Evil

In light of serious moral critiques against the theodicy discourse,[14] and against the rationality of religious belief in the face of evil, and in alignment with Georg Gasser, I advocate that Islamic philosophers and theologians should abandon the futile quest to provide "a satisfactory answer to the problem of evil" and instead should focus on practical responses to evil that emphasize human responsibility in alleviating suffering: "in the sphere of human agency,

12 Winter, "Islam and the Problem of Evil," 38.

13 Nasrin Rouzati, "Evil and Human Suffering in Islamic Thought – Towards a Mystical Theodicy," *Religions* 9, no.2 (February 2018): 3.

14 Cf.: Kenneth Surin, *Theology and the Problem of Evil* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1986); Terrence W. Tilley, *The Evils of Theodicy* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1991); Sarah Katherine Pinnock, *Beyond Theodicy: Jewish and Christian Continental Thinkers Respond to the Holocaust* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002).

it is about us taking responsibility and avoiding or alleviating suffering as far as we can".[15]

However, unlike Gasser, who seeks to exclude God from the equation and develop a kind of *anthropodicy*, I maintain that God should be held accountable for the world's evils, allowing space for protest as a legitimate response to the problem of evil. My argument asserts that if it is justified to silence individuals in their complaints and protests against what they perceive as "unjust" from the sovereign *heavenly God* – as exemplified in the story of Job – then it is also justified to silence them when they complain and protest against the *earthly gods* (i.e. tyrannical rulers and oppressors). The numerous critiques of theodicy discourse for potentially encouraging oppression and passivity in the face of it attests to this reality, and Gasser's position is not immune to this critique. Therefore, contrary to Gasser's stance, I maintain that amplifying the voice of protest against God as a response to evil is crucial, as allowing such protest also legitimizes resistance against any divine power claiming authority – and this is fundamental to a practical response to evil.

In the Islamic speculative tradition, not only is complaint not recognized as a legitimate response to evil, but a practical approach is also absent. My primary contention in this contribution is, therefore, that almost all the moral critiques levelled against the theodicy discourse, especially those accusing it of promoting passivity and escapism in the face of evil due to its quietist nature, could similarly be directed towards the Islamic theodicy discourse. These critiques hold also true for some of Gasser's observations, even though it may not align with his intentions, and despite his acknowledgement that the created world, far from being the "best possible world", is "tragic" in nature.[16]

Here, in my opposition to any religious response that would encourage silent forbearance and quiet acceptance of one's suffering out of humble faith – as reflected in Job's remarks: "I am unworthy – how can I reply to you? I put my hand over my mouth" (Job 40: 4) – I instead advocate for a response that emphasizes and echoes Job's defiant response: "Behold (*hine*), now I have opened my mouth, my tongue hath spoken in my mouth" (Job 33:2). With this intention, I propose a practical *religious* approach to evil that promotes "protest" as a fully legitimate response to the problem of evil, whether directed towards God or humans. Drawing inspiration from the Jewish and Christian *theodicy of protest*, I am to outline an "Islamic theodicy of protest". While inspired by these traditions, it will diverge from them in certain ways, as to remain relevant to the Qur'an, as the primary source of inspiration in Islam.

15 Gasser, "Human Suffering and the Riddle of Divine Goodness," 106.

16 Gasser, "Human Suffering and the Riddle of Divine Goodness," 93.

Theodicy of Protest in the Jewish and Christian Tradition

The concept of a "theodicy of protest" was first introduced by American Protestant theologian John Roth in 1981. He detailed this idea in a book chapter titled "Theodicy of Protest," which is included in the book *Encountering Evil: Live Options in Theodicy*. Later in 1993 the Jewish theologian and Holocaust scholar David R. Blumenthal suggested the term "theology of protest" in his book *Facing the Abusing God: A Theology of Protest*.[17]

Five years after the publication of Blumenthal's book, another Jewish scholar, Zachary Braiterman, in his book (*God*) *After Auschwitz: Tradition and Change in Post-Holocaust Jewish Thought*, introduced the idea of an "anti-theodicy", defined as "any religious response to the problem of evil whose proponents refuse to justify, explain, or accept as somehow meaningful the relationship between God and suffering".[18]

In light of such developments against the discourse on theodicy, Roth aligned with the movement in the second edition of his book chapter in 2001, stating: "In my present thinking, I consider *theodicy of protest* and *anti-theodicy* as nearly synonymous".[19]

According to Roth most theodicies suffer from a "fatal flaw", namely that "they legitimate evil. They do so by saying too much or too little as they answer questions posed by waste. The first tendency is illustrated in theories that would make all suffering deserved. The second is found in attempts to ensure happy endings by appealing to God's unfathomable wisdom and goodness, even though we have not the vaguest notion of how such endings could possibly be". Discontent with such a "fatal flaw", Roth suggests that the "theodicy of protest is anti-theodicy, with no desire to legitimate waste".[20]

Roth, therefore, puts all the various theodicies based on soul-making, eschatological hope, free-will etc. into question. He openly objects to any theodicy discourse: "As its title indicates, this essay's tone is protesting. I protest against philosophies and theologies that do not take the historical particularity of evil seriously enough, even when they claim that evils are horrendous".[21] He mocks theodicies that try to justify the existence of evil by limiting divine power:

17 David R. Blumenthal, *Facing the Abusing God: A Theology of Protest* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993).

18 Zachary Braiterman, (*God*) *After Auschwitz: Tradition and Change in Post-Holocaust Jewish Thought* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1998), 31.

19 John K. Roth, "A Theodicy of Protest," in *Encountering Evil; Live Options in Theodicy*, ed. Stephen T. Davis (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 4.

20 Roth, "A Theodicy of Protest," 17.

21 Roth, "A Theodicy of Protest," 3.

"Although God could intervene dramatically at any point in present history, God elects to let freedom work out its own course as it lives in individuals and communities. Thus, God's 'plans' for history is virtually no plan at all. It can release the worst as well as the best that is in us, and therefore the presence of this God may feel like the absence of all gods". He also ridicules theodicies that, resorting to human freedom, limit the scope of divine knowledge, by stating "God could predetermine the future, but God declines so as to make freedom real".[22]

For Roth, as well as for Blumenthal and Braiterman, God is not limited in the divine sovereign power: "This theodicy of protest affirms the existence of an omnipotent God".[23] However, they contend that God is limited in benevolence; in other words, God is not necessarily good and just. According to Blumenthal, therefore, one can "accuse God of acting unjustly":

> We will try to accept God – the bad along with the good – *and* we will speak our lament. We will mourn the bad, and we will regret that things were, and are, not different than they are. This face-to-Face alone will enable us to maintain our integrity, even though it leaves an unreconciled gap between us and God. These steps alone will enable us to have faith in God in a post-Holocaust, abuse-sensitive world. Unity and reconciliation are no longer the goal; rather, we seek a dialogue that affirms our difference and our justice, together with our relatedness to God.[24]

Therefore, in the theodicy of protest or anti-theodicy, the target of protest lies beyond the scope of theodicy or theology, it is also aimed at God: "Anti-theodicy or a theodicy of protest puts God on trial, and in that process, the issue of God's wasteful complicity in evil takes center stage".[25]

Towards an Islamic Theodicy of Protest

The Islamic theodicy of protest suggested here is inspired by the Jewish and Christian theodicy of protest, particularly in their emphasis on direct "dialogue" with God (however in anger and with a quarrelling tone) and the imperative to protest in the face of evil. However, it diverges from these traditions when it comes to questioning the divine goodness and justice.

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22 Roth, "A Theodicy of Protest," 13.
23 Roth, "A Theodicy of Protest," 13.
24 Blumenthal, *Facing the Abusing God*, 267.
25 Roth, "A Theodicy of Protest," 6.

In what follows, I will introduce some literary works from the Islamic tradition that offer substantial material for developing an Islamic theodicy of protest. Unlike attempts to justify evil and calls to accept suffering with patience and forbearance, these works provide space for human complaint, lamentation, objection, quarreling with and protest against God – what might be termed "metaphysical revolt".

Mosībat Nameh (*The Book of Suffering*)

In his book *Der Schrecken Gottes; ʿAṭṭār, Hiob und die metaphysische Revolte,* published in 2005 and translated into English in 2011 under the title *The Terror of God; ʿAṭṭār, Job and the Metaphysical Revolt*, Navid Kermani identifies traces of the biblical Job motif in the works of the 13th century Persian mystic and poet Farīdoddīn ʿAṭṭār, particularly in *The Book of Suffering*. Through ʿAṭṭār's literary lens, Kermani explores a religious faith that simultaneously knows and loves God passionately, yet expresses anger towards Him/Her in the face of the experienced pain, suffering and the divine silence. This response leads to quarreling with and rebelling against God.

The presence of this biblical Job motif in ʿAṭṭār's work, embodied in the figure of "fools", is particularly intriguing when contrasted with the qur'anic portrayal of Job, who unlike his biblical counterpart, does not protest:[26]

> In Islamic literature, the history of the Job motif goes partly in the opposite direction to the Christian version: instead of being increasingly suppressed, it comes to the surface only gradually. Though Job already laments in the Qur'an itself (Q 12:86), he does not accuse. The dimension of theologically sanctioned protest and the believer's rebellion against God is ruled out. The Qur'an reduces the story of Job to the aspect of forbearance.[27]

The qur'anic Job, therefore, far from being a rebel, is praised by God for his patience. "What an excellent servant! Indeed he was a penitent [soul]" (Q 38:44).[28] As was mentioned earlier, when it is not a punishment, suffering in

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26 For a comparative study on the figure of Job in the Bible and the Qur'an, cf.: Scott A. Davison, Shira Weiss, Sajjad Rizvi, *The Protests of Job: An Interfaith Dialogue* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).

27 Navid Kermani, *The Terror of God; ʿAṭṭār, Job and the Metaphysical Revolt* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), 28.

28 All Qur'an translations are taken from ʿAli-quli Qara'i's *The Qur'an with a Phrase-by-Phrase English Translation* (London: ICAS Press, 2004), with a slight modification: replacing "Allah" with "God".

the Qur'an serves as a test, "just as in the dominant Jewish and Christian exegeses". The fact that in the qur'anic story God gives back to Job his original good fortune "is interpreted in the classical commentaries as a reward for his silent patience and as an incentive to follow his example".[29] Kermani then concludes: the Qur'an "does not permit any form of lamenting piety,[30] let alone one that accuses God. In contrast to Christian theology, therefore, Muslim theology did not need to suppress Job's rebellion, the protest of humans against their God or even their questioning in the first place".[31]

The reappearance of the biblical Job motif in ʿAṭṭār's rebelling fools becomes even more interesting when considering that "this impression of metaphysical forlornness," prevalent in the work, "was written at the dawn of Persian love mysticism. This mystical tradition portrays God less in His frightening inaccessibility as in His all-consuming beauty".[32] Therefore, this "impression of having been abandoned by God, which is accompanied by an agonizing yearning for Him [*sic*]"[33] stands unique in the Islamic mystic tradition.

Nor does it follow the qur'anic suggested response to pain and suffering, notably in the story of the *qur'anic Job* – i.e. forbearance and patience: "The people in ʿAṭṭār's cosmos lose their patience; they refuse to be put off any longer", for they are convinced that "[t]he only way to succeed with God, if at all, is through resistance". Therefore, "[t]he fools accuse God, they refuse to do His [*sic*] bidding or defend themselves; they are ever at war with God".[34]

As mentioned earlier, "'[p]atience' (*ṣabr*), 'contentment' (*riḍa'*) and above all 'trust' (*tawakkul*) have remained the fundamental attitudes of Islamic piety in suffering and need to this day. According to this view, which is far more characteristic of eleventh-century Islamic mysticism than ʿAṭṭār's curses, faith in God demands trust in the perfection of everything that exists, and often even more: the unadulterated, joyful acceptance of everything that comes from God"[35]. There were certainly poets such as Ibn ar-Rāwandī (d. 911), Abū Mansūr Daqīqī

29 Kermani, *The Terror of God*, 129.

30 This is not entirely accurate. There are some few examples in the Qur'an that demonstrate allowance for lamentation and complaint, notably voiced by saints and prophets. For instance, when Jacob declares: "I complain of my anguish and grief only to God. I know from God what you do not know" (Q 12:86). Or there is a scene in the Qur'an where Mary expresses deep regret about her existence and wishes for her own annihilation: "Alas! I wish I had died before this, and was a thing long forgotten!" (Q 19:23).

31 Kermani, *The Terror of God*, 129.

32 Kermani, *The Terror of God*, 134.

33 Kermani, *The Terror of God*, 134.

34 Kermani, *The Terror of God*, 143.

35 Kermani, *The Terror of God*, 133.

(d. 977), ʿOmar Ḫayyām (d. 1131), etc. in the Islamic tradition "who mocked such sermons, but their opinions were outside or at least on the outermost fringes of religion".[36] As Stroumsa states: "A tormented Muslim might inquire into theodicy but no Muslim would conclude the inquiry with the statement that God behaves like a wrathful, murderous enemy."[37] In other words, it is historically and theologically impossible in Islam to accuse God, let alone to portray him as an enraged, murderous enemy in the way Ibn ar-Rāwandī did. Whoever did so, "could not remain a Muslim in any meaningful way".[38] In ʿAṭṭār's case, however, according to Kermani, God is being attacked by those who are the most devoted to Him/Her. And this is exactly what gives the accusation its gravity and its specific character.

Kermani, therefore, argues that ʿAṭṭār's pious fools, reminiscent of the biblical Job figure, despite their limited likeness in the Islamic tradition, illustrate that "the paths taken by those who quarrel with God can lead straight through the heart of Muslim piety".[39] *The Book of Suffering* is, thus, not a negation of religion or faith, nor does ʿAṭṭār want to provoke heresy. He simply seeks to describe "a specific emotional state among those who are intimate with God". In such motifs, "[l]ament and rebellion are absorbed into faith itself".[40] As Kermani elaborates:

> Job or the fools, saints and Dervishes in *The Book of Suffering* do not lose their faith in God when they rebel against Him [*sic*]; in their despair, they are more religious than the believers who praise God, but turn a blind eye to the real state of His [*sic*] creation. Those whose love exceeds the conventional degree dare to demand the kind of God He [*sic*] Himself [*sic*] revealed to them. … Disobedience here becomes an act of submission; humans become pleasing to God by emancipating themselves from Him [*sic*].
>
> The eye of Your forgiveness searched for a rebel,
> So, I went out onto the field of resistance. (○, p. 18)[41]

Kermani thus suggests a "counter-theology" that, according to him, runs through many religious traditions – theistic or otherwise – and connects Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

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36 Kermani, *The Terror of God*, 133.

37 Sarah Stroumsa, *Freethinkers of Medieval Islam: Ibn al-Rāwandī, Abū Bakr al-Rāzī, and Their Impact on Islamic Thought* (Leiden, Boston, Köln: BRILL, 1999), 73–74.

38 Stroumsa, *Freethinkers of Medieval Islam: Ibn al-Rāwandī, Abū Bakr al-Rāzī, and Their Impact on Islamic Thought*, 74.

39 Kermani, *The Terror of God*, 163.

40 Kermani, *The Terror of God*, 164.

41 Kermani, *The Terror of God*, 167.

The traces of "protest against God" that Kermani detects in ʿAṭṭār's work can very well help me in shaping my *Islamic theodicy of protest*. However, if I am to base my response on the Qur'an and the Islamic tradition, I cannot follow one of the key elements of the theodicy of protest, as suggested by Kermani, as well as the Jewish and Christian proponents of this movement, i.e. questioning the divine benevolence and justice. Therefore, I have some difficulty accepting certain remarks Kermani makes, in interpreting ʿAṭṭār, notably the denial of the divine goodness: "This is the very paradox of that heretical piety with which ʿAṭṭār follows on from the Bible: Clinging to God, but simultaneously denying Him [*sic*] the attribute of goodness, and finally the rewarding of this negative emotion towards God".[42]

The second issue I find problematic in Kermani's reading of ʿAṭṭār is his elevation of human above God in moral matters. In the section titled "Man [*sic*] raises himself above God", Kermani suggests: "That humans could surpass God in their morality is one of many possibilities" that ʿAṭṭār suggests but could not find in the Qur'an.[43] He further adds: "There is scarcely traces of forgiveness for God in *The Book of Suffering*. He [*sic*] is not only no better than humans; no, He [*sic*] is much worse. He [*sic*] has no manners, and disregards the most basic rules of politeness, decency and charity. That is why the fools no longer appeal to God's goodness, only to the possibility that He [*sic*] will grow bored of tormenting them sooner or later".[44]

I cannot accept such a reading of ʿAṭṭār, nor can I incorporate it into my own *theodicy of protest* simply because the Qur'an differs from the Bible in certain fundamental aspects, even if they both employ very similar prophetic stories.

As Winter, for example mentions, "the Qur'an's heroes are constructed as ethically exemplary harbingers of God's desire to save sinners from evil and evildoing so that the biblical 'texts of terror' which impute malfeasance to God's messengers all disappear".[45] For instance, David does not seduce Uriah's wife; Lot does not sleep with his daughters; there is no sacred extermination of civil populations at the hands of Moses or Joshua. "The new scripture's ideal types never instigate random or unwarranted suffering, although they may justly and transparently punish the guilty or warn of God's condign yet fitting chastisement (Noah, Lot, Moses). The outcome is a thoroughly consistent theo-drama in which God's prophets endure but do not mete out undeserved suffering and

42 Kermani, *The Terror of God*, 166.
43 Kermani, *The Terror of God*, 148.
44 Kermani, *The Terror of God*, 149.
45 Winter, "Islam and the Problem of Evil," 233–34.

are locked in ceaseless combat against agents of human wilfulness".[46] Thus, the Qur'an has simply a different prophetology than the Bible.

The second difference is that, unlike the Bible which is mostly a talk *about* God, the Qur'an, as Kermani himself mentions, "speaks neither of God nor to God", it is rather, by its own claim, "the direct word of God. The textual concept itself already precludes the possibility of human complaining about God, as it is He [*sic*] who speaks in the first person in the Qur'an (in the Bible, strictly speaking, he [*sic*] speaks only in quotations), and God speaks to a single person at a moment in history that is sometimes even specified to the exact day".[47] Thus, the Qur'an has simply a different theology – in the sense of knowledge or conception of God – than the Bible.

Third, because in the Qur'an there are no instances of God acting arbitrarily. I quote here again Kermani himself: "God punishes, He [*sic*] rages and fills humans with fear and dismay, but the punishment has a reason, and the raging a specific cause. In the Qur'an, the terror of God serves to purify".[48]

Fourth, God, according to the Qur'an is never absent, as Kermani himself admits: "The Qur'anic God is visible; it is for humans to recognize the signs, and perhaps they will do so, perhaps they will not … God courts humans, He [*sic*] promises, threatens, punishes and forgives His [*sic*] creatures, but the course of the world, according to the Qur'an, is a history of human refusal that provokes God's wrath, yet simultaneously induces Him [*sic*] to keep sending new envoys nonetheless".[49] Kermani, thus, concludes: "That God is fundamentally cognizable separates the view of God in the Qur'an from the predominant one in the Hebrew Bible … The Hebrew God is not always concealed, but, from Isaiah's complaint that Yahweh 'is hiding his face from the house of Jacob' (Isaiah 8: 17) to modern Jewish reflections on the Holocaust, the distance of God has been felt – even if only as a potential danger".[50] In the Qur'an, however, the biblical roles are reversed, as Kermani himself mentions: "The possibility of God's concealment is not mentioned anywhere, whereas the disloyalty of humans, their refusal to recognize God's signs, their closed eyes, ears, hearts and mouths, is brought up time after time. God is categorically and permanently declared visible;[51] humans cannot await Him [*sic*] passively, but must rather decide;

46 Winter, "Islam and the Problem of Evil," 234.
47 Kermani, *The Terror of God*, 129.
48 Kermani, *The Terror of God*, 129.
49 Kermani, *The Terror of God*, 172–173.
50 Kermani, *The Terror of God*, 173.
51 This is also not entirely accurate. In some qur'anic verses, there is evidence of perceived divine absence. For example, the Prophet and his followers, disappointed by the lack

they turn either towards God or away from Him [*sic*]. In either case it is they, the humans, who are expected to act".[52]

Fifth, not only do the qur'anic conception of God, the God-human relationship, its prophetology and *Heilsgeschichte* differ from the Bible, but so does its anthropology. This is also noted by Kermani himself:

> Because the Qur'an interprets the entire world as one great address from God to humans, it radically elevates humans, which [*sic*] are no longer a part of even the crown of the creation, but rather its meaning and purpose, its origin and *telos*. Thus, man [*sic*] in the Qur'an is not the "image" of God, but rather His [*sic*] "successor, representative" (*ḫalīfa*, caliph). This is a fundamental contrast to the Bible, though, as far as I can tell, it is hardly ever reflected upon: man [*sic*] is not simply created in God's image, but rather is given the responsibility to complete the creation.[53]

Based on all that has been discussed, while I largely agree with Kermani, I take issue with his interpretation of ʿAṭṭār's work through the lens of the 20th-century Jewish and Christian theodicy/theology of protest or anti-theology, where the goodness and justice of God are called into question. In other words, I concur with Kermani regarding the influence of the biblical Job and the rabbinic motif of rebellion in ʿAṭṭār's work, and I seek to use this as a model for my proposed Islamic theodicy of protest. However, I disagree with him as far as his interpretation of the text through the framework of modern theological (or anti-theological, if you will) movements goes, which explicitly and resolutely assumes God's lack of goodness.

It is true that, as Burley elaborates, modern theologies and "theodicies of protest derive inspiration both from biblical texts, such as the Book of Job and the Psalms of lamentation and imprecation, and from the long tradition of prophetic figures and rabbinic interpreters who question and challenge God while nevertheless professing belief".[54] Even Roth, according to Burley, "although writing from an overtly Christian perspective, draws heavily upon Jewish sources, and it is to a large extent with Judaism that the tradition of 'arguing' or 'wrestling' with God has been associated".[55] Even outside the religious tradition, there are post-Holocaust works that use this theological motif, most notably

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of divine aid, demandingly ask: "When will God's help come?". In response, they hear: "Behold! God's help is indeed near!" (Q 2:214)

52 Kermani, *The Terror of God*, 173.

53 Kermani, *The Terror of God*, 174. The transliteration of Arabic words and methods of referencing the Qur'an have been modified.

54 Burley, "Reproaching the Divine," 1235.

55 Burley, "Reproaching the Divine," 1231.

amongst them are "writings by the Nobel Laureate and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel, such as his play *The Trial of God* (1979)".[56] Wiesel, though outside the religious tradition, comes from a Jewish background and is thus familiar with the Jewish motif of *rebellion against God*.

This post-Holocaust protest theodicy's idea of *putting God on trial*, however, unlike the traditional motif, presumes God's lack of goodness and justice. I am convinced that this is a rather modern development of the traditional Jewish motif of quarrelling with God, and that such an explicit and direct connection between the two does not exist. In my view, granting the right to protest does not necessarily require presuming divine injustice or non-benevolence, even if the protester in his/her outrage, questions divine justice and goodness. For instance, Ricoeur, drawing on the Bible, suggests a kind of "theodicy of protest" that does not necessarily adopt such presumptions. The notion that protest and rebellion against God necessitate the belief that God lacks benevolence and justice – or, worse yet, is morally inferior to humans – stems from a modern interpretation of the biblical Job story and the rabbinic tradition. Such a connection between protest and the assumption of divine malevolence is not necessarily warranted, nor does it apply to ʿAṭṭār's fools. I therefore find that part of Kermani's interpretation of ʿAṭṭār's text, which assumes that rebellion necessitates a belief in God's lack of goodness, to be anachronistic.

Therefore, the *theodicy of protest* that I am proposing here aligns more closely with Ricoeur's understanding, which involves questioning the goodness of *the created world* rather than that of *the divine*: "Hebrew lament expresses a protest against Yahweh for the intensity of suffering and calls into question the goodness of creation".[57] Quoting Walter Brueggemann,[58] Putt describes this biblical genre as a "bold movement and voice from Israel's side which does not blindly and docilely accept, but means to have its dangerous say, even in the face of God".[59] This is

> an alternative to the "common theology" of the ancient Middle East. Israel by and large agreed with other religions that God as creator was the sovereign and powerful source of order and legitimate structure. Yet, in the midst of accepting this prevalent theology, Israel came to discover a new kind of courage and faith – the courage to question God as to whether the structures of reality were

56 Burley, "Reproaching the Divine," 1235.

57 B. Keith Putt, "Indignation toward Evil; Ricoeur and Caputo on a Theodicy of Protest," *Philosophy Today* 41, no. 2 (1997): 463.

58 For more information, cf.: Walter Brueggemann, "A Shape for Old Testament Theology, II: Embrace of Pain", *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 47 (1985): 400.

59 Putt, "Indignation toward Evil," 463.

> legitimate and should be maintained and the faith to question God and lodge a complaint against God's apparent inactivity and often silent affirmation of radical injustice and needless suffering.[60]

There are even versions of the theodicy of protest, such as Caputo's, that presuppose the existence of a good God: "Caputo argues that one believes in God 'because of' evil. The mystery of evil and suffering provokes faith into interpreting the traces of a withdrawing divinity, encourages it to accept that as it moves about in the darkness of the abyss, in the midst of undecidability and with fear and trembling, it finds itself bending toward a loving and gracious withdrawing presence".[61]

In the same vein, the Islamic theodicy of protest that I propose here acknowledges complaint, protest, and even rebellion against God as legitimate responses to the problem of evil, without assuming His/Her malevolence or injustice, since, "[o]nly someone who believes in the Highest can throw stones up to heaven".[62] This approach can also be in harmony with the Qur'an: "The loving relationship with a personal God who is at once the saviour and destroyer of mankind … is present more between the lines than explicitly in the Qur'an".[63] In other words, the theodicy of protest suggested here does not require limiting the scope of divine justice and benevolence to make room for rebellion and protest in the face of evil. And it can still be in harmony with the Qur'an, since, as Mirdamadi points it out,

> the Qur'an not only argues for the trust that it expects to win from believers, but it also on occasions depicts prophets and angels as criticizing or at least questioning God or a special agent of God, and the Qur'an does not condemn their critical mode; instead, God tries to answer them. That would be enough to substantiate the claim that the blind trust is not an option in the qur'anic way of life. While the qur'anic ideal for human salvation is submission to the will of God, the Qur'an recognizes reasoning, honest and serious doubt, and even protest to God as ways for people to get closer to the divine truth.[64]

As mentioned earlier, and in line with Burley's perspective, I am convinced that "[e]ngaging with works of poetry is one effective, yet hitherto underdeveloped, means of diversifying the philosophy of religion beyond the standard

60 Putt, "Indignation toward Evil," 463.
61 Putt, "Indignation toward Evil," 468.
62 Kermani, *The Terror of God*, 134.
63 Kermani, *The Terror of God*, 138.
64 Yaser Mirdamadi, "Why I am Muslim," in *Rowman & Littlefield Handbook of Philosophy and Religion*, edited by Mark A. Lamport (Lanham etc.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2022), 389.

preoccupations with narrow formulations of theism".[65] Kermani's survey in this regard is a valuable contribution, providing ample material and a strong starting point for exploring this direction. The motif of the "rebelling/protesting pious" or the "pious rebel" that he identifies within the mystic-poetic tradition opens up the possibility of "protest" within the Islamic tradition. "Such protest is exhibited not in an outright rejection of the divine but in a troubled relationship through which the deity is questioned, reproached, and sometimes railed against".[66]

In my effort to propose an alternative Islamic response to the problem of evil with a more pragmatic and practical approach, and echoing Burley's assumption that "certain instances of religious poetry can facilitate deep philosophical contemplation of these complexities", I aim to further explore this potential through the works of two significant Islamic poets. The two pieces of poetry presented here contain traces of the biblical Job motif, reinterpreted in ʿAṭṭār's rebelling pious. These poems serve as further evidence that there is potential for developing a theodicy of protest within the Islamic tradition, challenging the assumption that such an idea is alien to it. This is particularly relevant given that these two poets originate from vastly different cultural contexts within the Islamic world – one from the Indian Subcontinent and the other from Ottoman Turkey. Both poems were composed at the turn of the 20th century, during a period of significant turmoil in the Muslim world, as the Ottoman Empire was in decline and Muslim lands were falling one by one into the hands of colonizers. This created an atmosphere of despair and deep grief that permeated Muslim societies, with poetry emerging as a more powerful medium than philosophy or theology for expressing these collective emotions and sufferings.

Shikwa (Complaint) and *Jawab-e-Shikwa* (Response to the Complaint)

The first poem is attributed to the Indo-Pakistani poet-philosopher Muhammad Iqbal (1877–1938), who is revered as the national poet of Pakistan. In his poem "*Shikwa*" ("Complaint") published in 1909, Iqbal addresses God in a manner that is almost unprecedented in the Islamic literature, employing a language of reproach, outrage and accusation. He holds God responsible for the misery and decline experienced by the Muslim world. The central theme of the poem

65 Burley, "Reproaching the Divine," 1229.
66 Burley, "Reproaching the Divine," 1229.

revolves around the complaint that God is not upholding His/Her promises to support "His/Her people" (i.e. Muslims) against decline. Iqbal begins with the following verses that immediately reveal to whom his complaint is addressed:

> The strength of my words is encouraging to me,
> Woe to me! My complaint is against God, you see.
> ...
> O God! Hear the complaint from the faithful to you,
> Listen to the grievances of those who always praise you.

He then goes on to depict the current state of the Muslim world, lamenting the decline of Islamic glory and reputation. In the midst of this reflection, he suddenly shifts to a scolding and inquisitive tone, asking God:

> Infidelity mocks, don't you have any pain?
> For your own *tawhīd*[67] don't you hold any regard, any claim?

The poet continues by reminding God of all the services Muslims have rendered: spreading His/Her message on earth, glorifying His/Her name, and more. It is as if the poet is trying to help God recall that while S/He may not have upheld His/Her covenant with Muslims, they have remained steadfast and loyal:

> How strange was the sight of your world before us!
> Where stones were adored, and trees worshiped thus
>
> Human eyes, trained to believe only what they could see,
> How could they ever embrace a God beyond their sight to be?
>
> Are you aware who it was that raised your name?
> It was the strength of the Muslim's arm that brought you this gain.
> ....
> Which nation became exclusively the seeker of you?
> And embroiled in wars' calamities for you too?
>
> Whose world-conquering sword did world-ruler become?
> By whose *takbīr*[68] did your word enlightened become?
>
> Through whose fear did idols perpetually remain alarmed?
> Falling on their faces shouting *"huwa-llāh-u aḥad"*,[69] in alarm

67 The Unity of God, the most central Islamic doctrine.

68 "God is great" (*alla-u akbar*).

69 A qur'anic verse (Q 112:1), meaning "S/He is One".

Then, in an interesting turn of the narrative, like a jealous lover burning with passion for God and broken-hearted, the poet – as the representative of Muslims – while refusing the charge of disloyalty attributed to him, shifts the accusation back onto the "Beloved":

> Sometimes with us, sometimes with others, you've learned to stray;
> It's hard to admit, but you are an unfaithful beloved[70] today.

While condemning the Beloved with one breath, with the next, he yearns in a passionate tone (and this time in Persian) for His/Her return:

> O that happy day when you with elegance will come back;
> When unveiled to our congregation, of your lovers, will come back.[71]

After its publication, "*Shikwa*" caused a lot of controversy among Muslim scholars, especially among orthodox clerics, who regarded the language of the poem as too bold. Four years later, in 1913, Iqbal published the poem "*Jawab-e-Shikwa*" ("Response to the Complaint"), in which God directly responds to the accusations, asserting that the blame should not be placed on Him/Her for breaking His/Her promises, but rather on the Muslims who strayed from the path of their Prophet and forefathers, thus bringing about their own decline.

"*Jawab-e-Shikwa*" picks up where "*Shikwa*" left off, continuing with Iqbal's (or Muslims') impassioned complaint to God. In a reflective monologue, Iqbal, representing humanity or Muslims in the poem, ponders his intense complaint and accusations against God, wondering if anyone can truly understand him. He concludes that if anyone could, it would be the dwellers of paradise, the angels, who might recall him and his tragic expulsion from there:

> If anyone, the [dwellers of] heaven alone can grasp my plight,
> Recognizing me as the one who lost paradise.

However, to his great surprise, in a scene depicted at the outset of the poem, reminiscent of the biblical Job's companions, the angels not only fail to understand him and his situation but also begin reproaching him for his audacity in questioning God:

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70 The Urdu word "*harǧāī*", which comes originally from Persian, literally means "belonging to everywhere". In Urdu, it carries various meanings, including vagrant, wandering, unfaithful, even promiscuous and courtesan.

71 The translation is mine. The original Urdu poem could be found on the website of Iqbal Cyber Library: http://www.iqbalcyberlibrary.net/en/SHIKWA-TANOLI.html (5 Nov. 2022).

They wondered, "Can humans now ascend to these regions high?
Has that tiny speck of mortal clay now learned to fly?"

How little do these beings of earth know of grace!
How insolent and rude they are, these mortals of a lower place!

So great their insolence indeed, they dare even God berate!
Is this the same Adam before whom the angels once did prostrate?[72]

Of quality and quantity, he is truly aware,
If only he knew a bit of humbleness to pair!

How proud these humans are, blessed alone with speech!
Yet ignorant, they lack the grace this gift could teach.

While the angels, who are expected to show understanding to the human, fail to do so and continue to reproach him for his insolence, God enters the scene with a sympathetic and affirming tone:

Then came a voice compassionate: "Your tale enkindles pain,
Your cup is overflowing with tears you could not contain

Even High Heaven is stirred by your impassioned cries,
How wild-tongued is your heart, teaching your lips such fierce replies!

Its grace yet turns your song into a eulogy,
You've built a bridge of converse between the mortals and Me!"

After this expression of compassion and validation, which legitimizes human's voice of complaint while delegitimizing the angels' reproaches, God in this poem – much like the God in the biblical story of Job – continues to emphasize His/Her grandeur and glory, enumerating His/Her grace and gifts to the Muslims, and their ingratitude and wrongdoing in return:

Behold, We stand ready with gifts, but none come to plea,
And the path is revealed, yet no one seeks Me.

My guidance is there, but no one with potential to bear,
Not this the clay from which I can a new Adam shape or prepare.

S/He who has the potential, I can exalt to splendor,
And for the true seeker, a new world I can render.

72 Allusion to the Qur'an (2:34 and 18:50) where God commands angels to prostrate before Adam.

However, unlike the biblical story of Job, God engages in a dialogue with humanity, clarifying the situation by holding Muslims accountable for their own misery, thus placing the burden of responsibility on their own shoulders:

> No strength lies in your hands, and your hearts are steeped in apostasy,
> You are an *Umma* that brings disgrace to its Prophet's legacy.
> …
> The Muslim once was s/he whose whole concern was Allah,
> The one you now call "unfaithful beloved" was once your only awe!
> Go, seek a faithful beloved[73] now, with her a new bond sign,
> And Muhammad's *Umma* to some local place confine![74]

This shifting of almost full responsibility for the state of the world and of individuals on human shoulders is also reflected in, and forms the core of, Iqbal's philosophy. For instance, where, alluding to the Qur'an, he says:

> It is the lot of man [*sic*] to share in the deeper aspirations of the universe around him [*sic*] and to shape his [*sic*] own destiny as well as that of the universe, now by adjusting himself [*sic*] to its forces, now by putting the whole of his [*sic*] energy to mould its forces to his [*sic*] own ends and purposes. And in this process of progressive change God becomes a co-worker with him [*sic*], provided man [*sic*] takes the initiative: "Verily God will not change the condition of men [*sic*], till they change what is in themselves" (Q 13: 11).[75]

What stands out in these two poems is the image Iqbal presents of humanity in relation to God: a *creature* both capable of and bold enough to stand before his/her *Creator* as an equal, questioning His/Her justice, complaining to Him/Her, protesting and revolting against Him/Her in times of pain and suffering, arguing with Him/Her, and occasionally whispering passionate words of love. Moreover, the depiction of God in this relationship is also not that of the traditional, distant, and indifferent Sovereign, but rather that of a patient and empathetic Lover who responds to reproach with recognition, and argues back. Most importantly, S/He listens to the voice of human complaint and protest without silencing them out of anger or wrath – unlike the angels – thereby

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73 *"Yakǧāī", from* a Persian root, literally means "belonging to one place". These two verses are clearly a response to the verse in "*Shikwa*", where the poet/lover, disappointed and burning in love and jealousy, refers to his Beloved/God as "*harǧāī*", which, as mentioned earlier, literally means "belonging to everywhere", i.e. unfaithful.

74 The translation is mine. The original Urdu poem could be found on the website of Iqbal Cyber Library: http://www.iqbalcyberlibrary.net/en/SHIKWA-TANOLI.html (5 Nov 2022).

75 Muhammad Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan 2011 [1930]), 10.

legitimizing not only complaint but also revolt and protest in the face of evil and suffering.

Iqbal's conception of the divine and that of the angels align well with the qur'anic portrayal of God and angels. The qur'anic God, far from being a despotic and authoritarian King/Lord who tolerates no objection to His decrees, engages in patient dialogue with both angels and humans when they struggle to understand His/Her commands and plans. For instance, upon creating Adam, the angels object to God, questioning whether S/He is sure S/He'd want to create a being who, instead of obediently praising Him/Her, might seek to turn His/Her creation into chaos. They inquire: "Will You set in it someone who will cause corruption in it and shed blood, while we celebrate Your praise and proclaim Your sanctity?" (Q 2:30). And God's response is patient – not outraged reaction of "How dare you question Me?" but rather a calm reassurance: "Indeed, I know what you do not know" (Q 2:30).

Another example of God's acceptance of objections to His/Her will and decision is found in the compassionate dialogue between God and Abraham. When Abraham objects and argues with the angels/messengers sent by God concerning the divine decree to punish the people of Lot (Q 29:32, 11:73–76), God does not respond with anger at Abraham's daring. Instead, S/He patiently listens to Abraham's plea (Q 11:74). Rather than rebuking Abraham for his audacity, God describes him as "indeed most forbearing, plaintive, [and] penitent" (Q 11:75).

These qur'anic stories reinforce one of the key themes in Iqbal's two poems presented here: far from being a narcissistic King/Lord who demands passive obedience and worship, and tolerates no objection, the qur'anic God desires partners in creation and values dialogue.

Ya Rab Bu Uğursuz Gecenin Yok Mu Sabahı? (O Lord, Is There No Dawn to This Ominous Night?)

The second poem presented here, is by the national poet of Turkey, Mehmet Âkif Ersoy (1898–1936). Like Iqbal, Ersoy, confronted with the calamities facing the Muslim world at the beginning of the 20th century, turns to God in anger, openly and boldly quarreling with Him/Her. The poem has a cynical and dark tone, reflecting a world as sinister as the one depicted in *The Book of Suffering*. Far from being the best of possible worlds, it is portrayed as an eternal ominous night. The poet expresses his discontent with the otherworldly promises as a response to the overwhelming suffering he witnesses around him:

O Lord, is there no dawn to this ominous (dark) night?
Must the deliverance of the miserable wait until the Day of Resurrection's light?

He furiously protests against the way God responds to Muslim prayers and cries for deliverance:

We yearn for light, but you grant us burning fire
"We are burning" we yell, floods of blood you send to mire

Like Iqbal, Âkif Ersoy also wonders if God sees what is happening to His/Her nation and if S/He cares about what is befalling the Islamic world and the divine message:

Should Islam be trampled, dragged on the ground?
O God, what a loss, what profound degradation found!

Step by step, his doubts and anger turn into an accusation and questioning of divine justice, one of the key divine attributes in Islam, if not *the* divine attribute *per excellence*:

What is the point in crushing and destroying the oppressed?
Why didn't your justice take the oppressor, lest?

The perpetrator thrives, while the innocent dies,
The guilty is ignored, while the guiltless cries
...
O you divine justice, if you really needed to burn
You should have burnt the evil-doers, but you chose us in turn

The poet refuses to be silenced by the qur'anic response of "S/He cannot be questioned" (Q 21:23), as an answer to the many puzzling questions he has:

Many questions are silenced by "He cannot be questioned"
Leaving humans in fear, with hearts deeply tensioned.

Âkif Ersoy ends his poem with some pressing questions that cast doubt on the central Islamic concept of *divine justice*:

Is it not enough, all the calamity we've been through?
Woe is me, do you not exist, divine justice, you?[76]

76 The translation is mine. The original poem is available on the official website of Ersoy's poetry: https://safahat.diyanet.gov.tr/Default.aspx (5 Nov 2022).

One can discern clear parallels between Iqbal's "*Shikwa*" and this poem by Âkif Ersoy. This is not surprising, given that Âkif was a great admirer of Iqbal and was likely influenced by his thought and poetic style. In fact, Âkif was the first to introduce Iqbal to the Turkish audience.[77] Therefore, the presence of the motif of the rebelling pious in Âkif's poem could be attributed to Iqbal's influence on him.

Of the two, Iqbal holds greater significance for this survey for several reasons. Firstly, Iqbal is the source of inspiration for Âkif, not the other way around. Secondly, his two extensive poems develop the motif of the pious rebel more comprehensively. Thirdly, and most importantly, Iqbal is not only revered as a renowned poet in the Muslim world, particularly in the subcontinent and Iran (since his poems are in both Persian and Urdu), but also as one of the leading Muslim thinkers of the last century. This makes him particularly relevant to the aims of this contribution. When a philosopher/theologian like Iqbal employs the motif of the *metaphysical revolt* in his poetry, it arises not merely from aesthetic choices but from deep intellectual conviction. Iqbal's poems serve as a mirror, reflecting the depth of his philosophical thought through an aesthetic medium, to make it available to the broader public.

Concluding Remarks

In contrast to the thinkers from the Jewish and Christian traditions, who in recent decades have engaged intensively with the question of evil and suffering and sought to provide many new theodicy-sensitive responses to the problem evil, there is very little interest in the Islamic tradition to discuss the issue anew. Almost no attempt is made to revise the traditional responses, which, by justifying evil, essentially deny the existence of genuine evil, for an evil that is merely the "absence of good", or is "relative" or is "for a higher good" etc. is not evil after all.

These traditional *theoretical* responses have faced intense moral scrutiny, particularly in the aftermath of the *Shoah*. Advocates of a *practical* approach have argued that confronting evil requires moving beyond mere theorizing and philosophizing. Practical responses are needed that treat evil as a *lived reality* to be actively fought against, rather than a *problem* to be rationalized and harmonized within a system. While Jewish and Christian thinkers have

77 For more information cf.: Ahmet Albayrak, "The Status of Iqbal Studies in Turkey," in *Almas*, Vol. 7, (Khairpur, Sindh, Pakistan: Shah Abdul Latif University, 2004), pp. 1–16.

extensively explored this approach, it remains almost entirely absent in the Islamic tradition to this day.

In this contribution I have sought to develop an Islamic theodicy of protest as a practical response to the problem of evil, where protest against God serves to legitimize protest in the face of evil. This approach presupposes a new anthropology that is largely absent in the Islamic speculative tradition. I have demonstrated how the motif of the biblical Job, which found its way into the Islamic poetry, can be used as a model for an Islamic theodicy of protest.

The aim of this contribution in introducing the motif of the pious rebel was not primarily to advocate rebellion against God or to suggest any injustice on the part of the divine. It was instead meant to suggest protest and complaint to God in the face of suffering, even questioning divine justice, as expressions of one's pain and discontent with the state of the world as it is, coupled with a yearning to mend and improve it. The purpose of such protest is not necessarily to challenge divine justice, but rather to formulate a theodicy that places responsibility back on human actors, rather than simply vindicating or condemning God. The literary works discussed here all have one thing in common: a robust anthropology. Through protest and revolt, it is not *our perception of the divine*, as just and loving, that changes, it is, rather, *our understanding of humanity and its relationship to God* that undergoes a profound transformation.

This is even more evident in the case of the poem "Reportage from a Past June," composed in 1972 by the Palestinian contemporary poet Samīḥ al-Qāsim (b. 1939):

> The Sufi set fire to his robe,
> Over which he cast the remnant of his patience
> He became a new Job
> He attained revelation and destiny withdrew taken with it the blueness of his poetry.
> When I met him in the lobby of sadness, he smiled,
> And said to me, with the poisoned dagger sunk into his chest:
> "God made a great mistake,
> He should not take it amiss if a slave speaks …[78]

Quoting these lines, Sajjad Rizvi argues that Samīḥ al-Qāsim in his poem seeks to "express the enduring significance of the figure of Job". Rizvi adds:

78 Samīḥ al-Qāsim, *al-Qasaʿīd* (Jerusalem: Matbaʿat al-sharq al-ʿarabīya,), 2:77; Sajjad Rizvi, "Ineffability, Asymmetry and the Metaphysical Revolt: Some Reflections on the Narrative of Job from Muslim Traditions," in *The Protests of Job: An Interfaith Dialogue*, ed. Scott A. Davison, Shira Weiss, Sajjad Rizvi (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 51–52.

> However, instead of emphasising the resigned suffering in the fact of a seemingly cruel deity whose acts of rewarding and punishing seem arbitrary and random, a servant of a tyrant who remains faithful in the midst of his servitude, al-Qasim transforms the "traditional" Job into a modern hero of resistance, of speaking truth to power and representing the struggling Arab self in the post-war and postcolonial period: the new Job. Job resists and wins against God who is herself changed by the encounter, a somewhat Promethean human who recasts humanity in another image and projects that onto the divine … Al-Qasim takes the notion of Job as metaphysical rebel far beyond anything in the middle period Islamic poetry of revolt.[79]

Therefore, if one follows Rizvi's argument, it appears that the motif of the biblical Job which subtly influenced the "middle period Islamic poetry of revolt," is re-emerging in contemporary Muslim poetry, as demonstrated in the poems studied in this survey.

All the poems discussed in this contribution primarily reflect the pain of feeling abandoned by God, accompanied by an agonizing yearning for Him/Her. Far from rejecting God, or His/Her benevolence and justice, their protest and rebellion serve as expressions of their deep love, and the expectation that a world created by a loving and just God should be anything but this "landscape of screams".[80] They engage with God in a lover-Beloved relationship, rather than the traditional servant-Lord or subject-King dynamic. It is precisely because of this intimate relationship that they dare to question God, their Beloved.

The metaphysical revolt or a theodicy of protest suggested in these poems is not aimed to question divine justice, but rather serves as an expression of refusal to accept the *status quo* and a call to human responsibility. As demonstrated in Iqbal's poem "Complaint," the motif of "putting God on trial" suggests that one should not automatically and passively accept that God must necessarily be just – especially in the face of this much gratuitous pain and suffering – as a means and expression of rejecting the *status quo*. However, as in the story of the biblical Job and in Iqbal's "Response to the Complaint", it becomes clear by the end that God is indeed just, even though humans may not fully comprehend why and how. As Gasser puts it: "Job's trials can be seen as a spiritual journey one outcome of which is the insight that creation is a sphere that 'carries with it no purely human-centered answers'".[81]

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79 Sajjad Rizvi, "Ineffability, Asymmetry and the Metaphysical Revolt," 52.

80 "Landschaft aus Schreien" (1957), is a poem by post-Holocaust German-Swedish Jewish poet Nelly Sachs (1891–1970).

81 Gasser, "Human Suffering and the Riddle of Divine Goodness," 102.

This acknowledgement does not imply that protest and revolt in the face of evil should be silenced or discredited. The God depicted in both the biblical story and Iqbal's poem recognizes and legitimizes humanity's outcry of protest, yet refuses to accept the charge of accountability for it, placing the onus of responsibility on human beings themselves.

Unlike the traditional worldview, where God and divine action are so expansive that they leave no room for human agency, subjectivity, and consequent action – thus leading to passivity – the cases presented here place humanity at the center stage, elevating human to the divine level. Unlike the classical view, which binds humans to a destiny ordained by God/gods and mandates submissive acceptance of their lot without objection, the motif of rebelling pious, presented here, positions humans as dialogue partners with God, holding Him/Her accountable for the evils of the world, and refusing to accept His/Her creation as it is, thereby rejecting the *status quo*. This robust anthropology can also be in harmony with the Qur'an, if we accept Kermani's interpretation that "man [*sic*] is not simply created in God's image, but rather is given the responsibility to complete the creation".

As such, this theodicy of protest, by legitimizing rejection and rebellion in the face of evil and advocating a metaphysical revolt, suggests a *practical* religious response to the problem of evil, that shifts the focus from wasteful *theoretical* debates on the etiology of evil to the significance of human responsibility and action. The first step towards a practical approach to confronting evil is to acknowledge its very existence. This entails recognizing that this world, far from being "the best of possible worlds," is a "vale of tears", a "landscape of screams", which should not be *passively* accepted in its current state, but rather be *actively* and constantly challenged, if not rejected, underscoring the urgent need to mend and improve it.

There's a lover in the story
But the story's still the same
There's a lullaby for suffering
And a paradox to blame
But it's written in the scriptures
And it's not some idol claim
You want it darker
We kill the flame
...
Hineni, hineni
I'm ready, my Lord

PART III

Divine Simplicity and Divine Action

Al-Ghazālī Against *al-Falāsifa* (the Philosophers) on Divine Simplicity

Mehmet Sait Reçber

The idea that God is absolutely simple has a remarkable historical background and, in our times, although such a view has come under some severe criticisms it equally has found a significant numbers of defenders.[1] The doctrine that God is free from any complexity is generally motivated by the intuition that God is ontologically distinct and therefore radically different from the rest of beings. Although the contention that God is simple seems to be ontological in character, it has some significant semantic and epistemological implications on the conception of deity and this brings to the fore the question whether it can be coherently maintained in conjunction with a theistic conception of God. In the medieval Islamic thought, the simplicity of God was strongly held by *al-falāsifa* (the philosophers) such as al-Fārābī (d. 950) and Ibn Sīnā/ Avicenna/ (d. 1037). It was al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) to mount an attack against the idea of the divine simplicity in his *Tahāfut al-Falāsifa* (*The Incoherence of the Philosophers*) where significant space is devoted to its refutation. As a matter of fact, al-Ghazālī's critical analysis of the divine simplicity occupies a significant place in his overall criticism of the views advanced by *al-falāsifa*. Manifestly, the target al-Ghazālī sets for himself in *Tahafut al-Falāsifa* is rather negative in character, in that he aims to undermine certain views advocated by *al-falāsifa* on the philosophical grounds. In fact, al-Ghazālī himself clearly expresses the negative character of his project in the book when he says that "for this reason we have named the book *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, not *The Introduction to Truth*".[2] Even though it might be true that the basic motivation behind al-Ghazālī's critique is religious/ theological, his arguments to this end are based on the philosophical grounds inasmuch as he was not content with rejecting them simply because they contradict with the tenets of

1 For such a debate in the contemporary philosophical theology, see Alvin Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1980); William E. Mann, "Divine Simplicity," *Religious Studies* 18 (1982): 451–71; Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, "Absolute Simplicity," *Faith and Philosophy* 2, no. 4 (1985): 353–82; Thomas V. Morris, "On God and Mann," *Religious Studies* 21 (1985): 299–318.

2 Al-Ghazālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers* (=*Tahāfut al-Falāsifa*)*: a Parallel English-Arabic Text*, trans. Michael E. Marmura (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1997), 106 (VI.39)

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faith.[3] In other words, he sought to show in a conclusive manner that many of the doctrines defended by the philosophers were not just incompatible with the truths of revelation but also false in themselves.[4]

It seems to me that the significance of al-Ghazālī's criticism of the divine simplicity does not simply consist in the strength of his arguments. Indeed, his arguments to this effect exemplify a pioneering and powerful defence of the traditional theistic concept of God who arguably has a particular nature that is answerable to some essential personal properties against a concept of God based on simplistic intuitions.[5] The basic contention seems to be that fixing the meaning and the reference of God, which is both theologically and philosophically significant, can hardly be secured on the premises of the doctrine of the divine simplicity. This cannot be done without presupposing that God has a set of (personal) properties that are descriptive of his particular and unique nature. Al-Ghazālī's basic strategy is therefore to demonstrate that the view that God is simple cannot be defended due to the fact that it is unintelligible insofar as it leads to some unacceptable, or rather, absurd consequences. He thus seemed to have thought that the idea of a simple God is both religiously inadequate and philosophically indefensible. In what follows, I shall first give a descriptive account of the divine simplicity as defined and defended by *al-falāsifa* and then concentrate on the arguments levelled by al-Ghazālī against them on the issue. Finally, I shall provide an evaluation of the debate and conclude that most of al-Ghazālī's arguments against the philosophers on the divine simplicity remain defensible.

1. *Al-falāsifa* and Divine Simplicity

A substantial implication of the intuition that God is simple is that since He lacks any complexity or composition He cannot be subject to a definition. Thus, al-Fārābī's contention that since the First (*al-Awwal*) is absolutely simple

3 Oliver Leaman, *An Introduction to Classical Islamic Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 27.

4 Eric Ormsby, *Ghazali* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2007), 62.

5 Another significant reason for thinking that al-Ghazālī's critique of the divine simplicity is valuable is the fact that, in doing this, he seemed to have anticipated some of the contemporary criticisms of the doctrine. Thus, for example, McGinnis has recently provided a detailed comparative account of al-Ghazālī's and Alvin Plantinga's arguments against the divine simplicity. See Jon McGinnis, "Simple is as simple does: Plantinga and al-Ghazālī on divine simplicity", *Religious Studies* 58 (2022): S97-S109.

one cannot refer to Him by the terms of a definition seems to provide a neat statement of such an intuition:

> ... the First is not divisible in thought into things which would constitute its substance. For it is impossible that each part of the explanation of the meaning of the First should denote one of the parts by which the First's substance is constituted. If this were the case, the parts which constitute its substance would be causes of its existence, in the same way as the meanings denoted by the parts of the definition of a thing are causes of the existence of the thing defined and in the same way as matter and form are causes of the existence of the thing composed of them. But this is impossible in the case of the First and since it is the First and since its existence has no cause whatsoever.[6]

Ibn Sīnā too finds it impossible there being a necessary being with a quiddity/ nature which entails an ontological composition.[7] The meaning of the Necessary Existent (God) cannot therefore be articulated by reference to the terms of a definition since there can be no elements constitutive of the divine nature. Granted that each term in the definition denotes an ontologically independent component, the individual essence/ self (*dhāt*)[8] of each will be distinct from the others as well as from the whole (the aggregate) and since the whole cannot exist without its parts (since the parts are somehow *prior to* the whole) the whole cannot be a necessary being. The co-existence of the parts of the whole will entail that they stand in relation of a mutual (ontological) dependence. And given that the whole cannot be *prior to* the parts it has to be either *posterior* to or *simultaneous* with the parts; in any case it cannot be

6 Al-Fārābī, *Al-Farabi on the Perfect State: Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī's Mabādī Ārā' Ahl al-Madīna al Fāḍila*, A Revised Text with Introduction, Translation and Commentary by Richard Walzer (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 67, par. 4. For more on al-Fārābī's approach, see Mehmet Sait Reçber "Fârâbî ve Tanrı'nın Basitliği Meselesi," [Al-Fārābī and the Question of Divine Simplicity] in *Uluslararası Fârâbî Sempozyumu Bildirileri*, ed. Fehrullah Terkan and Şenol Korkut (Ankara: Elis Yayınları, 2005), 213–227.

7 Ibn Sīnā's defence of the divine simplicity can be seen a part of their overall doctrine of the unity of God which both entails that there can be no more than one God and that He is devoid of any composition. (See Harry Austryn Wolfson, "Avicenna, Algazali and Averroes on Divine Attributes," in *Studies in the History of Philosophy and Religion*, ed. Isadore Twersky and George H. Williams (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1973), 143. Cf. Peter Adamson, "From the necessary existent to God," *Interpreting Avicenna: Critical Essays*, ed. Peter Adamson, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 181). For Ibn Sīnā's argument that there can be no more than one God, see Jon McGinnis, *Avicenna* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 164; Adamson, "From the necessary existent to God," 177–79.

8 It ought to be reminded that, in the literature, the term 'essence' is used for both 'quiddity (*māhiyya*)' and 'self (*dhāt*)'. In the text, I indicate the relevant sense.

a necessary being.[9] Since whatever is definable is composite, it is not possible for an expression to denote the reality of something that is simple.[10] By the same token, since the First/ God "has neither genus nor differentia, He has no definition".[11] Consequently, God or the First is simple because, in McGinnis' words, "attributes such as God's power, wisdom, love, and the like could not refer to different aspects of God, for then there would need to be some cause that explains how these different attributes come together to form the single entity that is God".[12]

For both al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā definition is a matter of falling under a genus with a specific difference and since God is ontologically unique and simple He neither falls under a genus nor differs from any other being *via* a specific difference. Thus, three assumptions seem to be at the bedrock of such a reasoning: (i) whatever is definable cannot be simple, it must be composite; (ii) there is a semantic-ontological correlation (or rather correspondence) between the terms of a definition (*definiens*) and the parts of the referent (*definiendum*), where each term denotes a part of the being defined. And finally, (iii) the parts denoted by the terms of a definition are somehow causally responsible for the existence of the being defined. Considering that none of these can be true of the First (God), no definition of Him is possible.

For Ibn Sīnā, the fact that the First has neither genus nor differentia does not only imply that He has no definition but also that He has no quiddity: "[t]hat which has no quiddity has no genus, since genus is spoken of an answer to the question, "What is it?" and [moreover] in one respect is a part of a thing; and it has been ascertained that the First is not composite".[13] The basic objective is to avoid any ontological composition in God such that nothing can be added to His bare individual existence/ reality to the extent that, in referring to Him as "the First", one should not mean an addition to His necessary existence as it expresses nothing other than the ontological status of His relations to

9 Ibn Sīnā, *al-Najāt fī l-Manṭiq wa l-Ilāhiyāt*, ed. 'Abd al-Rahman' Umayra (Beirut: Dār al-Jīl, 1992), vol. 2, 80–81. For some further mereological assumptions on which Ibn Sīnā relies here, see McGinnis, "Simple is as simple does: Plantinga and al-Ghazālī on divine simplicity," S98-S99.

10 Ibn Sīnā, *Remarks and Admonitions, Part one: Logic*, trans. Shams C. Inati (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1984), 70.

11 Avicenna, *The Metaphysics of the Healing* (=*al-Shifā': al-Ilāhiyāt*)*: a Parallel English-Arabic Text*, trans. Michael E. Marmura (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2005), 277. (VIII.4.16).

12 McGinnis, *Avicenna*, 158.

13 Avicenna, *The Metaphysics of the Healing*, 277 (VIII.4.14).

other beings. Consequently, no multiplicity can be attributed to the Necessary Existent whatsoever[14], even in saying that

> … He is One in essence and does not become multiple is that He is as such in His essence. If, thereafter, many positive and negative relations become attendant on Him, these are necessary concomitants of the essence that are caused by the essence; they exist after the existence of the essence, do not render the essence subsistent, and are not parts of it.[15]

Ibn Sīnā thus manifestly defends the view that "[t]he First has no quiddity other than His individual existence"[16], and that is to say that for the Necessary Existent there cannot be "some quiddity (…) such that that quiddity would have a meaning other than its reality".[17] There is a sense in which Ibn Sīnā seems to have attributed a quiddity to God when he said that the quiddity of Necessary Existent is nothing other than "its being the Necessary Existent" but this, in turn, is identified with His bare individual existence, that is its 'thatness' or 'thisness' (*inniya*).[18] The First therefore does not have a quiddity and whatever that has a quiddity other than its bare individual existence is emanated from him and caused for its existence.[19]

What Ibn Sīnā aims to establish at this point is that nothing can be ontologically responsible for the Necessary Existent, hence "the necessary existence" is somehow identical with the Necessary Existent.[20] Or else, one has to think that the Necessary Existent is requisite of properties (*maāni*) where the quiddity becomes a cause for the Necessary Existent. In this case, the Necessary Existent cannot maintain His ontological status as it would be attached to a cause for His (necessary) existence.[21] In other words, if there were such a quiddity to which the Necessary Existent is attached, then "the meaning of the Necessary Existent inasmuch as it is the Necessary Existent would come to be through something which is not itself. Hence, it would not be the Necessary Existent inasmuch as it is the Necessary Existent. … it would not be a necessary existent because it has something through which it is rendered necessary".[22]

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14 Avicenna, *The Metaphysics of the Healing*, 273 (VIII.4.1).
15 Avicenna, *The Metaphysics of the Healing*, 273 (VIII.4.2).
16 Avicenna, *The Metaphysics of the Healing*, 274 (VIII.4.3).
17 Avicenna, *The Metaphysics of the Healing*, 274 (VIII.4.7).
18 Avicenna, *The Metaphysics of the Healing*, 276 (VIII.4.9).
19 Avicenna, *The Metaphysics of the Healing*, 276 (VIII.4.11–13).
20 Ibn Sīnā, *Al-Najāt*, vol. 2, 84.
21 Ibn Sīnā, *Al-Najāt*, vol. 2, 84.
22 Avicenna, *The Metaphysics of the Healing*, 275 (VIII, 4.8). See also Ibn Sīnā, *The Metaphysica of Avicenna* (*Ibn Sīnā*)*: A Critical translation-commentary and analysis of the fundamental*

2. Al-Ghazālī's Refutation

Al-Ghazālī recapitulates the idea of the divine simplicity as defended by the philosophers in the following way: (i) there can be no quantitative division in God, (ii) no conceptual distinction can be drawn in God in terms of form and matter, (iii) there can be no plurality of attributes in God, (iv) God bears no relation to a composition of the genus and differentia and (v) the divine existence cannot be attributed or attached to a quiddity.[23] For al-Ghazālī, the arguments advanced by *al-falāsifa* in defence of the divine simplicity are based on some interrelated metaphysical or ontological assumptions. Once these assumptions are questioned one can explicitly see that their arguments are unsound. Most of these assumptions are made around the concept of "the Necessary Existent". Thus, crucial to this line of thinking is the assumption that if the existence of the First is related to a quiddity, then his ontological status as the uncaused being would be undermined. In other words, if God has a quiddity other than His pure existence, His existence would be consequent on it (presumably, His existence would not be ontologically independent) such that "necessary existence" will be an effect of such a quiddity and this would generate a contradiction.[24] However, for al-Ghazālī, this is neither self-evident nor the arguments to this end are truly convincing:

> This is a return to the source of the confusion in using the expression "necessary existence." For we say [that] He has a reality and a quiddity. This reality exists – that is, it is not non-existent [or] negated, and its existence is related to it. If [the philosophers] want to call [this existence] consequent and necessary concomitant, then there is no quarrel in names once it is known that there is no agent for [His] existence, but that this existence continues to be pre-eternal without [having] an efficient cause. If, however, they mean by "the consequent" and "the effect" that it has an efficient cause, this is not the case. If they mean something else, this is conceded; and there is nothing impossible in it, since proof has only shown the termination of the regress of causes. Its termination in an existing reality and a fixed quiddity is possible. Hence, there is no need in this for the negation of quiddity.[25]

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arguments in Avicenna's Metaphysica in the Dānish̲ Nāmai 'alaī, (*The Book of Scientific Knowledge*) trans. Parviz Morewedge (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), 56; Ibn Sīnā, "On the Nature of God (from *al-Risālat al-'Arshīyya*)," in *Avicenna on Theology*, trans. Arthur J. Arberry (Westport, Connecticut: Hyperion Press, Inc., 1979), 27–28.

23 Al-Ghazālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, 87–89 (V.15–20).

24 Al-Ghazālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, 116 (VIII.3).

25 Al-Ghazālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, 116–17 (VIII.3).

For al-Ghazālī therefore there is not an ontological impossibility for an eternal or necessary being to have a particular quiddity that is distinct from its existence. If so, would not God depend on such a quiddity or be somehow caused? Al-Ghazālī's answer to this question is that quiddities can never be considered as causal agents or powers:

> The quiddity in created things is not a cause of its existence; how, then, [can this be] in the case of [what is] pre-eternal, if they mean by "cause" that which enacts it? … The impossibility is only in the [infinite] regress of the causes. If the regress is terminated, then the impossibility is prevented. The impossibility of other than this is not known. Hence, there is a necessary need for a demonstration [to show] its impossibility. But all their "demonstrations" are arbitrary […] built on taking the expression "the necessary existent" in a sense that has necessary consequences [following from it] and on the acceptance that proof has demonstrated a necessary existent having the quality they attribute to it. But this is not the case …[26]

Al-Ghazālī maintains that there is not sufficient evidence to support the contention that it is not possible for the Necessary Existent to have a quiddity and for the assumption that whatever has a quiddity other than its existence is ontologically caused by such a quiddity. His arguments at this point are not restricted to the elimination of such an impossibility as he further argues for the unintelligibility of there being a being without a quiddity:

> Existence without a quiddity and a real [nature] is unintelligible. And just as we do not comprehend an unattached nonexistence but [one] in relation to an existent whose nonexistence is supposed, we do not comprehend an unattached existence, but only in relation to a determinate real [nature], particularly if it is determined as one entity.[27]

Thus, since the repudiation of quiddity is tantamount to the disapproval of reality or nature, an existent without a quiddity is unintelligible.[28] One can therefore rightly conclude that "the denial of the quiddity is the denial of reality. Nothing remains with the denial of reality save the verbal utterance "existence," having basically no referent when not related to a quiddity".[29] Similarly, al-Ghazālī argues, an attempt to identify the quiddity of God with His necessary existence is of no help basically for two reasons. First, given that being necessary has no sense other than the negation of a cause, even though such

26 Al-Ghazālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, 117 (VIII.5).
27 Al-Ghazālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, 117–18 (VIII.9).
28 Al-Ghazālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, 118 (VIII.11–13).
29 Al-Ghazālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, 118 (VIII.11).

a denial is a "necessary concomitant" of God, the reality of the divine essence/ self cannot thus be established. Second, if one supposes that "necessity" can be added to the "existence", then a multiplicity follows, which undermines the very basic idea of simplicity; and if "necessity" is not added then the bare "existence" cannot be a quiddity.[30] Al-Ghazālī thus repeatedly underlines the fact that the meaning of necessary existence can be nothing than the denial of a cause in that "there is no cause for His existence and no cause for His being without a cause".[31]

On the other hand, given that according to the philosophers the First has no quiddity and plurality, al-Ghazālī finds it surprising how they can nonetheless attribute different meanings/ properties to him:

> Despite this, they say of the Creator that He is a principle, a first, an existent, a substance, one, pre-eternal, everlasting, knowing, an intellect, one who apprehends intellectually, intelligible, an agent, a creator, a willer, powerful, living, lover, a beloved, enjoyable, one who enjoys, generous and pure good. They claim that all this is an expression of one meaning that has no plurality. This is [truly] a wonder.[32]

Generally speaking, an insurmountable difficulty facing the defenders of the divine simplicity seems to be the multiplicity of attributes that are particularly ascribed to God somewhat in a theistic manner. How are we to sustain that God is simple together with the view that He has many different attributes such as knowledge, power, will etc.? Can simplicity and multiplicity be squared with each other in such a particular context? If the simplicity thesis is true, an identification of different attributes seems to be inevitable, just like the identification of quiddity and existence. As a matter of fact, for al-Ghazālī, this is how the reasoning of the philosophers proceeds: "Thus, Will would be nothing other than Power itself, Power nothing other than Knowledge itself, Knowledge nothing other than the Essence itself. All, then, reduces to the Essence itself."[33] In other words, "[a]ll these meanings reduce His essence and His apprehension of His essence. His intellectual apprehension [of all this] and His intellectual apprehension of His essence are identical with His essence. For He is pure intellect. All, then, reduce to one meaning".[34]

30 Al-Ghazālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, 118 (VIII.13).
31 Al-Ghazālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, 85 (V.7).
32 Al-Ghazālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, 89 (V.22).
33 Al-Ghazālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, 92 (V.27).
34 Al-Ghazālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, 95. (V.35).

Yet, such an identification of the divine attributes with the divine essence/ self or reducing them to one meaning, according to al-Ghazālī, is a clear denial of different attributes such as knowledge, power and will, and it was this intuition which led the philosophers and the Mu'tazila to use these attributes in "verbal" sense[35], that is, in a non-realistic fashion where they do not denote different meanings in God. But, why should we think that God or the First cannot have different attributes (for instance, knowledge, power and will) such that each of which denotes a different meaning or a fact other than the bare divine essence/ self? What sort of impossibility is involved here?

In al-Ghazālī's view, once again, there is no evidence for such a claim. On the face of it, there seems to be no impossibility involved in thinking that the divine attributes exist as uncaused such that they are co-eternal with the divine essence/ self. An argument on the grounds of that the divine essence/ self would then have a "receptive" cause is simply unconvincing because the concept of "receptive cause", al-Ghazālī maintains, is a part of the arbitrary terminology adopted by the philosophers; it has no evidential value.[36] On the other hand, the proof in terms of the "termination of the regress" is perfectly compatible with "one [existent] that has eternal attributes that have no agent in the same way that there is no agent for His essence".[37] For al-Ghazālī, there is no harm in thinking that the regress of receptive causes should terminate with the divine essence/ self as the substratum (*maḥall*) of the divine attributes, where the agent causation is irrelevant for both of them. At any rate, both the divine essence/ self and the divine attributes can be eternal and uncaused. Consequently, provided that the existence of an eternal being with no cause for its existence is rationally conceivable, the uncaused existence of such a being together with its essence/ self and attributes is equally rationally conceivable.[38]

As for the question, if God needs these attributes other than His essence/ self, then He would not be perfectly self-sufficient (*a se*), al-Ghazālī again finds this confusing insofar as "the attributes of perfection do not separate from the essence of the Perfect, so as to say that He is in need of another"[39]; or else, this is tantamount to the assertion that "[t]he perfect is the one who does not need perfection".[40] From these considerations he seems to have concluded

35 Al-Ghazālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, 96 (VI.1).
36 Al-Ghazālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, 98 (VI.10). Cf. McGinnis, "Simple is as simple does: Plantinga and al-Ghazālī on divine simplicity," S102-S103.
37 Al-Ghazālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, 98 (VI.10).
38 Al-Ghazālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, 98–99 (VI.12).
39 Al-Ghazālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, 100 (VI.18).
40 Al-Ghazālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, 100 (VI.18).

that although the divine essence/ self and the divine attributes are not identical such that each of which denotes a different meaning/ fact (hence they are *intensionally* different), they are nevertheless necessarily *co-extensive*.[41] In other words, on this account, although there is a logical equivalence between the divine essence/self and the divine attributes, neither the essence/self is identical with attributes nor attributes are identical with each other.[42]

Moreover, al-Ghazālī contends, the divine simplicity cannot be maintained if God is an epistemic subject, because even his self-knowledge cannot be identified with (therefore, has to be distinct from) his essence/ self. *A fortiori*, if it is allowed that God's knowledge extends beyond His self-knowledge, then once again a plurality will follow due to the fact that self-knowledge can never be identical with the knowledge of others. Likewise, given that God knows Himself to be a "principle", there must be a difference between His pure

41 Considering that Ibn Sīnā is an Aristotelian about universals and that for him "only concrete individuals exist", Moad argued that, on this account, although the essence of *x* is a logical condition of *x* it is not a cause of *x*'s existence. Following Robert Wisnovsky's interpretation (of Ibn Sīnā's distinction) that "essence and existence are extensionally identical but only intensionally distinct", he maintains, in support of al-Ghazālī, that the argument that God does not have a quiddity fails. This also undermines, he concludes, the doctrine of the pre-eternity of the world. See Edward R. Moad, "Between Divine Simplicity and the Eternity of World: Ghazali on the Necessity of Necessary Existent in the *Incoherence of the Philosophers*," *Philosophy & Theology* 27, no. 1 (2015): 59–73.

On the other hand, due to the ambiguity of their ideas and expositions, it is not at all easy to classify the Muslim philosophers on the issue of abstract ontology such as universals (quiddities, natures or essences). Generally speaking, al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā can be considered as conceptualists rather than nominalists or realists with regard to the ontological status of universals. See Fadlou Shehadi, *Metaphysics in Islamic Philosophy* (Delmar, NY: Caravan Books, 1982), 58; Harry Austryn Wolfson, "Avicenna, Algazali and Averroes on Divine Attributes," 145–46. Similarly, the nature of the distinction between essence and existence has also been controversial, particularly in Ibn Sīnā's metaphysics. But there has been a tendency to think that Ibn Sīnā's distinction of essence and existence is *logical* rather than *ontological* (or metaphysical) in character and thus that his view of essences needs to be considered in *conceptualist* terms. See Fazlur Rahman, "Essence and Existence in Avicenna," *Mediaeval and Renaissance Studies*, vol. 4 (1958), 1–16; Parviz Morewedge, "Philosophical Analysis and Ibn Sīnā's 'Essence-Existence' Distinction," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 92 (1972): 425–35; Fadlou Shehadi, *Metaphysics in Islamic Philosophy*, 80; Michael E. Marmura, "Quiddity and Universality in Avicenna," in *Neoplatonism and Islamic Thought*, ed. Parviz Morewedge (New York: SUNY Press, 1992), 84–85.

42 For al-Ghazālī, 'knower' and 'knowledge' have different denotations in that while the former refers to a self that has knowledge, the latter refers to knowledge *simpliciter*. See al-Ghazālī, *The Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names of God: al-Maqsad al-asnā fī sharḥ asmā' Allāh al-ḥusnā*, trans. David B. Burrell and Nazer Daher (Cambridge: Islamic Text Society, 1995), 14.

self-knowledge and His knowledge of being a principle because the former can be conceived without the latter. It is therefore contradictory to think that God's self-knowledge and His knowledge of others can take place without there being an addition to His essence/ self.[43] Considering the ontological intuition that no attribute is self-subsistent and depends on a *substratum* for its existence, the divine essence/ self and attributes cannot be identical. Indeed, by making such an identification, al-Ghazālī argues, the philosophers end up not only "with denying Him reality and quiddity, but have reached the point of denying Him self-subsistence, reducing Him to the realities of accidents and attributes that have no self-subsistence".[44]

For the philosophers, as underlined by al-Ghazālī, a substantial reason for not ascribing a quiddity to God, which also makes a definition of Him impossible, is that He does not share with another being a *genus* (a general meaning) or differs from it in *differentia*. Since God is *ex hypothesi* simple, a definition (of Him) in terms of the composition *genus-differentia* is not possible; there is no answer to "What is it?" accordingly, a question which can be asked for the composite beings that have a quiddity distinct from their existence. The components of a definition stand for the constituents of the quiddity (nature) of such a being.[45] In al-Ghazālī's view, the philosophers have no independent proof for the impossibility of such a composition other than their "denial of attributes – namely, that [whatever] is composed of genus and differentia is an aggregate of parts".[46] But in any case it is not true that the First does not share a *genus* with another being or differs from it in terms of *differentia*, because both the First and the other intellects – that is, those which are "the effects of the First" – are supposed to be immaterial and numerically distinct. So, they must share something in common and this is not a "necessary concomitant" (or a formal property) but a quiddity. In other words, both the First/God and the first effect/ the first intellect have the common property of apprehending

43 See al-Ghazālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, 101–8 (VI.22–53).

44 Al-Ghazālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, 109 (VI.54). Al-Ghazālī's idea that the identity-claims made by the philosophers in order to establish the divine simplicity led them to reduce the reality of God to an 'accident' or 'attribute' seems to have been rehearsed in the contemporary philosophical theology. Thus, as McGinnis points out ("Simple is as simple does: Plantinga and al-Ghazālī on divine simplicity", S104), Plantinga seems to have made a similar point when he argued that identity-claims involved in the divine simplicity render God an abstract object rather than a person. See Alvin Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?*, 47. See also Richard M. Gale, *On the Nature and Existence of God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 23–29.

45 See al-Ghazālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, 110–15 (VII.1–19).

46 Al-Ghazālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, 112 (VII.9).

themselves and another.[47] Here al-Ghazālī thinks that the philosophers are faced "either with contradicting the principle [of divine uniqueness], or else coming to [uphold the view] that being intellect does not substantiate the essence. Both of these, according to them, are impossible."[48]

3. Some Further Considerations

Now, both the philosophers' arguments for the divine simplicity and al-Ghazālī's counter-arguments in this context are interwoven, hence they have to be considered in a holistic manner. The idea that God is simple seems to have the implication that no distinction whatever can be drawn between His existence and quiddity or His essence/ self and attributes or His various attributes. He cannot therefore be subject to a definition which implies a multiplicity in terms of different meanings involved. *Prima facie*, the basic problem with such a view, as highlighted by al-Ghazālī, seems to be *the intelligibility question*, the question whether one can conceive of a real being such as God in the way proposed. To start with, can there be a being without a quiddity (essence or nature)?

There have been some attempts to show that the philosophers do not hold that God does not have a quiddity but rather that they reject the view that He has a quiddity distinct from His existence. All they wanted to say, on this account, is that God does not have a quiddity other than His necessary existence, where quiddity and existence are identical. If so, clearly al-Ghazālī's criticism would be irrelevant. Thus, in his criticism of al-Ghazālī, Ibn Rushd/ Averroes (d. 1198) argued that "[t]o identify the quiddity and the existence of a thing is not to do away with its quiddity, as Ghazali asserts, but is only affirmation of the unity of quiddity and existence."[49] Thus, considering al-Ghazālī's objection as a piece of sophistry, he maintains:

> ... the philosophers do not assume that the First has an existence without a quiddity and a quiddity without existence. They believe only that the existence in the compound is an additional attribute to its essence and it only acquires this attribute through the agent, and they believe that in that which is simple and causeless this attribute is not additional to the quiddity and that it has no quiddity

47 Al-Ghazālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, 115 (VII.20).

48 Al-Ghazālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, 115 (VII.20).

49 Ibn Rushd, *Averroes' Tahafut al Tahafut* (*The Incoherence of the Incoherence*), trans. Simon Van Den Berg (Cambridge: EJW Gibb Memorial Trust, 1978), 236 (392), par. 5.

> differentiated from its existence; but they do not say that it has absolutely no quiddity, as he assumes in his objection against them.[50]

To say that God has no quiddity distinct from His existence might indeed be a far cry from saying that God has no quiddity. Nevertheless, it might be a premature conclusion to think that al-Ghazālī's criticism is misguided unless one can make a full sense of the contention that God does not have a quiddity distinct from His existence. Also, one needs to see as to whether such a contention can be squared with the rest of arguments advanced by the philosophers for the simplicity thesis. Then, how are we to understand the contention that God has no quiddity other than His existence? What exactly does it mean to say that God's quiddity *is* His necessary existence?

A first approximation is to suppose that God has a *sui generis* quiddity in that His existence is not additional or attributed to such a quiddity inasmuch as they co-exist. Indeed there are some passages in Ibn Sīnā's writings which seem to justify such a line of thinking when he, for instance, says that "the reality of the First exists for the First, not [any] other".[51] The term Ibn Sīnā employs for the 'reality' in this context is *haqīqa* which, like *māhiyya* (quiddity), is sometimes rendered as 'essence'.[52] If so, someone like Ibn Rushd would be right in thinking that "the philosophers do not assume an existent absolutely without a quiddity: they only assume that it has not a quiddity like the quiddities of the other existents".[53] Thus, in this context, Shehadi argues that "the lack of essence here is a technical point. 'God has no essence' means that He has no genus-cum-differentia, which what other beings have."[54] Again, he argues that the very identification of the distinction of essence (quiddity or nature) and existence in God needs to presuppose a minimal semantic distinction between 'essence' and 'existence', where the meaning of '*is-ness*' is kept apart from that of '*what-ness*'.[55]

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50 Ibn Rushd, *Averroes' Tahafut al Tahafut*, 240 (399), par. 5–10.

51 Avicenna, *The Metaphysics of the Healing*, 278 (VIII.5.1).

52 See, for example, Parviz Morewedge, "A Third Version of the Ontological Argument in the Ibn Sīniān Metaphysics," in *Islamic Philosophical Theology*, ed. Parviz Morewedge (Albany: SUNY, 1979), 194. See also John P. Rosheger, "Is God a What? Avicenna, William of Auvergne, and Aquinas on the Divine Essence," in *Medieval Philosophy and the Classical Tradition in Islam, Judaism and Christianity*, ed. John Inglis (London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2005), 237–40.

53 Ibn Rushd, *Averroes' Tahafut al Tahafut*, 240 (399), par. 5.

54 Shehadi, *Metaphysics in Islamic Philosophy*, 62.

55 Shehadi, *Metaphysics in Islamic Philosophy*, 53.

Indeed, without presupposing somewhat a distinction between 'essence (what-ness)' and 'existence (is-ness)', it seems difficult to make sense of such an identification but, from such a conceptual necessity it hardly follows that the philosophers make an intensional distinction between essence (quiddity) and existence in God. Instead, it seems plausible to think that in their denial that God does not have a quiddity other than His (necessary) existence, the philosophers imply that such a distinction is simply inapplicable or irrelevant. Moreover, it remains difficult to recognize the logic of the identification of essence (quiddity) and existence in God when considered in conjunction with the other reasons put forward by the philosophers. For, what such an Ibn Rushdian interpretation seems to establish at best is that the divine quiddity and existence are *extensionally* identical such that there can be no *existential* distinction between them. This is to say that the divine nature is (necessarily) co-extensive with the divine existence, even though they are *intensionally* distinct. Unfortunately, this does not seem to be what the philosophers have in mind when they claim that God is absolutely simple. Because, had this been the case, it would have been possible to think that one can make a conceptual distinction between God's existence and quiddity or between his self and attributes or between his various attributes. Evidently, this contradicts the philosophers' basic contention that the meaning of 'God' ('the First') cannot be articulated in the terms of a definition which naturally involves a semantic variegation (of, say, the divine attributes). Consequently, since the philosophers' denial of the divine essence (quiddity) is in line with their disapproval of a definition of God, it is hard to think that they might have such a distinction between the essence and existence of God in mind. Likewise, we have seen that Ibn Sīnā clearly maintains that since everything that has a quiddity other than its existence must be caused for its existence, "there is no quiddity for the Necessary Existent other than its being the Necessary Existent. And this is […] "thatness," [its individual existence]".[56] To be sure, even the "necessity of existence" cannot be considered as a quiddity in a way that might imply that there is a meaning other than the reality of "the Necessary Existent".[57] Otherwise, this will imply that the divine existence is not necessary in itself but in relation to something else. However, given that bare "necessary existence" cannot

56 Avicenna, *The Metaphysics of the Healing*, 276 (VIII.4.9).

57 Avicenna, The *Metaphysics of the Healing*, 274 (VIII.4.7). In fact, as McGinnis rightly points out, Ibn Sīnā seems to be somewhat ambivalent at this point insofar as he both argues that the Necessary Existent has no quiddity and that His quiddity is His necessary existence. See Jon McGinnis, *Avicenna*, 168–69. Cf. Adamson, "From the necessary existent to God," 175. For further discussion, see E. M. Macierowski, "Does God Have a Quiddity According to Avicenna," *Thomist* 52, no. 1 (1988), 81–85.

substitute quiddity (the divine nature, for that matter)[58] and that it is hard to conceive a being without a quiddity (a particular nature), al-Ghazālī's contention that a "being without a quiddity" is unintelligible remains to be a forceful objection.

After all, it is difficult to see how the nature of a being can consist in "necessary existence" only. Indeed this seems to be the very target of al-Ghazālī's unintelligibility objection: insofar as it is not possible for us to conceive "pure nothingness" other than assuming the non-existence of a being, by the same reason, the existence of a being cannot be conceived but in relation to a particular quiddity/ nature. That is, if God is a real being He must have a quiddity or exemplify His nature (which involves certain essential properties/ attributes requisite of the divine nature such as omniscience, omnipotence etc.) in order to exist.

Now, given that a definition is answerable to the set of essential properties/ attributes (where the conjunction of all its essential properties is *what makes a being what it is*) exemplified by a being, there seems to be good reasons for thinking that there is a set of properties that are definitive of the divine nature. There are some essential properties such as omniscience, omnipotence etc. that are attributed to God by theism, without which it is not possible to individuate Him from others. As a matter of fact, the philosophers *do* ascribe different attributes to God[59] but the problem, as al-Ghazālī found it astonishing, is how are we to square this with their contention that God is absolutely simple, free from any complexity?

To be sure, it is possible to think that different ontological intuitions might be at work here. Thus, as Wolterstorff proposes, it may be the case that the medieval thinkers had a rather different ontological insight which he calls "*constituent ontology*" in contrast to the current "*relation ontology*". Considering these different ontological styles, Wolterstorff argues that an astonishing

58 For further evaluation whether "necessary existence" can be a quiddity, see Mehmet Sait Reçber, "Vâcib'ül-Vücûd"un Mâhiyeti Meselesi" [The Question of the Quiddity of the Necessary Existent] in *Uluslararası İbn Sînâ Sempozyumu: Bildiriler I*., ed. Mehmet Mazak and Nevzat Özkaya (İstanbul: İstanbul Büyükşehir Belediyesi Kültür A.Ş., 2009), 307–15.

59 Adamson rightly indicates that Ibn Sīnā's strategy at this point is to save the divine simplicity together with 'substantive theological predication'. For him, Adamson notes, this can be achieved by negating certain attributes from God by appealing to His being uncaused/ necessary and by affirming His relations to other beings as their cause. See Adamson, "From the necessary existent to God," 174–76. Nevertheless, it remains difficult to see how such a strategy can provide us with a satisfactory account of both that God is simple and that He has a set of non-formal/ substantive attributes as conceived by theism.

ontological truth-claim from the perspective of "relation ontology" can be seen as unproblematic within "constituent ontology". Unlike the latter ontologist the former does not consider that things are composite.[60] Thus, for example, "having a nature or essence" is understood in a *constitutive* way by the medieval ontologist and conceived in a *relational* manner by the contemporary ontologist. Thus he writes: "Whereas for the medievals *having an essence* was, having an essence as one of its constituents, for us, *having an essence* is, having an essence as one of its properties: exemplifying it."[61] If so, given "constituent ontology", how are we to conceive an incomposite being, devoid of any constituent? Wolterstorff seems to find "no ontological difficulties in the proposal that there is such an entity. Of course there will be a variety of things which such an entity is not, and there will be a variety of relations between that entity and others. But there seems no reason to think that these facts imply that the entity is, after all, a composite of constituents."[62]

Unfortunately, it may not be possible for everyone to conceive such a being and hence it is fair to expect a satisfactory characterisation regarding the existence and nature of the being proposed here. Again, given the identity statements made by the defender of the divine simplicity, where God's essence is identified with His existence, it is hard to think how such a being can be God. Thus, as Hughes rightly pointed out in his discussion on Aquinas' view of the divine simplicity, "it seems clear that nothing subsistent could be just existent: a merely existent substance is too thin to be possible. Moreover, even if some substance could be simply existent, God could not be, since He is any number of other ways than just existent- good, wise, and just, as well as omnipotent, omniscient, and the like".[63]

Evidently, since the philosophers espoused a "constituent" ontological view, they seemed to have thought that (i) the constituents of a composite being somehow play a causal role, (ii) whatever is composite needs a composer and (iii) all composite beings are caused for their existence. Granted that none of these can be true of God (or the First) they concluded He must be absolutely simple. Now, considering that al-Ghazālī shares none of these ontological intuitions there are good reasons for thinking that, unlike some medieval

60 Nicolas Wolterstorff, "Divine Simplicity," *Philosophical Perspectives* 5 (1991), 540–49.

61 Wolterstorff, "Divine Simplicity," 542.

62 Wolterstorff, "Divine Simplicity," 543. Conspicuously, Schärtl thinks that the divine simplicity can be held together with "the idea that God's nature is constituted by divine tropes" once the terminology of "causal dependency, parthood, or participation" is avoided. See Thomas Schärtl, "Divine Simplicity and Divine Action," in this volume, 175.

63 Christopher Hughes, *On a Complex Theory of a Simple God* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 21–22. Cf. Adamson, "From the necessary existent to God," 176.

philosophers or theologians, he was not a constituent ontologist. Perhaps he was a relation ontologist. Now, once the basic intuitions of constituent ontology are substituted with those of relation ontology, an entity will not be composed of its constituents but stand in relation to its essence or properties and, in this case, Wolterstorff maintains "everything is simple, nothing is composite".[64] From this he concludes that "[t]he doctrine of divine simplicity fits even more smoothly into the contemporary style of ontology than into the medieval".[65]

However, if everything is considered as simple in this sense a constituent (or 'the medieval') ontologist will think that God has no ontological privilege over and against the rest of beings; that is, He will lose His ontological status. Moreover, the term 'simple' seems to have been used ambiguously here. For a relation ontologist a being will be considered as simple in the sense that it is not constituted or composed of various ontological ingredients. But one can still draw an ontological distinction between the essence and existence or between various attributes exemplified by such a being. Once again, for a constituent ontologist, this will make such a being composite rather than simple.

One might rightly think that the conflict between the philosophers and al-Ghazālī on the question of the divine simplicity consists in their different ontological intuitions which are also wedded to their theological insights. Notwithstanding, even if it might be true that the philosophers were working within a different ontological style, it is hard to see how they can answer the bulk of the objections that al-Ghazālī levels against them. It therefore seems reasonable to conclude that his critique of the divine simplicity still remains insightful.

64 Wolterstorff, "Divine Simplicity," 549.

65 Wolterstorff, "Divine Simplicity," 549. Cf. Alan J. Torrance, "Divine Perfection and the Reality of God's Self-Disclosure: Are Mixed Relations Mixed Up?", in *this volume*, 187–208.

Divine Simplicity and Divine Action

Thomas Schärtl

The doctrine of divine simplicity has been under attack for several reasons. Nevertheless, despite a harsh and outspoken opposition to this traditional doctrine, some more recent theological voices have been heard that indicate that we need to stick to the doctrine of divine simplicity in order to defend the absoluteness of the divine existence. This comes as a surprise since, especially in the camp of those theologians who demand that the grammar of any theology of God has to meet the requirements of the revelation-based concept of God, the doctrine of divine simplicity (DDS) is usually seen as a relic of Neo-Platonism,[1] i.e. a more or less problematic piece of outdated metaphysics which has always been in danger of turning the living God of the Scriptures into a metaphysical principle.[2] However, not all philosophers and theologians were eager to dismiss DDS, some opted for a reconstruction or, at least, for a transformation of DDS while keeping its core message.[3]

Jay Richards offers a list of implications that seem to follow from DDS – a list that already reveals the problems of DDS as well as certain opportunities that might get lost if we had to abandon DDS:

> Among the senses of simplicity that appear in Christian theology are the following:
> (1) All divine properties are possessed by the same self-identical God.
> (2) God is not composite, in the sense that he is made up of elements or properties more fundamental than he is. He has no external cause(s), such as Platonic Forms.
> (3) God's essence is 'identical with' his act of existing. […]
> (4) All God's essential properties are coextensive.
> (5) All God's perfections are identical.
> (6) All God's properties are coextensive.
> (7) God's essential properties and essence are (strictly) identical with God himself.
> (8) All God's properties are (strictly) identical with God himself.

1 Cf. Jay Wesley Richards, *The Untamed God. A Philosophical Exploration of Divine Perfection, Immutability and Simplicity* (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 2003), 214–15.

2 Cf. William Hasker, "Is Divine Simplicity a Mistake?" *American Philosophical Quarterly* 90 (2016): 699–725, esp. 719–25.

3 Cf. Thomas Schärtl, "Divine Simplicity," *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 10 (2018): 53–90, esp. 60–64.

> Of these, (1) is the easiest to accommodate; (8) is the most difficult. In fact, of these eight possibilities, we can defend plausible renderings of (1), (2), (3), (4) and perhaps (5). But it should become clear that the Christian must deny senses (6), (7) and (8), at least on certain contemporary interpretations; [...]. Interestingly, there seems to be an asymmetrical entailment relation between these theses going from (8) to (1). So, for instance, (8) entails (7), but (7) does not entail (8), and so on. If this is correct, then (8) is clearly the strongest form of simplicity and (1) is the weakest.[4]

It does not come as a surprise that Richards is at odds with what is claimed in (6), (7), and (8). DDS seems to have aspects that run against our most basic metaphysical intuitions and against the commitment to a personal God who – on the everyday individuals-have-properties-account of metaphysics – cannot be identical to a property or a set of coextensive properties:

> I am initially inclined against the notion that, say, perfect or infinite goodness, knowledge and power are just the same properties, even in God, whether we understand them as maxima or some kind of infinite limit case. While the perfections are coextensive in God, coextensiveness is clearly not synonymous with identity. For instance, trilaterality and triangularity are coextensive properties of triangles, but they are surely different properties. Similarly, all necessary truths are coextensive; that is, they are true in the same set of possible worlds, namely, all of them. So, the propositions *All red things are colored* and *All bachelors are unmarried* are both true in all possible worlds and so they are coextensive. Nevertheless, these propositions are not identical.[5]

Moreover, there seem to be some 'intra-mural' problems attached to DDS as well; for it is almost impossible to see how the Trinitarian Creed of the Christian tradition can be reconciled with divine simplicity. So, if philosophical theology forces us to stick to a literally 'simple' God, while Trinitarian theology demands an alternative route, shouldn't we abandon the philosophically motivated doctrine in question? Wouldn't it be better to strip DDS down to its pieces and analyze its element according to its compatibility with Trinitarian theology?[6] But wouldn't that be just another act in the old drama that takes allegedly place between the God of Holy Scriptures and the God of metaphysics?

Steven Duby, on the other hand, is a prominent example of those theological voices that are willing to defend divine simplicity – surprisingly – on biblical grounds; to them DDS is a *code* that helps us to safeguard *divine aseity and*

4 Richards, *Untamed God*, 217.

5 Richards, *Untamed God*, 227.

6 Cf. Richards, *Untamed God*, 230.

sovereignty.[7] Therefore, Duby concludes that, based on biblical and revelation-oriented terms, DDS is reconcilable with a Christian concept of God:

> First, against the suspicion that it is less a biblical or Christian teaching than a capitulation to Hellenistic philosophy, it should be observed that the biblical doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* and the inference to divine simplicity mean that this attribute is at home in distinctly Christian theology. [...] Second, this divine attribute does not evacuate God of his multi-faceted richness. In light of *creatio ex nihilo*, each of God's perfections is identical with God himself, but, instead of depriving God of his immanent abundance, this identification only highlights that God's utterly unique (and indelibly mysterious) *actus essendi* includes all that he is without the paucity of creaturely exemplification and partial differentiation. Third, God being *actus purus* does not entail a theological inertia. In fact, *actus purus* tends in precisely the opposite direction: it is an implicate of God's mighty act of creation and as such magnifies that he is the radically living and active one who cannot and need not advance in life or dynamism.[8]

1. The Core Message of the Doctrine of Divine Simplicity

But what is the core message of DDS? It would be rather misleading to simply claim that DDS necessarily entails that God *has no parts*, since nobody in the monotheistic tradition really claimed the opposite (maybe with some exceptions in some ancient traditions that used Stoic quasi-materialism for the divine etc.). Even philosophers and theologians who are highly critical of DDS would insist on drawing a sharp line between God's mode of being and the metaphysical constitution of material things that, indeed, have parts (in the broadest sense of parthood). Nevertheless, DDS' emphasis on divine simplicity is not a quarrel about the theologically rather uncharted territory of a possible contemplation of the materiality of the divine; rather it is the emphasis that the Divine does not stand in a relation of participation to anything else: $\forall x \forall y\ (D(x) \rightarrow \neg P(x, y))$.[9] The variable $\ulcorner y \urcorner$ has to be interpreted in the widest possible way: There are not just actual or possible individuals God must not participate in, but the non-participation condition $\ulcorner \forall x \forall y\ (D(x) \rightarrow \neg P(x, y)) \urcorner$ also encompasses laws, principles, and properties or universals. DDS sticks unambiguously to the idea that God's being is unique even at the risk of fully embracing the incomprehensibility of the divine. As William Vallicella

7 Cf. Steven J. Duby, *Divine Simplicity. A Dogmatic Account* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 133–77.

8 Duby, *Divine Simplicity*, 176.

9 Cf. Schärtl, *Divine Simplicity*, 65–67.

points out, God is the *paradigm case of existence*, because anything that exists depends on his existence:

> The picture is this. Existence is that which makes derivative existents exist. If Existence did not itself exist, then nothing would exist. So Existence itself exists. It is identical to God. God is the unsourced Source of everything distinct from God. God, as Existence itself, is the Paradigm Existent. God is at once both Existence and the prime case of Existence.
>
> In this respect, God is like a Platonic Form in which all else participates. (It is worth recalling in this connection that Aquinas speaks of God as *forma formarum*, the form of all forms.) God is self-existent Existence; creatures are not self-existent, but derive their existence from self-existent Existence.[10]

It is for this very reason that Thomas Aquinas excludes any idea of composition from the divine;[11] since the composition of form and matter is also not applicable to the divine, there cannot be a natural kind God belongs to – for this kind of belonging would not just introduce composition into the Godhead but a dependency of God on terms and conditions established by a certain kind-membership.[12] If there is no composition of matter and form in God and if we cannot attribute the usual criteria of kind-membership to God the concept of God has to be based on an entirely different framework since our conceptual distinctions usually carve at the joints of the realities of kinds and individuals

10 William Vallicella, "Divine Simplicity," in: *The Maverick Philosopher*, accessed February 02, 2021. https://maverickphilosopher.typepad.com/maverick_philosopher/divine-simplicity/

11 William Hasker relates the principle of excluded composition to temporal parts and divine eternity and, furthermore, to unchangeability. This is, of course, a very familiar way to connect DDS to other divine attributes. Cf. Hasker, *Divine Simplicity*, 702–703. However, in Aquinas's own terms the principle in question is predominantly applied to the composition of form and matter such that divine incomprehensibility is underlined. Although Aquinas is a strong defender of divine eternity, he is not in any way dealing with the doctrine of temporal parts.

12 Cf. Thomas Aquinas, S.Th. I q. 3 a. 2: "Respondeo dicendum quod impossibile est in Deo esse materiam. Primo quidem, quia materia est id quod est in potentia. Ostensum est autem quod Deus est purus actus, non habens aliquid de potentialitate. Unde impossibile est quod Deus sit compositus ex materia et forma. Secundo, quia omne compositum ex materia et forma est perfectum et bonum per suam formam, unde oportet quod sit bonum per participationem, secundum quod materia participat formam. Primum autem quod est bonum et optimum, quod Deus est, non est bonum per participationem, quia bonum per essentiam, prius est bono per participationem. Unde impossibile est quod Deus sit compositus ex materia et forma. Tertio, quia unumquodque agens agit per suam formam, unde secundum quod aliquid se habet ad suam formam, sic se habet ad hoc quod sit agens. Quod igitur primum est et per se agens, oportet quod sit primo et per se forma. Deus autem est primum agens, cum sit prima causa efficiens, ut ostensum est. Est igitur per essentiam suam forma; et non compositus ex materia et forma."

whose belonging to certain kinds is dictated by the laws of kind-membership. Therefore, according to classical theism, any concept of God we may arrive at, has to be regarded and treated as a *Grenzbegriff* from the ground up:

> There is, then, a tolerably clear sense in which God is unconceptualizable or *unbegreiflich*: he cannot be grasped by the use of any ordinary concept. But it doesn't follow that we have no concept of God. The concept *God* is a limit concept: it is the concept of something that cannot be grasped using ordinary concepts. It is the concept of something that lies at the outer limits of discursive intelligibility, and indeed just beyond that limit. We can argue up to this Infinite Object/Subject, but then discursive operations must cease. We can however *point to* God, in a manner of speaking, using limit concepts. The concept *God* is the concept of an infinite, absolute and wholly transcendent reality whose *realitas formalis* so exceeds our powers of understanding that it cannot be taken up into the *realitas objectiva* of any of our ordinary concepts.[13]

For Aquinas there is a straight line between DDS and the claim that God is identical to his nature; and this is, of course, the issue that has upset[14] philosophers and metaphysicians every once in a while:

> [...] Deus est idem quod sua essentia vel natura. Ad cuius intellectum sciendum est, quod in rebus compositis ex materia et forma, necesse est quod differant natura vel essentia et suppositum. Quia essentia vel natura comprehendit in se illa tantum quae cadunt in definitione speciei, sicut humanitas comprehendit in se ea quae cadunt in definitione hominis, his enim homo est homo, et hoc significat humanitas, hoc scilicet quo homo est homo. Sed materia individualis, cum accidentibus omnibus individuantibus ipsam, non cadit in definitione speciei, non enim cadunt in definitione hominis hae carnes et haec ossa, aut albedo vel nigredo, vel aliquid huiusmodi. Unde hae carnes et haec ossa, et accidentia designantia hanc materiam, non concluduntur in humanitate. Et tamen in eo quod est homo, includuntur, unde id quod est homo, habet in se aliquid quod non habet humanitas. Et propter hoc non est totaliter idem homo et humanitas, sed humanitas significatur ut pars formalis hominis; quia principia definientia habent se formaliter, respectu materiae individuantis. In his igitur quae non sunt composita ex materia et forma, in quibus individuatio non est per materiam individualem, idest per hanc materiam, sed ipsae formae per se individuantur, oportet quod ipsae formae sint supposita subsistentia. Unde in eis non differt suppositum et natura. Et sic, cum Deus non sit compositus ex materia et forma, ut ostensum est, oportet quod Deus sit sua deitas, sua vita, et quidquid aliud sic de Deo praedicatur.[15]

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13 William Vallicella, "On God's Not Falling Under Concepts," in *The Maverick Philosopher*, accessed November 02, 2020. https://maverickphilosopher.typepad.com/maverick_philosopher/divine-simplicity/

14 Cf. Hasker, *Divine Simplicity*, 703–4.

15 Thomas Aquinas: S.Th. I q. 3 a. 3: "God is the same as His essence or nature. To understand this, it must be noted that in things composed of matter and form, the nature or essence

The very last sentence in Aquinas's comment has, as a matter of fact, frequently puzzled, even angered contemporary philosophers of religion: How can it be the case that God is identical to his attributes? How can we say that God *is* his own deity, his own life, his own wisdom, his own goodness? Wouldn't that turn God into an abstract object or property since anything that is identical to a property must be a property itself?

Some philosophers of religion have tried to make sense of Aquinas's statement by circumventing a literal understanding of the identity statement. Christopher Hughes, for instance, has introduced the idea of supervenience (borrowed from the philosophy of mind) to shed some light on what Aquinas may have hinted at: We could imagine that the divine attributes – like goodness, wisdom, power, etc. – have the very same *supervenience basis* in God; this very basis might as well be a so-called 'super-rich property' which, as the expression of divine perfection would recommend us, if unfolded into a variety of perfect making attributes that can be analyzed as overlapping sets, allows us to accept the co-extension of these perfect-making attributes while including one and only one element: God.[16] Although Hughes' reconstruction has some merits, it still remains within the well-established framework of contemporary mainline

must differ from the suppositum, because the essence or nature connotes only what is included in the definition of the species; as, humanity connotes all that is included in the definition of man, for it is by this that man is man, and it is this that humanity signifies, that, namely, whereby man is man. Now individual matter, with all the individualizing accidents, is not included in the definition of the species. For this particular flesh, these bones, this blackness or whiteness, etc., are not included in the definition of a man. Therefore this flesh, these bones, and the accidental qualities distinguishing this particular matter, are not included in humanity; and yet they are included in the thing which is man. Hence the thing which is a man has something more in it than has humanity. Consequently humanity and a man are not wholly identical; but humanity is taken to mean the formal part of a man, because the principles whereby a thing is defined are regarded as the formal constituent in regard to the individualizing matter. On the other hand, in things not composed of matter and form, in which individualization is not due to individual matter – that is to say, to this matter – the very forms being individualized of themselves – it is necessary the forms themselves should be subsisting supposita. Therefore suppositum and nature in them are identified. Since God 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." Translation by Fr. Laurence Shapcote, accessed September 07, 2023. https://aquinas.cc/la/en/~ST.I.Q3.A3.SC.

16 Cf. Christopher Hughes, *On a Complex Theory of a Simple God. An Investigation in Aquinas' Philosophical Theology* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1989), 60–87.

metaphysics that holds on to a rather strong notion of properties and to the notion of predication as being grounded in the exemplification of properties.[17]

But it was William Vallicella who has pointed out frequently that we severely misunderstand DDS if we do not take a step further:[18] We have to question the applicability of the above-mentioned concept of predication, which is connected with property exemplification, to God as such; rather we have to get used to the idea that, in God's case, the 'usual' mechanisms of 'having attributes' and 'describing attributes' will not work because God is the truly transcendent other to the finite realm and its principles. Anything below this very sharp distinction would not be able to emphasize divine uniqueness in the ways in which classical theism is aiming at it.[19] Thus, it is not just enough to say that God has certain attributes in the most perfect ways we can conceive of, because this emphasis might not really shoot our attempts to conceive of God into the stratosphere of transcendence as long as we are able to conceive of perfections a finite being has based on the possibility that a finite being could become the role model of a very specific perfection such that this finite being would stand out and be singled out compared to any other finite being. For reaching the top of the food chain in terms of perfection is still not what classical theists really mean when they point to God's unsurpassable greatness: God is not just outstanding, he is outside of what makes finite beings literally comparable. Thus, he is also outside the predication mechanisms that are built on property exemplification etc. Furthermore, it is also not enough to state that God has all the perfect-making attributes we can conceive of; for our knowledge of the true range of perfect-making attributes and their consistency might be limited. So again, it is of the utmost importance to point out that God is, most of all, *transcending* the mechanisms of property ascription and property exemplification:

> A truly transcendent God, however, must transcend the ontological framework applicable to everything other than God. So he must transcend the distinction between kind and instance. In a truly transcendent God there cannot be real

17 For different assessments and reconstructions of the identity of attributes corollary of DDS see also James E. Dolezal, *God without Parts. Divine Simplicity and the Metaphysics of God's Absoluteness* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2011), 144–63.

18 Cf. William Vallicella, "Divine Simplicity," *Faith and Philosophy* 9 (1992): 508–25; William Vallicella, "On Property Self-Exemplification," *Faith and Philosophy* 11 (1994): 478–81.

19 For a comparable overview of typical problems attributed to DDS see also Hugh McCann, "Divine Nature and Divine Will," *Sophia* 52 (2013): 77–94, esp. 83–90.

> distinctions of any kind and thus no real distinction between kind and instance, nature and individual having the nature.[20]

2. Is the Doctrine of Divine Simplicity Built on a Misunderstanding?

It has been important to underline the true intentions of DDS in the first paragraph and to remind the benign reader of the core meaning of DDS since contemporary discussions tend to underestimate its main point: its emphasis of *divine transcendence*. Among others, William Hasker has outspokenly criticized DDS. Basically, DDS seems to be the offspring of a certain concession to a *Platonic Theory of Predication* (PTP):[21]

1. If *x* falls under the concept F, then *x* participates in the form (= Platonic idea) of F which is the epitome of F-ness and has the ontological and semantic capacity to cause a degree of F-ness in *x*.
2. *x* falls under the concept F.
3. *x* participates in the form/idea of F …

But in God's case PTP would run into severe problems. For God must not depend on anything else apart from himself. DDS claims, instead, that there is a specific relation – even a paradoxically non-relational relation – between God and his attributes, so that the dependency/participation problem disappears in an instant. But to Hasker DDS is a scratch to the wrong itch; to him the whole dependency/predication problem disappears once we refuse to sign off on PTP as such:

> This argument observes, quite correctly, that we cannot suppose God to depend for his perfections on entities such as the Forms that are distinct from, and external to, God. But this problem can be met nicely without subscribing to the doctrine of simplicity: all that we need to do is to repudiate the doctrines of the Forms and participation. A horse is not a horse because it participates in the True Horse; it is a horse because it has the morphology and genetic structure that is characteristic of that species – and likewise for other kind and attribute terms.[22]

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20 William Vallicella, "God as Uniquely Unique," *The Maverick Philosopher*, accessed October 19, 2020. https://maverickphilosopher.typepad.com/maverick_philosopher/divine-simplicity/

21 Cf. Hasker, *Divine Simplicity*, 700–1.; cf. also Jeffrey E. Brower, "Simplicity and Aseity," in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Theology*, ed. Thomas P. Flint and Michael Rea (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 105–28, esp. 108–9.

22 Hasker, *Divine Simplicity*, 701.

Hasker's solution is straightforward: We just have to endorse another theory of predication and this would earn us the justification to leave DDS behind. However, Hasker's recommendation comes at higher costs than what one might want to pay. For, St. Anselm's proof of God's existence in his famous *Monologion* presupposes some version of a Platonic theory of Predication.[23] St. Anselm is, of course, not talking about any sort of F-ness like being a horse etc. To Anselm, Hasker's assessment of the Platonic theory of predication would sound like a mockery of a much more sophisticated intuition, because in some rare cases we encounter predicates that seem to refer to, what one might call, a 'standard of attribution' which cannot and will not be found within the realm of finite entities. This is the reason why St. Anselm is not talking about being a horse or a ship or a table etc. but, most interestingly, about 'being good': If we have no clear-cut notion of *pure goodness* how dare we attribute goodness to anything?[24] In contrast to Hasker's assumption we would have to modify PTP and restrict its applicability to so-called pure (perfection-)properties only, while emphasizing that pure properties are those properties that are attributed on the basis of an all-or-nothing standard and whose ascription indicates an ontological perfection called 'unsurpassable existence.' Now, the remodified argument runs as follows:

1. If *x* has the pure property *P* while *x* is, in itself, a finite being, then *x* has *P* only if it participates in *y* which is the epitome of having *P* in the most unrestricted way we can think of.
2. *x* has the pure property *P*.
3. *x* participates in *y* which is the epitome of having *P*.

This time, it would get a bit harder to avoid DDS for God's own case of having pure properties. One would have to deny that there are any pure properties at all or that pure properties are, in the light of day, nothing else but our own modes of abstraction from the everyday mixed bag situation of predicating many attributes of finite entities – all at the same time. However, both exit strategies have uncomfortable consequences as well: If we deny the existence of pure properties we lose not only the building blocks for so-called transcendental arguments for the existence of God,[25] we might also lose the ingredients for describing the content of divine perfection and its unsurpassable

23 Cf. Anselm of Canterbury: *Monologion* I; cf. Brower, *Simplicity*, 109–10.

24 Cf. Anselm of Canterbury, *Monologion* II & III.

25 Cf. Sean Choi, "The Transcendental Argument," in *Reasons for Faith: Making a Case for the Christian Faith: Essays in Honor of Bob Passantino and Gretchen Passantino Coburn*, ed. Norman L. Geisler and Chad Meister (Wheaton: Crossway, 2007), 216–33.

maximality. But if we, on the other hand, try to render pure properties as the result of abstractions, performed by our own intellectual capacities, we might not have any guarantee that we add the adequate content to the product of abstraction in question, because our noetic structures are always occupied by impure properties in a way that grasps the contents of pure properties only as the limit cases of our intellectual endeavors. Much of what the Christian tradition has said about the relations between God and human nature, and God and our intellectual and ethical longings especially, was tied to the notion of pure properties. So, if PTP unavoidably contains the predication schematics of pure properties, DDS is the only way to go – in God's case.

But, Hasker offers some additional points of criticism. He underlines that DDS requires the idea that God is identical to his attributes, but that this very notion leads to an infinite regress:

> But, we are told, God is *identical* with his action of parting the Red Sea. Applying the substitutivity of identicals, we have
>
> ([([God] parting)] parting).
>
> But there is no reason to stop there; repeating the operation we have
>
> ([([([God] parting)] parting)] parting)
>
> and so on indefinitely. Clearly, however, something has gone badly wrong. We have, in fact, a confusion of categories, the action designated as '([God] parting)' is simply not the right sort of thing to be the agent who performs an action. Insofar as the doctrine of divine simplicity involves category mistakes, its assertions are either necessarily false or, perhaps better, simply unintelligible. (An ill-formed formula expresses no proposition and is not a candidate for being either true or false.)[26]

However, once we take a closer look at Hasker's diagnosis, we can easily identify Hasker's mistake: First of all, he tried again to squeeze the identity of attributes into an everyday-schematics of predication which seems to revolve around the notion of individuals having properties or individuals having properties under the umbrella of certain universals. As William Vallicella and others have pointed out frequently: DDS starts with the idea that for God the everyday schematics of property ascription must not be applied.[27] This is the very

26 Hasker, *Divine Simplicity*, 703–4.

27 Brower has developed an alternative approach that does not commit us to a specific predication theory for divine attributes but claims that any substantial predication has just one and the same truthmaker. Cf. Brower, *Simplicity*, 110–17, esp. 112: "It should be clear already that the truthmaker interpretation goes a considerable distance toward rendering the doctrine of divine simplicity coherent. On this interpretation, for example, the doctrine does not require that God is identical with each of his properties, and hence is himself a property. In fact, it does not even require that God has any properties at all (in the

reason why DDS and the classic *doctrine of analogy* – regarding *our mode of speaking* about God – form a conceptual unity which can be easily understood (and is far from being unintelligible) if we adopt the following insight:

1. For any *x* and *y* the property F is ascribed univocally if and only if *x* and *y* have the very same relation to the F-ness expressed by F. [*Condition for Univocity*]
2. *x* and *y* don't have the same relation to the F-ness expressed by F. [*assumption*]
3. The property F is not ascribed univocally to *x* and *y*.

The condition of univocity, expressed in line 1, doesn't specify the relation to the F-ness. This turns out to be, despite some first impressions, an advantage, because we may think of participation as the only relation that fits the bill. But we could very well come up with a less laden notion of property ascription – one that is, for instance, more Aristotelian or even more Wittgensteinian which would, in this case, include that F-ness had to be conceived of as a specific set of rules expressed in our communicative abilities etc. Anyhow, it is easy to see that the independency thesis underlying DDS forces us to confirm what is expressed in line 2. whenever we attempt or start to compare God with any finite entity. But to stop from falling into the traps of equivocation – which would be a viable option for the interpretation of what is expressed in line 3. – we need to hold on to DDS insofar as divine simplicity entails that God still is F because he is identical to his F-ness. While, on the other side, any finite being *x* would stand in a different relation to F-ness (and would, therefore, fail to be the epitome of pure F-ness) the mode of having F would be different for finite beings – compared to God's mode of being F. But since God incorporates F-ness by being *identical* with his F-ness, it would still be possible to ascribe F to God: Univocity and equivocation would be ruled out at the same time – with regard to the ascription of F.

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ontologically loaded sense of exemplifiables). On the contrary, all the doctrine requires is that, for every true intrinsic divine predication, there is a truthmaker and God is identical with that truthmaker. But there is nothing obviously absurd about that. Indeed, on the assumption that each of God's intrinsic predications is also essential, this interpretation renders the doctrine quite plausible in certain respects (more on this below). Finally, we should note that the truthmaker interpretation allows us to make sense of the claim, endorsed by traditional proponents of simplicity, that abstract expressions such as '*a*'s justice' can refer both to concrete individual persons (in the case of God) and to properties or exemplifiables (in the case of creatures). For according to TA, expressions of this form will refer to whatever it is that makes predications such as '*a* is just' true. But in the case of creatures, unlike that of God, such predications will often be plausibly regarded as contingent. In order to supply a truthmaker for it, therefore, we must appeal to something like particular properties (or non-transferable tropes)."

Furthermore, DDS and its identity of attributes-requirement has always been applied predominantly to so-called substantial attributes God has 'a se' and eternally. Divine actions related to the external world are – to say the least – only quasi-attributes with an entirely different status. Not only did Hasker miss the concept of analogy, which is inseparably attached to DDS and is the reason why the everyday-schematics of property ascription must not be applied to God; he also picked an entirely misleading example to paint a caricature of the leading intuitions for a suitable theory of predication related to God. If we, instead, are not focusing on not-substantial divine attributes (like the parting of the Red Sea) and claim, for instance, that God is 'identical' to his knowledge we can meaningfully assert that the divine knowledge is a trans-categorically relevant perfection of knowing, for we have to treat the divine knowledge as a trope being a substantial constituent for the divine nature. Only as a trope divine knowledge can be treated like an ontological individual; divine knowledge like any other divine attribute is not grounded in a universal or a proposition or anything of that kind, but only in God's very own unique nature.[28]

If we combine these insights with what we have already outlined at the beginning of the last section we, nevertheless, arrive at another kind of problem. Although it might be possible to overcome some of the conceptual problems which seem to be, at first glance, the implications of DDS and fueled Hasker's caricatures, it becomes unequivocally clear that DDS, after all, requires a very specific kind of *metaphysics* for the divine:

1. 'Existing' needs to be treated as a full-bloodied, nevertheless specific attribute – at least in a first step (the second step, however, will lead us deeper into the wonderous rabbit hole of trope theories). For only in this case, the identity statement holding between the divine nature and the divine existence makes sense at a logical level. And only in this case we can talk about God as the epitome of existence or as 'existence itself' or 'pure existence' etc.
2. Universals as the backbone of property ascriptions need to be treated in a more or less nominalist fashion, because to underline the identity of divine attributes presupposes, at least in a formal way, that these attributes can be rendered as individuals or quasi-individuals – which is possible only if we consider such attributes to be tropes, i.e. individual-resembling constituents of the quality-side of individual existents.[29]

28 Cf. Schärtl, *Divine Simplicity*, 73–76.
29 Cf. Schärtl, *Divine Simplicity*, 73–76.

Both requirements are, as a matter of fact, opposed to views that hold on to a more or less Platonic notion of properties[30] or to a Kantian *deflationist version* of interpreting the attribute of existence. To put it simply: PTP seems to be unavoidably called for when it comes to so-called pure properties of the divine. But PTP would introduce a mechanism of predication which is at odds with divine aseity and independence. So, in order to eat the cake of pure properties and have the cake of divine independence, transcendence, and aseity we get advised by the classics to endorse DDS; and – in order to avoid the pitfalls of becoming unintelligible – the closest metaphysics of divine properties would be a version of trope theory combined with ingredients coming from nominalism. Admittedly, this is not a small price we have to pay if we'd have to regard properties as tropes and, thus, as constituents of the divine existence.

Peter Van Inwagen has become known as a defender of an opposite view; and he is very outspoken about any approach that tries to see properties as anything else but independently existing abstracts or concrete universals:

> Now if properties are assertibles, a wide range of things philosophers have said using the word 'property' are false or unintelligible. For one thing, a property, if it is an assertible, cannot be a part or a constituent of any concrete object. If this pen exists, there are no doubt lots of things that are in some sense its parts or constituents: atoms, small manufactured items; perhaps, indeed, every sub-region of the region of space exactly occupied by the pen at t is at t exactly occupied by a part of the pen. But 'that it is a writing instrument,' although it can be said truly of the pen – and is thus, in my view, one of the properties of the pen – is not one of the parts of the pen. That it is not is as evident as, say, that the pen is not a cube root of any number. Nor is 'that it is a writing instrument' in any sense present in any region of space. It makes no sense, therefore, to say that 'that it is a writing instrument' is 'wholly present' in the space occupied by the pen. In my view, there is just nothing there but the pen and its parts (parts in the 'strict and mereological sense'). There are indeed lots of things true of the pen, lots of things that could be said truly about the pen, but those things do not occupy space and cannot be said to be wholly (or partly) present anywhere.[31]

But if we still need to sign off on the notion of an identity of attributes (in God's case) we have to treat attributes like individuals and as constituents of the individual they belong to. To emphasize this predicament contradicts apparently a number of contemporary approaches to the realm of properties, as indicated in Peter van Inwagen's comment.

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30 Cf. Peter Van Inwagen, "Properties," in *Knowledge and Reality. Essays in Honor of Alvin Plantinga*, ed. Thomas M. Crips, Matthew Davidson and David Vander Laan (Dordrecht: Springer, 2006), 15–34.

31 Van Inwagen, *Properties*, 29.

Ironically, DDS seen as a relic of Platonic origins is strictly opposed to a Platonic concept of properties or abstract entities as the truth-makers of property ascription – not only in God's case. For if there were Platonic forms as the condition of property ascription for any finite entity *x* that falls under a specific concept F, the F-ness as such, seen as a Platonic form, would be ontologically very different from any finite being: It would be as necessarily existing as eternal and, by this very description, pose a threat to God's strict aseity. Van Inwagen's adherence to versions of Platonism is reconcilable with the Christian Creed only thanks to an obviously restricted, and thus: revisionary, interpretation of divine aseity and power: If God is able to *create* and *influence* those entities that can literally be *created* and *influenced*, this would – as Van Inwagen emphasizes – suffice to stick to God's almighty power.[32] But defenders of DDS would point out that this solution is merely a trick which, once put under scrutiny, runs against the most fundamental intuition which holds that God is the only a-se-existing, independent and eternal being 'out there' while his unique status would be questioned if God had to bow his head before eternally and necessarily 'existing' Platonic forms (or propositions etc.) that are independent of God.

So, the pressing issue related to DDS is not whether this doctrine is intelligible or even self-contradictory but, more importantly, whether DDS presupposes a special kind of metaphysics that entails a rather sparse ontology of properties and whether the notion of self-instantiating tropes and self-exemplifying pure properties makes sense at all. For if God, based on his aseity, must not be conceived of as depending on universals of pure properties etc.,

32 Cf. Peter Van Inwagen, "God and Other Uncreated Things," in *Metaphysics and God: Essays in Honor of Eleonore Stump*, ed. Kevin Timpe (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2009), 3–20, esp. 19: "Since I accept both the existence of abstract objects and the propositions contained in the Nicene Creed, I must regard the phrase 'creator of all things visible and invisible' as containing a tacitly restricted quantifier. And the tacit restriction on the quantifier 'all things', I say, is this: its domain is restricted to objects that can enter into causal relations. In my view, therefore, in reciting the opening lines of the Nicene Creed, I commit myself only to the proposition that God is the creator of all things (besides himself) that can in some sense be either causes or effects. Obviously, *visibilia* must enter into causal relations, since seeing is a causal relation. The *invisibilia*, I maintain, are things that do not and cannot enter into the causal relation 'seeing,' but do enter into various other causal relations. (Angels are the only *invisibilia* that come readily to mind.)

Creation is, everyone will agree, a causal relation. Theists will say more: that creation is, in a very important sense, the causal relation, *the* causal relation that is the *fons et origo* of all the others. If there are objects to which the concept of causation has no application – in the way in which the concept 'pulling out of something by using a physical tool' has no application to the process of extracting a cube root – the existence of such objects is irrelevant to the Christian doctrine of creation."

his nature must be nothing else but the category-transcending limit case of self-instantiation and self-exemplification of pure properties, while the instantiation of properties in the finite realm is in one way or the other related in something that grounds the having of such properties that, if and only if they indicate a perfect mode of being, cannot be identified with the individual that has such properties. Clearly, for a horse to be a horse, its being a horse is grounded in its biological constituents. But, as we have already pointed out, DDS is focusing on pure predicates – and being a horse is not one of those.

Thus, the predominant question for further discussions must be: Does classic theism force us to embrace a specific metaphysics that deals primarily with tropes and individuals (as substances constituted by tropes) while abandoning properties, propositions, states of affairs, abstract objects as a mere *façon de parler*? Is it a benefit or a burden for the classic concept of God to be so outspoken in its metaphysical consequences? Or should our belief in God as well as our theology of God stay neutral and let the metaphysicians decide the prosperity and fruitfulness of certain metaphysical frameworks in comparison with their viable alternatives? But doesn't the agenda of these questions also imply that the everyday individuals-having-properties-metaphysics – which is one of the main metaphysical reasons why DDS is under pressure – is the best metaphysics we have? If the metaphysical race to find the best model is still open shouldn't theists remain a bit picky and a bit more patient before they willingly let go of DDS?[33]

3. Divine Simplicity as Code for Divine Aseity

First and foremost, we need to be reminded again that DDS has a central goal which could escape our eyes if we focus on the allegedly problematic aspects of the doctrine's metaphysical requirements or implications only. We need to be aware of the strong connections between DDS and the doctrine of divine aseity. Our comment on Van Inwagen's attempts, which tried to reconcile a Platonic ontology of abstract objects with theistic convictions, runs into the problems of divine aseity if we look at the following argument:

1. If the doctrine of divine aseity is true, then everything must depend on God (while God must not depend on anything). [*Internal connection between aseity and omni-causation*]

33 Cf. Duby, *Divine Simplicity*, 76–80.

2. If there are free abstract objects, then there are entities that do not depend on God. [*by definition, explication of the nature of free abstract objects*]
3. If there are entities that do not depend on God, then not everything depends on God. [*Quantifier replacement*]
4. There are free abstract objects. [*Van Inwagen's claim*]
5. The doctrine of divine aseity is not true. [from 2 & 4 MP, from 3 & 1 MT]

The doctrine of divine aseity is apparently strongly connected to DDS, it forces us to conceive of God's existence in the strongest possible way; God's mode of being is unsurpassably greater than any mode of being we find in the realm of finite entities:

> Indeed, this divine existential absoluteness has traditionally been reached by comparing God's existence with that of his creatures and removing from our conception of him everything suggestive of imperfection, dependence, and correlativity. […]
>
> Thomists and Reformed theologians have traditionally held that only an absolute being sufficiently explains and causes the phenomenon of 'being in general.' Moreover, the cause of being in general cannot itself be an instance of such general being without thereby being conceived as existentially self-caused. But such an explanation of the world's existence easily falls foul of the problem of infinite regress. To stave off such an illogical and unchristian conclusion classical theologians have frequently maintained that God is both pure act (*actus purus*) and is subsistent being itself (*ipsum esse subsistens*). Though these notions are incomprehensible to the human mind, they consistently represent the claims of divine simplicity and seem to be a ready answer to the question of how it is possible that anything exist at all. The conception of God as *actus purus* and *ipsum esse subsistens* effectually places God beyond the creaturely mode and order of being, thus upholding his absolute transcendence, while at the same time explaining how such a creaturely order could possibly come to be in the first place. Existential absoluteness alone can ground all existential contingency and becoming.[34]

There have been some discussions – especially following Anthony Kenny's coping with Aquinas – whether the notion of *ipsum esse subsistens* is, as a matter of fact, too abstract to tell us anything meaningful about God. Because this notion sounds rather formal; apparently it is based on the idea that God's nature and essence are his being, as DDS would underline by its 'rule of non-composition/identity.' But if determination of any kind would introduce limitation and composition into the Godhead, wouldn't the emphasis of the identity of God's essence with his existence imply that God's being lacks any

34 Dolezal, *God without Parts*, 93–94.

determination? Wouldn't this confirm our suspicion that *ipsum esse subsistens* is a rather vacuous concept which is unsuited as a leading concept for the theology of God? Again, James Dolezal offers a precious insight which helps us to grasp the full meaning of the concept in question:

> Given that God is pure act it follows that denominating him '*ipsum esse*' must carry a different sense than when we speak of *ipsum esse* generally, that is, of *esse commune*. The difference between the 'being itself' that is God and the 'being itself' that is the general being common to all non-divine things is that God's *esse* is a *self-subsistent act of existence* while the *esse* commonly attributed to creatures does not subsist in itself. God is not abstract being, 'but being that is fully determinate in itself and subsistent, and from which all other things derive their being. As *ipsum esse per se subsistens*, God is formally determined as the cause of all beings.' And as the cause of being God cannot be an instance of *esse commune* unless he is existentially self-caused, which is impossible.
>
> This twofold sense of *esse* (divine and creaturely) also allows us to deny that ipsum esse is too abstract to be identical with God. Indeed, insofar as *esse commune* is considered as *ipsum esse* it must be in an abstract sense since there is no such thing as *esse commune per se subsistens*. In non-divine things it is a principle by which complete created substances are said to be; but as an intrinsic principle of the subsisting creaturely being (*ens*) it does not subsist in itself. In God, though, *esse* is not a principle in the proper sense, but is simply the Godhead itself considered as its own sufficient reason for existing. [...] in God *ispum esse* 'is not abstract, but most concrete and fully determined; God is not merely being without essence but being that has fully and completely 'essentialized,' and, as such, God possesses the whole infinite fullness of being.' God's *esse* is not like the abstract simple *esse* of composite entities, which is only actualized in composition with an essence really distinct from it. Rather, God is the personal, self-subsistent simple *esse* because of the real identity of his essence with his existence.[35]

Dolezal also argues that DDS is meant to draw a very sharp line between God and the finite world:

> This being so, God cannot be thought of as the highest existent within *ens commune*. As existentially simple, his existence is most absolute and so cannot be measured as though it were relative to other existents. To attempt such a comparison, as so many modern analytic philosophers and Perfect-being theologians want to do, is to conceive God as one being among others. [...] Put differently, God's existence is not the existence of the biggest thing around, but the existence of the one who causes anything to be around at all.
>
> Distinguishing God's existence from the existence of the world requires an expression of his existence as entirely non-correlative. If God's *esse* were measured or assessed as some particular within *ens commune*, and from which we

35 Dolezal, *God without Parts*, 108–9.

> could simply abstract the notion of *esse commune*, he could hardly be thought of as most absolute in his existence. […] it is God's real identity with his own act of being – that is, his simplicity – that both accounts for the possibility of the actual coming to be of all non-divine existents and for the entirely non-derived and non-contingent manner of his own existence. This notion of existential absoluteness can be unfolded by considering: (1) that God is not in a series of being with any creature; (2) that the order of God's existence and the order of the world's existence are really two distinct orders; and (3) that the relation between God and non-divine things is analogical and not univocal.[36]

Steven Duby could also confirm this assessment: DDS is the metaphysical reason for keeping the doctrine of analogy intact. And this is, of course, a gift to theology as well because it constantly reminds us of the ontological asymmetry between God on the one side and the whole finite realm on the other side. To Duby it does not come as a surprise that especially those analytic philosophers that tend to dismiss DDS are drawn to a theory of univocity (at least when it comes to some core attributes of the divine) which is, eventually, in danger of blurring the lines of the above-mentioned asymmetry.[37]

James Dolezal has marvelously expressed the connection between divine aseity and DDS; within this framework three aspects are worth noticing since they underline that the understanding of 'divine simplicity' must not be taken at face value but reread as a code for core aspects that are central to classic theism:[38]

i. The *rule of non-composition* excludes that there is an 'addition' of form and matter, essence and being, in God, because the givenness of a form as well as the givenness of being or the presupposition of matter are the signatures of createdness. In other words, the rule of non-composition implies that God is uncreated and non-finite in the strictest sense; he is his very own source of being and existing. Finite beings gain their matter and the imprint of forms by natural processes or by some sort of willful craftsmanship; in our finite realm there is no such thing as a spontaneous, self-induced meeting of form and matter, essence and being respectively. For if that were the case, we would encounter instances of pure self-creation within the finite realm, but this is impossible.
ii. The *identity of essence and existence* in God implies that God is the purest actuality; there is no perfection left open for further achievement etc. and there is no limitation to his existence. If we have to admit that there cannot be

36 Dolezal, *God without Parts*, 111–13.
37 Cf. Duby, *Divine Simplicity*, 70–74.
38 For a historical assessment of these aspects see Mohammad Saeedimehr, "Divine Simplicity," *Topoi* 26 (2007): 191–99.

an entire vacuity of determination in the highest being, all the while we must concede that God cannot be determined by anything else, the identity-claim is code for the divine self-determination. The passing of a certain form is usually, at least at a ground level, the product of nature; only within certain limitations finite beings may have the power to alter some aspects of their formal determination. Although having a formal determination means to have a certain content – which we conceptually express as kind-membership etc. –, this very determination, for the most part, includes limitations: No finite being can become maximally and unsurpassably perfect in an omni-relational perspective, since its form is putting a lid to the degree of perfection which is achievable for finite entities. If maximal and unlimited perfection could be equaled to having the most beautiful and wildest dreams, God would be the only one who would have unlimitedly beautiful dreams in infinitely many worlds he can endlessly conceive of.

iii. The *rule of strict independence* is intimately connected to divine aseity; it includes that only God himself is the reason for his own existence but also that God is the reason and the cause for everything else. Furthermore, strict independence implies strict non-participation: God is not subject to metaphysical principles and does not participate in anything else (apart from him). Any relation that carries the slightest smell of participation is, therefore, not applicable to God. Only in insisting on the radical independence of God classical theists see God's transcendence safe-guarded and ensured; God is not part of the furniture of the world, because he is not subject to the metaphysical principles according to which the world operates. Another implication of this rule of independence consists of the fact that God is strictly unique: If there was another God, God would lose his independence; even if this other God wasn't the source of God's existence, the mere existence of another God could block the performance of divine power right from the start.

Now, one can of course wonder whether we can accept or uphold these rules – as the precious heritage of classic theism – without being bound to DDS. Let us assume, for a minute, along with Matthew Baddorf that God is, in a way, complex, i.e. that his being is constituted by what we might call 'parts' (in a very wide sense of the word). Baddorf proposes the idea that God is constituted by certain content-bearing tropes that, at the end of the day, help us to describe his nature:[39] If we would have to say that God's nature is constituted by his divine wisdom and his divine power and his divine goodness etc., wouldn't we have to admit that there is some sort of complexity in God that, apparently,

39 Cf. Matthew Baddorf, "Divine Simplicity, Aseity, and Sovereignty," *Sophia* 56 (2017): 403–18, esp. 409–14.

contradicts DDS? And would this contradiction put a threat to God's sovereignty and aseity? Baddorf offers an argument that is meant to show that such troubles are unjustified, and that divine complexity may not undermine divine aseity:

> 1. Either God or God's parts are fundamental. (Premise)
> 2. If God's parts are fundamental, then they have necessary existence per se. (Premise)
> 3. God's parts do not have necessary existence per se. (Premise)
> ∴ 4. God's parts are not fundamental. (2, 3)
> ∴ 5. God is fundamental. (1, 4)[40]

This looks like an elegant solution in defense of a notion of divine complexity that might help us to stick to divine aseity while abandoning DDS, which – admittedly – remains a burdensome notion despite the many attempts to make it digestible to the contemporary metaphysician and theologian. But how would a defender of classic theism respond to this? The answer is simple: You can't eat the cake and have it, too. Since for classical theism divine constituents would be the grounds of God's nature. If they were fundamental, they would not be open to God's creative power and will. However, if they were not fundamental – as Baddorf assumes – they must be open to God's power and will and would, therefore, be subject to God's power and will – as the abovementioned rule of strict independence insinuates. Even if we could assume that grounding constituents of the divine nature cannot put any kind of causal pressure on God, which, indeed, would make God causally dependent on these constituents, we would be hard-pressed to accept that God is the cause of the grounding constituents of his nature. For only in turning the possible causal relation between God and the grounding constituents of his nature from heads to tails we could ensure the true meaning of divine aseity. But if we did that we would end up with the pitfalls of 'theistic activism,' i.e. the problem that God would have to create, produce, or invent the constituting 'elements' of his own nature, his very divine attributes included.[41] Still, it is hard to see how God could do such things without already 'having' certain attributes – i.e. without relying on certain grounding constituents of his own nature that provide him with the creative capacities he might need to 'invent' the whole range of his

40 Baddorf, *Divine Simplicity*, 413.

41 Cf. Thomas Schärtl, "Theistischer Aktivismus und Gottes Selbstaffirmation seiner Natur," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Philosophie* 142 (2021): 55–86, esp. 56–60. See also McCann, *Divine Nature*, 78–82.

attributes.[42] In order to avoid these consequences – and the infinite regress awaiting us –, we would have to say, at a certain point, that some of the grounding constituents of God's nature are, after all, fundamental; for God has to 'presuppose' them as the starting point for his creative, inventive, and active performance. But, and here the dragon raises his many heads again, God has to 'presuppose' his attributes without losing his aseity and independence.

Actually, facing such a dilemma DDS is the best help we can get to come to our rescue. For DDS does not strictly exclude the idea that God's nature is constituted by divine tropes or that God's being is constituted by his nature. Rather, it reminds us that we need to avoid the description of this constitution-relation in terms of causal dependency, parthood, or participation.[43] To build up such a wall DDS uses the admittedly burdensome notion of the 'identity' or, better, 'sameness' between God and his nature, God and the grounding constituents of his nature respectively. The symmetry of identity (and sameness) is a tool to block the innuendo of dependency right from the start. It goes both ways: If God is identical to the grounding constituents of his nature, God cannot (causally) depend on these constituents, he cannot be forced to presuppose them ontologically prior to his existence, he does not participate in them in a way that would make him subject to them. However, if the grounding constituents of God's nature are, as a matter of fact, identical to God they cannot be created, invented or dreamed-up either. While God is the reason for their being, they are not caused by God. Although Baddorf is right in pointing out that DDS is not a necessary requirement to uphold divine aseity, it is the best instrument we have if we want to avoid to pay the costs of further problems. For DDS is a means to block certain, rather unwelcome interpretations of God's relation to his nature (or to the grounding elements and constituents of his nature): Does God have to choose his nature? Would God lose his aseity if his very own nature would be beyond his choice? But if God is nothing else but his self-exemplifying pure properties, the questions of choosing or being dependent on would become literally non-applicable. Isn't that a relief that should count for something despite the many caricatures of DDS?

Clearly, the insistence on the identity of God and his nature is, presumably, not the only way to go. Hugh McCann is at odds with DDS because it does not perform well in the framework of our everyday individuals-having-properties-metaphysics. Admittedly, it still has to pay the high prize of accepting a metaphysics of tropes and, as we have already pointed out, a version of trope-nominalism (replacing universals) in combination with the *Grenzbegriff*

42 Cf. Schärtl, *Theistischer Aktivismus*, 67–75.
43 Cf. Schärtl, *Theistischer Aktivismus*, 80–81.

of self-exemplifying or self-constituting tropes at the very boarders. But, in avoiding these costs, the price McCann would have to pay on the other hand is, what we might call, the *abyss of unchained divine voluntarism*:

> Finally, there is nothing ontologically prior to God's willing his own being; most especially, there is not a Platonic template of possible divinity that is already given and merely awaits instantiation. So while God is not self-creating in the sense of causing himself to be or conferring existence on himself, he is creatively disposed toward his nature, in that that nature finds its first and only reality in the completely spontaneous act of God intending to have that nature, the act that is God himself. Accordingly, universals such as *omniscience*, *omnipotence* and *aseity* have the same status as those pertaining to the created world. They have being only in what exemplifies them, in this case just one being: God. And of course they are essential to him. Must we say, as many would, that since these are essential traits of God he possesses these traits as a matter of *de re* necessity? I see no reason to do so. But if we do choose to say this, we need to realize that in this case necessity would not rule out libertarian freedom. Rather, it would be equally a matter of *de re* necessity that God possesses absolute freedom respecting all of his attributes. Whatever we may think about *de re* necessity in other contexts, then, it certainly cannot limit God in any respect. Rather, all that he is falls under his sovereignty, for all of his traits are exemplified in a voluntary act that is God himself, and in which he freely undertakes to exhibit them.[44]

Perhaps it is possible to offer a more benign reading for what McCann is hinting at: Maybe it is true that the divine attributes could be the 'result' of divine self-determination. But since any kind of determination, *we* can conceive of, is modelled around what *we* are acquainted with in the finite world of human self-understanding and, thus, relates to what we know from our own capacities, we would have to admit that the common laws of conscious self-determination – as a mixture of the spontaneity of willing and the reciprocity of contemplating – are inapplicable in God's case. For no finite being can ignite his will and will something from the scratch; in willing we already presuppose our nature as a set of specific dispositions, attributes, character traits, preferences, and motives. Spontaneity without reciprocity and experience is inconceivable to us; it is as empty of the freedom we know as is the pure reciprocity of a merely calculating intelligence. So, the bridge over the abyss of unchained voluntarism leads us into the entirely uncharted territory of a self-determination that resides in an incomprehensible land beyond the interconnection of spontaneity and reciprocity.

But a not so benign interpretation of McCann's position might identify the problem of divine self-creation, as the notorious subtext of theistic activism,

44 McCann, *Divine Nature*, 92.

arising again. DDS might be, after all, a still prizeworthy alternative to all this; for it escapes unchained divine voluntarism as well the complete mysteriousness of divine self-determination. However, DDS does not explain the relation between God and his attributes by introducing another relation that implies causation, willing or any activity on God's part (and, of course, on the divine nature's part neither). Rather, it unambiguously blocks any attempt to further explicate the identity- or sameness-relation. Right here DDS voluntarily lets us hit the glass ceiling of divine transcendence.

But, as we have already seen, DDS does not exclude constitution of some sort, as long as the notion of constitution in question does not hurt the insistence on sameness or identity. In that regard, Trinitarian theology is not another problem on DDS's table but offers an opening door to a better understanding of God's being as the unsurpassably 'simple' substance: Since the Trinitarian persons are – as the Latin tradition beginning with St. Augustine has pointed out – not parts of the substance or composites of God's being, they have to be regarded as different relations the divine substance has to itself. It does not alter the substantiality of the divine existence if we dare say that the divine substance for which its nature and its being are the same 'subsists', nevertheless, in different relations to itself. Although these relations are not the same, their points of departure and their points of arrival are always the same for these relations: the divine substance. These relations present the divine substance to itself in a certain light and, therefore, help us to get a hint at how the supremely simple divine substance can be alive and active and can encompass the supreme actuality of being. Traditional as well as contemporary theology has, therefore, used the *model of the mind* to explain how the sameness of God and his nature can be squared with the idea that God is in different, content-bearing relations to himself.[45] Moreover, DDS can help us to understand why Trinitarian theology is, despite certain allegations, still different from polytheism; for in the Trinitarian persons we always encounter the one and the same Godhead. What we said earlier about the relation between God and the grounding constituents of his nature is also true of the divine substance and the relations the substance has to itself which are the Trinitarian persons:

> By contrast, subscribing to the singularity of the personal divine essence and to the modal distinction between essence and person in God, the advocate of divine simplicity can affirm, on the one hand, that God as one is personal and, on the other hand, that there is no *ratio* of the persons' divinity or unity that lies back of them, and hence no God behind God. For the essence subsists only in and indeed *as* each of the persons. Strictly speaking, then, the *essentia* is not *that*

45 Cf. Schärtl, *Theistischer Aktivismus*, 79–85.

> *on account of which* the persons are divine and are one but rather that *according to which* the persons are divine and are one. There are no lines of causality running between *Deus unus* and *Deus trinus*. Thus, the former can never be seen as the 'deep' God above or below the latter. Instead, *Deus unus* and *Deus trinus* alike are simply Deus, the former being God under the absolute, essential aspect and the latter being God under the aspect of the modes of subsisting in relation to one another.[46]

That we have to decode DDS is one of the main strategies defenders of Divine Simplicity would argue for. As Mehmet Sait Reçber has shown in his brilliant paper on Al-Ghazālī's criticism of some aspects of Classical Theism DDS leads to the most bizarre, even laughably counterintuitive results that won't have enough space for a God of revelation, mercy, and salvation. In contrast, Reza Akbari has stupendously analyzed Mullā Ṣadrā's defense of divine simplicity based on the language of composition and necessity. But this very language should not be taken at face value – and this message is also already detectable in Mullā Ṣadrā's view: To be the immediate opposite of being not composed and to be the opposite of being not at all contingent is the sign and characteristics of finite existence. So, DDS seeks to draw a very sharp distinction between divine and finite existence: permitting not one of the attributes, we take from the experience of the created world in order to ascribe them to God, to enter the language of describing God completely unaltered. The terms 'composition' and 'necessity', therefore, need to be decoded as well: They must be read as signals for divine independence and aseity. And this is, precisely, the point where DDS has its merits because it stops many problems of infinite regress: Does God have to create the options he wants to choose from in order to create a world? Does God have to create the option of creating the options he wants to choose from …? Does God have to create the attributes he needs for creating options and creating the world? Does God have to create the disposition of creating the attributes he needs for creating options and creating the world? Whoever answers such questions with 'no' would run the risk of making God, at last, dependent on attributes that are previously given to or installed in him – not unlike our situation as finite beings who have to accept basic parameters of their finite existence despite their desire to exceed such given constellations.

But whoever answers such questions with 'yes' runs into the problem of an infinite regress. DDS serves, as pointed out, as a regress stopper while, at the

46 Duby, *Divine Simplicity*, 221.

same time, underling God's independence tout court: If God is in an admittedly strange way 'identical' to his attributes, they are not given to him or installed in him because there is no relation applicable to God and his attributes that could ever parallel a distinction between God and his attributes. But if there is no 'distinction' between God and his attributes, any mode of speaking that introduces an installment or a givenness of these attributes is clearly misguided; God's attributes are not given to him, he is not forced to accept them as unalterable preconditions, but he is also not up to invent them or to choose them, they are 'simply' his identity, they are his way of being.

DDS is, as we pointed out, and as Reza Akbari has also hinted at using Mullā Ṣadrā's ingenious reconstructions also intimately connected to divine incomprehensibility and the doctrine of analogy (in some camps of analytic philosophy of religion the later has, unfortunately, been treated as a more permissible version of the doctrine of univocity – an interpretation that does not go well with the intentions of the classics). Rather, divine simplicity in connection with divine incomprehensibility and the doctrine of analogy have to be seen as 'game-altering' attributes indicating that the well-established modes of speaking and predicating must not be used literally when we approach the divine realm. What a so-called conceiving-related skepticism, which doubts that conceivability is a road to possibility, can do for the problem of theodicy indicating that it is unclear whether the fact that we can conceive of and imagine a 'better world', a divine attributes-related 'conceptual skepticism' could help us to cope with so-called paradoxes of some of the core divine attributes. Although we don't see exactly, for instance, how divine providence and human freedom can work together organically in order to avoid theistic fatalism, we can based on DDS and the doctrine of analogy emphasize that divine simplicity forces us to be very careful when we apply attributes like knowing or willing to God because we have to understand them in a way that sticks to divine independence and aseity from the ground up.

As Mehmet Sait Reçber and Reza Akbari have shown, the classics referred to those ontological categories applicable predominantly to finite entities to show how DDS messes these categories up. While for the opponent this very result is irritating, for the proponent of DDS the conceptual fractures produced by DDS are an indication of the fact that the divine is beyond our ontological categories and the metaphysical laws or principles we use to connect or explain them. Moreover DDS can – and this might sound somewhat provocative – align itself with contemporary post-theism insofar as it introduces fractures into our understanding of divine attributes in order to underline God's true transcendence and independence.

4. Simplicity and Divine Activity

But the above-mentioned benefits of DDS do not seem to outweigh the costs we would have to pay in other departments of our theology of God. Again, it is William Hasker who addresses some painful questions: How can it be the case that God acts, and that God knows anything about us, if God is not (in one way or the other) *complex*? How can it be the case that God is intentionally open to knowing us and to want to engage with us if his knowledge and will are, as classical theism holds alongside DDS, such that the primary (if not ultimate) object of God's knowing and willing?[47] And doesn't God need a (apparently not so simple) multitude of concepts or a variety of intentions in order to truly relate to created beings? Doesn't God know, in knowing only his essence, what might be the case – as the sheer shadow of his own necessary existence? Or can God will or wish the prospering of a specific and concrete person, if he doesn't have a *specific* relation to that very person – a relation that is distinct from the relation he might have to any other person? In other words: Doesn't God need a rich and multi-layered inner life and consciousness in order to be the *God for us*?[48]

We have to distinguish three problems that seem to be the cornerstones of these questions:

1. Apparently, knowledge requires concepts; but if the introduction of concepts would destroy divine simplicity, how can we ever claim that there is anything equivalent of conceptual knowledge for God? And how is it possible that, within the undisputed mode of divine self-knowledge, God may know (or even learn to know) created beings that are, obviously, not identical to his essence?
2. If God wills his own being and essence absolutely, he wills it necessarily. But if his willing also somehow encompasses finite creatures, how is it possible that the existence of creatures is not necessitated by the absolute will of God's willing?
3. If God is meant to be active and to love every single creature, how does this not introduce a multiplicity into the divine being?

To the first set of questions classical theism would respond that the divine nature is the only concept-equivalent feature God really needs; content-wise the divine nature is the richest quasi-concept whose grasp is, admittedly, beyond our imagination. In the light of his own nature God knows, so to speak,

47 Cf. Dolezal, *God without Parts*, 164–87.
48 Cf. Hasker, *Divine Simplicity*, 706–19.

everything which is not God *as* gradual (non-)instantiations or images of divinity:

> As infinite act he cannot receive additional intellectual data inasmuch as that would constitute an enrichment of his knowledge and no purely actual infinite can be made more actual than it already is. Furthermore, this infinite actuality requires that there cannot be any finite existent or quality whose perfections of being are not already present in God in an eminently superior fashion. Accordingly, his knowledge of any actuality cannot properly derive from some being outside himself, but must originate in his own self-knowledge. God knows creatures properly, then, not by directly perceiving them in their essences or properties but in comprehending his own essence as imitable or participable, that is, able to be imaged forth in finite things.[49]
>
> So what is it about the divine essence that God knows that enables him to consider something other than simply the essence itself? How does he come to know things non-identical with himself in the act of knowing himself? An initial answer to this question [...] is that God's perfect self-knowledge entails knowledge of his power and no power is perfectly known without knowing to what it extends. Thus, God knows all things in knowing the full extent of his power to produce them. But this is not the whole answer. Thomas also turns his attention upon the *imitability*, or imageability, of the divine essence. He insists that God does not only know being in general by knowing himself as the principle of being, but he also knows particular beings with all their perfections in knowing the ways his essence can be imitated and participated.[50]

Clearly the result is somewhat shocking but not at all surprising for the classical theist: God sees the world truly in a very different way – he sees the world in a way that is entirely different from our way of seeing all the while classical theists might insist that our way of seeing – which is built on comparing based on resemblance and builds categories in abstraction from individual features – is the more limited because it is the more 'biased' way of perceiving and knowing. So, for the classical theist God's mode of perceiving the world is not a deficit on God's part, rather it mirrors in a counterfactual way the peculiarities of our mode of perceiving that are, admittedly, far from perfect knowledge. Thus, if God doesn't see books *as books*, or tables *as tables* or human beings *as mammals* etc., but instead regards them insofar as they non-instantiate but imitate divinity, he *sees their truth* and *their objective value*, since God's nature is the epitome of truth and goodness.

To resolve the second problem, we would have to adapt some sort of non-closure strategy: Despite the fact that God necessarily wills his own nature, it doesn't follow from his willing that he also wills created entities necessarily

49 Dolezal, *God without Parts*, 170.

50 Dolezal, *God without Parts*, 171–72.

although his nature somehow encompasses the possibilities of created beings, for – based on DDS and the doctrine of divine aseity – finite beings are not the necessary constituents of the divine nature. In whatever form the entailment-relation that holds between God's nature and finite beings might be spelled out, it is ruled out by DDS that finite beings are grounding constituents or parts of the divine nature. Doleazal's insight offers a strong reason to confirm the non-closure approach:

> Because God is identical with the end of all his willing none of those non-divine things he wills can function as means to his end. God requires nothing beyond himself for the perfect enjoyment of himself. Consequently, non-divine things are not willed with the absoluteness by which he wills his own goodness. Also, no creature is necessary to God's being or understanding of himself and thus is not willed with the same strength of absoluteness by which he wills himself. Only if God derived his identity by correlation to something outside himself would anything non-divine be entailed in his will with absolute necessity. But, as pure act, this cannot be true of God.[51]

Of course, one can still ask whether God could have willed otherwise. With regard to finite beings we could still try to use the same non-closure strategy as we used above – for the very same reasons. But if we focus on the unalterable directedness of God's will to his own nature we might, eventually, follow Hugh McCann's lead. McCann emphasizes that God's nature is nothing else but the disposition of pure creativity and sovereignty. Would the fact that God has no choice with regard to willing his own creativity and sovereignty cross out divine freedom? McCann is speaking from the heart when he writes:

> What libertarian freedom requires is the absence of compulsion, where this implies a complete *foreclosure* of alternatives. In God's case no alternatives whatever are foreclosed. To the contrary: all alternatives that can be delineated within the created world, and indeed the very concept of an alternative, are provided for in an act of creation that is completely spontaneous and fully intended by God to have the exact nature and content it does. If someone decides not to call this libertarian freedom because antecedent possibilities are lacking, then well and good. But the matter is strictly a verbal one, for in fact the freedom that characterizes God's activity as creator is even less constrained than ours. If it does not deserve the name 'libertarian' then we need to define a better, higher type of freedom, one transcending even the 'libertarian' variety, and attribute this higher freedom to God.[52]

51 Dolezal, *God without Parts*, 186.

52 McCann, *Divine Nature*, 93.

Yet we still might be in need of an additional tool: If we were to introduce different intentions or volitions into the nature of God, divine simplicity would be at stake. Thus, for God's case we would have to embrace some sort of *Wittgensteinian philosophy of mind*: Instead of using the rich garden variety of mental operations, attitudes, representations etc. we should rather stick to Wittgenstein's recommendation: Intending is, eventually, nothing more than the *conscious causing of something*. God's so-called intending and willing would be more or less equivalent to his direct causing which is immediately directed to the entity in question – without the intermediaries of mental representations, volitions, intentions etc. If such a rather sparse picture of action is a viable option in general, it might also be an option for our theology of God.[53]

But how can we answer the third question? One way to resolve the puzzle would be to emphasize that divine actions are not individuated by divine intentions or volitions, but by their individual effects in the created world. This sounds quite puzzling but the guiding principle behind this answer underlines the insight that God's relation to everything else is entirely different from the relations finite beings have to each other. As a matter of fact, we – as finite beings we are best acquainted with – are far from having an all-encompassing single intention which's effects unfold into individual effects for individual entities. But there are some analogies that might help us to find an answer. Just imagine that you fall in love with the German soccer team in an instant and in an all-encompassing way and that you decide to be the great benefactor of this team at the same instant. On your side there is just this one intention which – for an outside person – would have to be translated into a multitude of sub-intentions that seem to be entailed by the primary single intention. Although you do not make such derivations yourself, such derivations seem, for the outside observer, plausibly based on the effects your one and single intention has for each member of the German soccer team. Although your intention is a single and instantaneous one, the effects on the different members of the team can vary greatly based on their abilities to be open to your benefactor disposition. If we – along the lines of this analogy – regard God's divine nature, his divinity, as the equivalent to the one intention God has (in order to avoid any plurality of intentions in God) and treat God's nature as the disposition of unsurpassably great creativity and the power of emerging goodness we will, nevertheless, see different effects based on the capacity of finite beings to respond to God's creativity and power.

53 Cf. Brower, *Simplicity*, 118–20.

There have been voices that see a (more or less) direct connection between DDS and the doctrine of divine eternity. But if we stick to the idea that DDS is primarily a *code* for divine aseity, the rules of non-composition and independence, eternity is only derivative of divine simplicity if temporality would subject God's existence to the composition of tensed sequences and temporal parts. So, the doctrine of divine eternity is not immediately backed up by DDS. Rather divine eternity – now accepted as another divine attribute encompassing a pure perfection and a pure property – can help us to support the notion of the one all-encompassing divine quasi-intention (which is encapsuled in the divine nature): If God can be aware of every point in time at an instant and in one single act of cognition it might be conceivable that God intentionally relates to every point in time in one and the same instant.[54]

Now to say that we *can* paint a more or less consistent picture of divine activity (as the effectiveness of divinity in the world) does not mean that this picture is *theologically* adequate. Especially those who embrace *personal theism* or – as Klaus von Stosch has put it – 'free will theism' might be rather dissatisfied with this detour-solution to the problem of particular divine actions in the light of DDS, because in this case God looks more like a principle of unlimited creativity[55] than an agent who literally shares a history of salvation with us. If personal theism implies that God has to have a unique and specific, intention-directed relation at each and every being in the world, then it is hard to see how his nature can serve as a substitute for what can only be fulfilled by a multitude of concepts, relations, and intentions. Brian Hebblethwaite offers

54 That the doctrine of divine eternity deserves further discussion, especially when we raise the question whether an eternal being (i.e., one that is eternally related to finite entities) can sustain temporally existing entities, while sustaining is seen as an integral part of divine activity. Cf. Delmas Lewis, "Timlessness and Divine Agency," *Philosophy of Religion* 21 (1987): 143–59, esp. 158: "Now I see no conceptual grounds which would render incoherent the suggestion that the timeless action of a timeless being changelessly brings about the existence of every temporal solid, including the very large one which is the actual world. But there are grounds which logically prohibit saying that this relation of causal dependence is a relation of being sustained, at least if the term 'sustain' is to retain any of its ordinary meaning. For I take it that an essential part of the concept of one thing, A, sustaining the existence of another thing, B, is the idea that B would cease to exist but for the sustaining activity of A. However, if the tenseless view of time is correct, then it is necessarily true that no physical object or temporal stage thereof can cease to exist. A tenselessly existing object logically cannot cease to exist, if it (tenselessly) exists at all. And this fact makes otiose the suggestion that a timeless God sustains the physical universe in existence."

55 For some this might sound like a promising result; cf. Robert Cummings Neville, *Eternity and Time's Flow*, (New York: State University of New York Press, 1993), 125–82.

a strong theological motive to finally oppose DDS for the sake of *individualized and particularized divine action*:

> There is sufficient here, I think, to enable us to defend the notion of particular divine agency against the tendency to locate particularity solely on the receiving side of the constant God-world relation. The God-world relation and the God-man relation *are* constant; but that is best conceived as the constancy of consistent action in the execution both of an over-all purpose and of particular purposes for individual lives within it. The evolution of the cosmos, the developing history of man and of Israel, in particular, the life of Jesus, and our own lives, are all developing, dynamic affairs, teleologically ordered, and it is they that are the field of the hidden divine hand making them make themselves, if the theory of double agency is right. What's more, each active element in the whole complex story from fundamental particle to human being and human history is not only held in being by the creative act of God, but furthered on its way and woven into the whole providential pattern by the hidden hand of God. But it is the experienced side of this relation, the point in the believer's experience where his will is taken up into God's will and where he finds himself responding to grace, which shows that this cannot be thought of as a one-sided personal relation. The particularity is not just on his – the believer's – side. This way of putting the matter is false to the whole nature of religious experience as understood in the context of personal theism, where, quite apart from anything else, the particularity of human response is itself construed as God's act in us.[56]

But Hebblethwaite's comment opens the door to what some might call a *theological meta-discourse*: If DDS is the bedrock of classical theism and if classical theism cannot fulfill certain theological requirements we need to sit down and argue over the criteria of a more adequate concept of God – setting aside the contemplation of the consistency of specific divine attributes for a while.

56 Brian L. Hebblethwaite, "Providence and Divine Action," *Religious Studies* 14 (1978), 223–36, esp. 229.

Divine Perfection and the Reality of God's Self-Disclosure

Are Mixed Relations Mixed Up?

Alan J. Torrance

Does the Incarnation Disclose God's Nature?

Central to the Christian faith is the affirmation that the eternal God who explains why there is anything contingent at all, became human. In doing so God was not diminished. Quite the opposite. This was the fullest expression of the love of God for his creation.

Now the question that I wish to consider is whether the Christian doctrine of the incarnation should or should not contribute to how we conceive of God's nature and thereby how we interpret God's perfection. And, if so, in what ways might it do so?

On examination, it would appear counterintuitive to think that it shouldn't. Imagine, for a moment, that NASA's SETI[1] programme was to pick up and decode what turned out to be a religious broadcast from a radio station on Kepler – 186f 490 light years away – transmitted when John Calvin was in his teens! Suppose, further, that the Keplernids turned out to be theists who held the eccentric belief not only that they had been created by a personal God but that that same God had become incarnate as one of them. One would assume that such an event would be expected to provide insight into the nature of the God they worshipped. If they were to respond, however, by saying that the incarnation was irrelevant for how they understood the divine nature or, indeed, that the incarnation only presented them with the *Keplernid* (i.e. creaturely) nature that God had 'assumed', and that it thereby provided no insight into the divine nature, the departments of cosmic religious studies on Planet Earth which were poring over this material would find this disappointing but also, one suspects, counterintuitive.

Precisely the same puzzlement can be found amongst biblical scholars on planet Earth. As N.T. Wright argues a clear consequence of the incarnation is that "the very meaning of the word 'god' requires to be rethought 'again and

1 The Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence.

again' around the actual history of Jesus himself."[2] Richard Hays adds: "the incarnation forces us to rethink the very meaning of the word *god*, for in Jesus, God is concretely present in a very surprising way." Still further: "The particularity of incarnation requires a fundamental reconfiguration of our understanding of God. God is made known precisely in Jesus, not through general speculation or natural knowledge."[3]

For Richard Hays, both his and N.T. Wright's views should be regarded as echoing Karl Barth's comment: "The meaning of his deity – the only true deity in the New Testament sense – cannot be gathered from any notion of supreme, absolute, non-worldly being. It can be learned only from what took place in Christ." He adds: "For – to put it more pointedly, the mirror in which it can be known (and is known) that He is God, and of the divine nature, is His becoming flesh and His existence in the flesh."[4]

In sum, given that the incarnation is the focal affirmation of the Christian faith and the *'skopos'* of its Scriptures (Athanasius) or 'scopus' (Calvin), one would expect that thinking about God's defining properties, not least God's perfection, should be driven by God's unique self-identification as the person of Jesus Christ.

But there is no unanimity here. At the heart of the Western Christian tradition, there is a tight conceptual package that is used to undermine any suggestion that God's relation to the contingent order can or should provide epistemic access to divine reality. The rest of this paper will be devoted to considering the diverse commitments that drive what I suggest are problematic affirmations.

The Doctrine of Mixed Relations

The most influential series of affirmations that undermines the relevance and significance of Biblical ascriptions is condensed in the doctrine of 'mixed relations'. This goes back to Thomas Aquinas' Aristotelian account of the nature of God's relation to the world but appears to be even more influential today – not least in scholastic, Reformed circles. Matthew McWhorter provides a highly

2 "Those who have desired to explore and understand the incarnation itself have regularly missed what is arguably the most central, shocking and dramatic source material on that subject, which if taken seriously would ensure that the meaning of the word 'god' be again and again rethought around the actual history of Jesus himself." N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), chap. 14.

3 Nicholas Perrin and Richard Hays, eds., *Jesus, Paul and the People of God: A theological dialogue with N.T. Wright* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2011).

4 Perrin and Hays, *Jesus, Paul and the People of God*.

regarded analysis and defence of Aquinas' approach here and it is primarily his analysis on which I shall draw.[5]

Aquinas argued that there neither is nor can be any real relation between God and the world. Consequently, his argument suggests that God's involvement with the contingent order and the testimony to it which the Scriptures provide, could never be relevant to understanding divine perfection because God's essential properties are necessarily interpreted on other grounds. (The irony of this is that it undermines Aquinas' own work in natural theology and biblical exegesis.)

Now the 'plain sense' of both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures appears to bear witness to a 'real relation' on the part of God to his people who are to be regarded as the objects of his creative and elective purposes and, indeed, a binding covenant commitment.[6] It is not surprising, therefore, that William Lane Craig, to take one example, should refer to Aquinas' position that, whereas God knows, wills and loves the world, God has no real relation to it (108) as "prima facie incredible" (95) and "extraordinarily implausible".[7]

Lesta we join Craig's chorus of condemnation prematurely, it is important to consider not only why Aquinas arrived at this view but also to appreciate that Aquinas' views on this matter were heir to a significant tradition in Christian thought, reflecting themes that were central to Augustine and Lombard as well.

So What Drives 'Mixed Relations'?

Aquinas was concerned that if we use the word 'creation' in its active sense (such that it signifies something 'in' God), that suggests there is something temporal in God. This is one reason why, although Aquinas agrees that "creation in its active meaning signifies the divine action, which is his essence with a relation to a creature", he argues: "the relation to a creature in God is not real,

5 Matthew R. McWhorter, "Aquinas on God's Relation to the World," *New Blackfriars* 94, no. 1049 (January 2013): 3–19.

6 Cf. the Kabbalistic renderings of *zimsum*.

7 "By way of assessment, I think it has to be said that Thomas's solution, despite its daring and ingenuity, is extraordinarily implausible. Wholly apart from the problematic notions of God's essence being identical with His act of being and of God's simplicity, we have this very difficult tenet that while creatures are really related to God, God is not really related to creatures." William L. Craig, "Timelessness, Creation, and God's Real Relation to the World", *Laval théologique et philosophique* 56, no. 1 (2000): 108, 95 and 98, https://doi.org/10.7202/401276ar. McWhorter seeks at length to defend Aquinas against William Lane Craig's critique in "Aquinas on God's Relation to the World" (cited above).

but it is according to reason only." (*Summa* Ia q. 45 a. 3 ad 1). So, what does it mean to say that a relation is "according to reason only"? For Aquinas, it means that the relationship does not consist in anything "except in a certain order which reason discovers". The relationship is not integral to the reality of that to which it refers. By way of explanation he provides the example of 'sameness'. If the cup in my sitting room is the same as the cup in my kitchen cupboard, possessing the property of 'sameness' does not provide any real insight into the reality of the cup in my sitting room. It is not a real property of the cup in my sitting room that it has the 'relation' of sameness to the cup in my cupboard.[8]

Matthew McWhorter comments that, when Aquinas speaks of God's relation to creation, his view is that there is no "real relation between God and the world because the divine nature is not naturally or ontologically ordered to anything else." Consequently, God's relation to creation is merely something ascribed to God by human reason – it does not refer to the divine *nature* or *reality*.

Creation, conceived as an action, signifies the action of God, which is his essence, in relation to a creature. But that is not a real relation. Rather it is one according to reason only.

> Now the creature by its very name is referred to the Creator: and depends on the Creator who does not depend on it. Wherefore the relation whereby the creature is referred to the Creator must be a real relation, while in God it is only a logical relation.[9]

Aquinas is drawing here on Aristotle's third-mode relations in book five of the *Metaphysica*. In this work, a relation is said to be real when considered in relation to its *terminus ad quem*, but not real when considered with regard to its *terminus a quo*. Third-mode relations are referred to as 'mixed relations' because they involve a real relation and a relation of reason – "one of the *relata* has an accidental property, whilst the other does not."[10]

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8 When one makes reference to another, Aquinas argues, it may be "only in the apprehension of reason by comparing one thing to another, and then it is a relation of reason only, just as when reason compares man to animal as a species to a genus." Another example of a relation of reason is 'sameness' which does not consist in anything "except in a certain order which reason discovers."

9 *De potentia*, q 3 a 3. As James Anderson puts it, "Considered actively, creation designates the action of God, which is His essence, with a relation to the creature, a relation not real, of course, but logical." McWhorter, "Aquinas on God's Relation to the World," fn 15.

10 R. T. Mullins, *The End of the Timeless God* (Oxford; Oxford University Press, 2016), 121. Aquinas again, "in all things which are referred to one another in some respect, of which one depends upon another and not the converse, in the one which depends upon the

As mentioned above equivalent views can be found in Lombard's appropriation and interpretation of Augustine's arguments:

> That which God begins to be called temporally which was not said previously is clearly said in a relative manner, yet not as an accident of God as something which may have happened to him, but clearly according to an accident of that thing to which God begins to be called relative.[11]

And, in the words of Augustine, "For creator, too, is spoken relatively to creature, as master to servant." As a man can become a master by owning a slave, making the property of being a master accidental, no such change can take place with respect to God.[12]

So, what precisely lies behind Aquinas' thinking and that of a tradition that is having such an impact on contemporary Reformed theology?[13] One influence is the belief that to affirm God's perfection entails affirming aseity and thus a strong doctrine of immutability. If God is immutable then any accidental relations that are affirmed of God must be ascribed by reason or 'by intelligence' and cannot be interpreted as denoting anything 'real' in God. The reason for this is referred to by Mullins as the 'Platonic assumption', that is, "All change is for the better or worse. If God undergoes a change, He becomes either better or worse. If He can become better, He wasn't perfect. If He can become worse, He wasn't perfect." It is assumed, therefore, that God's perfection means that God cannot change either in himself or, indeed, by accident.

In sum, if change involves either the *acquisition* of some form of reality (accidental or otherwise) that God didn't previously have or the *loss* of reality (accidental or otherwise) that God previously had, then neither is compatible

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other there is found a real relation but in the other there is a real relation according to reason only …"(*De Potentia* q. 3. A. 3)

11 *Sententiarum PL* 192.603. Cited by McWhorter, "Aquinas on God's Relation to the World," 11.

12 *On the Trinity*, Bk 5, chap 13. "But other things that are called essences or substances admit of accidents, whereby a change, whether great or small, is produced in them. But there can be no accident of this kind in respect to God; and therefore He who is God is the only unchangeable substance or essence, to whom certainly being itself, whence comes the name of essence, most especially and most truly belongs. For that which is changed does not retain its own being; and that which can be changed, although it be not actually changed, is able not to be that which it had been; and hence that which not only is not changed, but also cannot at all be changed, alone falls most truly, without difficulty or hesitation, under the category of being." *On the Trinity*, Bk 5, chap. 2.

13 Cf. John Webster, "*Non ex aequo*: God's Relation to Creatures," in *Within the Love of God: Essays on the Doctrine of God in Honour of Paul S. Fiddes*, ed. Anthony Clarke and Andrew Moore (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), chap. 6.

with affirming God's eternal reality. Similarly, to say that God changes accidentally, on account of a change in relation to circumstances external to God's being, is, it is suggested, to undermine God's aseity. Divine mutability serves to place either God's aseity or reality in question and is inimical, therefore, to divine perfection.[14] (What I mean by 'aseity' here is that God exists in and of himself, that he is self-sufficient and self-existent and does not in any respect exist *ab alio* 'through another'.[15])

Further Implications

The above argumentation generates a succession of further challenges. For example, it has implications for how we think about God's knowledge of the contingent. It leads to the supposition that God can only know the imperfect by way of the perfect. God's perfection means that God's knowledge cannot depend on knowing that which is either imperfect or contingent. If God were to acquire knowledge of creatures and thus the particular, time-bound contents of their minds, then God's omniscience would be sustained by that which was contingent – it would be perfected in and through coming to know that which is either contingent or imperfect or both. Consequently, God's perfection would be undermined. To avoid this, divine perfection requires that God only knows creatures 'by knowing creatures in himself'.[16] What this appears to suggest is that God does not know creatures as they are in themselves. Now Linda Zagzebski argues that if God knows every aspect of his creation then this will include the conscious states of his creatures. If she is correct and God's omniscience involves 'omnisubjectivity' then, again, this would appear to compound the problem by suggesting that God's omniscience is contingent upon creaturely subjective states that are inevitably imperfect and dysfunctional.

It also has implications for how we conceive of the divine will. Given that divine perfection requires that God's will is necessarily efficacious, there neither is nor can be any unrealised power or potency – God's will cannot be

14 This is not to assume that divine aseity itself is unproblematic or immune from critique. Platonists, for example, argue that there is an ultimate, metaphysical plurality of uncreated concepts and properties – numbers, for example.

15 A fuller definition of God's aseity is provided by the Catholic Encyclopaedia. God's aseity denotes that God is "a Being Who does not depend for His existence, realization, or end on any priority other than Himself; Who has within Himself His own reason of existence, Who is for Himself His own exemplary and final priority. It is to this very property of absolute independence, or self-existence by nature that we give the name of *aseity*."

16 McWhorter, "Aquinas on God's Relation to the World," 16.

unfulfilled or frustrated in any way. Perfection and mereological simplicity, to which we shall return, appear to generate the conclusion that God's willing is identical with God's willing his own goodness: "the object of the divine will is his own goodness, which is his essence."[17] As McWhorter points out, when God wills other things to exist, God never ceases to be the willed end and other things are only willed to exist as ordered to that end. He then argues, this cannot be articulated in such a way as to imply God has a real relation to creatures.[18] God wills creatures to exist yet without standing in a 'real' relation either to them or with them.

If the above (very brief) summary is fair to Aquinas, it would appear that his view of divine perfection suggests a tightly integrated conceptual package. God is defined in terms of radical aseity, immutability and, as we shall see, simplicity. It is the combination of these that underpins his denial that God can be really related to the universe he created.

It is only appropriate at this point to introduce a qualification. In a recent email, Brian Leftow commented as follows: "all it means to say that the relations are real only on creatures' side is that that is where the relations' foundations are …" He then adds that 'foundations' has a very technical sense in mediaeval logic. If he is right, then all that mediaeval logic is denying by stating that God is not *really* related to creatures is that God does not require creatures in order to be God – that they are not *foundational* to God's being. If that is all that is being said, then few would raise any objection. Consequently, it is important for us to clarify in what sense it is appropriate to affirm (or deny) that God's relations to creatures are 'real'.

In order to assess this we need to turn to the third element in the package, divine simplicity.

Perfection and Divine Simplicity

The third key element in the conceptual package underpinning 'mixed relations' is metaphysical simplicity. One of the primary motivations for affirming simplicity has been the fear that if God is regarded as distinguishable from his defining properties, then that would appear to make God contingent on them to some degree. The doctrine of divine aseity affirms that we should not say that God *possesses* his defining attributes but, rather, that God is *identical* with them, that he *is* them. God and all God's properties therefore, require

17 S Th Ia q. 19a. 1 ad 3.

18 Cf. McWhorter, "Aquinas on God's Relation to the World," 17.

to be conceived as mutually identical and thus God is necessarily, mereologically simple. (The argument applies *a fortiori* to extrinsic properties. The fear is that if God is distinguishable from the property of 'being faithful to Israel', for example, then any suggestion that this property belongs to the 'reality' of who God is risks making God contingent on the existence of Israel.)

Simplicity can be seen, therefore, to be integral to the conceptual package that leads to the doctrine of 'mixed relations'. Whereas it is right, for Aquinas, to regard the contingent order as really related to God, to suggest that God is really related to creation seems incompatible with divine perfection for the simple reason that God would then have to be seen as possessing accidental properties.

It is pertinent to note the extent to which Aquinas' position reflects the views of Parmenides for whom reason tells us that, "whatever is must be ungenerated and imperishable; one, continuous and indivisible; and motionless and altogether unchanging, such that past and future are meaningless for it.' This is 'all that can be said about what truly exists.' Reality is thus revealed as 'something utterly different from the world in which each one of us supposes himself to live,' a world which is nothing but a 'deceitful show' (Guthrie 1965, 51)".[19]

The question is whether Aquinas' account of the divine nature makes God's self-disclosure in and through the Scriptures something of a 'deceitful show' for the same reasons. What is this deceitful show, you ask? For Aquinas, God is not really related to the universe, and is unaffected by it. This is a very different understanding of God from what we find in the Hebrew bible. Bruce C. Birch, Walter Brueggemann, Terence E. Fretheim, and David L. Petersen claim:

> The God of the opening chapters of Genesis is portrayed as a relational God. Most basically, God is present and active in the world, enters into a relationship of integrity with the world, and does so in such a way that both world and God are affected by that interaction. God has chosen not to remain aloof from the creation but to get caught up with the creatures in moving towards the divine purposes for the world.[20]

Again, the Hebrew bible portrays a God that is really and intimately related to the universe. For Aquinas, however, at metaphysical rock bottom God is not really related to the universe. So, what becomes of the witness of the Hebrew Scriptures to God's righteousness or covenant faithfulness, given that, '*in rerum*

19 http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/parmenides/ accessed September 5, 2022.

20 Bruce C. Birch, Walter Brueggemann, Terence E. Fretheim, and David L. Petersen, *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 42. Mullins provided this example.

natura', there is, according to Aquinas, no "real" relation of God to creatures at all?

For McWhorter, Aquinas' account makes perfect sense. "God loves creatures in himself in a manner more perfect than if the divine love had a real relation to creatures."[21] If this is the case then Aquinas' approach articulates the outcome of a trajectory that reflects the witness of the Scriptures in its purest and most supreme form.

Craig and Mullins, however, are not convinced. Mullins: "We have a bizarre claim on our hands: accidental, relational properties cannot be predicated of the simple, immutable, and timeless God."[22] That means that the 'accidental properties' that are integral to the language and witness of the Hebrew Bible and New Testament, (not to mention the church's creedal, conciliar and liturgical documents,) make reference to divine properties that are neither in God nor, indeed, extrinsic to God.[23] As we have seen, for Aquinas, it is impossible for God's relations to creatures to be extrinsic. (That would offend simplicity, make God contingent on that which was extrinsic to God etc.) But relations to creatures 'are not really in Him' either. They can be "ascribed to Him according only to our way of understanding, from the fact that other things are referred to Him. For our intellect, in understanding one thing to be referred to another, understands at the same time that the latter is related to the former; although sometimes it is not really related at all."[24] To repeat what we suggested earlier, all extrinsic divine properties exist exclusively in the minds of creatures.

This raises the question as to whether Christian theologians should be content to recognise that, when we speak of God's creative purpose or God's covenant commitment and faithfulness or God's election of Israel, or that when we describe God as Creator, Redeemer, Lord, Judge, none of these statements denote properties of God and that the reference of what is being said lies exclusively in our thought processes and not in who God really is. (All

21 McWhorter, "Aquinas on God's Relation to the World," 18.

22 Mullins, *The End of the Timeless God*, 119.

23 Examples of extrinsic, accidental properties would be Creator, Redeemer, Lord or, as Jacobus Arminius suggests, 'Judge of all men'. Mullins goes on to question Kretzmann's and Stump's view that extrinsic, accidental properties apply to God – though they acknowledge that they are weakening the claims of divine simplicity. Mullins, 57. Later in his book, Mullins summarises: "A simple God can have no accidental properties, so God cannot stand in a real relation with creation. God's relation to creation is a relation of reason. Accidental properties like *Creator* and *Lord* are conceptual, they only exist in our minds, so they cannot cause any real change in God. The claim is that the relational properties that we predicate of God are not in Him, nor are they extrinsic to Him." 122.

24 *Summa Contra Gentiles*, II.14.

description of God in such terms is 'analogical' and hence 'apophatic' and, in no way grounded in the 'reality' of God.)

Modal Collapse and Dilemmas for God's Aseity and Freedom

Contemporary Aquinas interpretation is a minefield of disagreement and McWhorter regards Craig's critique of Aquinas as uncharitable. Consequently, I shall assume a conditionalising approach: "If Aquinas meant x, then y." Consequently, IF, as Craig and Mullins suggest, Aquinas' arguments imply a maximalist (or, to put it Oliver Crisply, 'non-parsimonious') account of divine simplicity, then Craig and Mullins present significant challenges. One of these is the spectre of modal collapse.[25] Modal collapse results from the denial that there can be any non-actualised possible worlds. The result is that every facet of this world becomes 'necessary'. Ultimately, it belongs to the being of God, therefore, that I am wearing batman socks at this particular moment. As Mullins summarises, "Necessarily, there is only one possible world – this world. Necessarily, God must exist with creation and necessarily everything must occur exactly as it in fact does".[26] This, ironically, undermines God's aseity: "In order for God to be who he is – pure act – he necessarily must create this world. This makes God's essential nature dependent on creation."[27]

K.A. Rogers defines the problem in the following way:

> From God's perspective, if his essence is his eternal and immutable act in this the actual and only really possible world then He could not fail to have any of His attributes and still be Himself. They are equally necessary. That means we are forced to conclude that creatures do have some effect on God's very essence.

25 Ryan Mullins outlines the Thomist form of modal collapse in the following way: "God is pure actuality. All of God's acts are identical to each other such that there is one act in God. God is identical to this one act. To put this another way, God's act is identical to God's essence. Thus far, Aquinas agrees. Aquinas will further agree that God's essence is identical to God's existence. He will also say that God exists of absolute necessity. God's existence is of absolute necessity. So God's essence is of absolute necessity. Since God's essence is identical to God's act, God's act is of absolute necessity. That act includes creation. So creation is of absolute necessity. Any attempt to introduce contingency, or any other kind of necessity into this story will destroy the claim that God's act is identical to His essence." See chap. 6 of In Search of a Timeless God, University of St Andrews PhD thesis, 2013, St Andrews Research Repository (https://hdl.handle.net/10023/3736).

26 Cf. Ryan Mullins, *The End of the Timeless God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), chap. 6. Also, Ryan Mullins, "Simply Impossible: A Case Against Divine Simplicity," *Journal of Reformed Theology* 7 (2013): 196.

27 Mullins, "Simply Impossible," 196.

> This seems shocking since a major motivation for insisting on simplicity is the absolute aseity of God. And now we have apparently arrived at the conclusion that He is dependent on creatures![28]

There are related implications for divine knowledge which Craig articulates:

> it is futile to try to allow God's consciousness to be different in various possible worlds without allowing that God is different in different possible worlds. But then God has contingent properties with which He is not identical, so that divine simplicity is destroyed. If we insist upon His simplicity, then God will have the same properties in every world with respect to willing, knowing, and loving as He does ...

He continues, "the price of maintaining the divine simplicity is destroying divine freedom."[29]

The resulting conception of God and the divine properties brings us back again to the recurring question: how far can the theological affirmations found in either the Hebrew or Christian Scriptures be said to 'track' God's reality *in any significant way at all*? We have already pointed to problems associated with God's 'becoming' creator, redeemer, judge etc. These challenges are compounded, however, by the further implications of 'property collapse' for revelation and god-talk – the effect of which is to collapse the totality of Christian god-talk into agnostic apophasis.

Perfection, Mereological Simplicity and Property Collapse

As we have seen, if, on Thomas' account, perfection involves simplicity and if simplicity means there are no parts of any kind to God and if distinct properties are parts, then every divine property must be identical with every other. This has major implications for theological language and the relationship between what we intend to say and the actual reference of our statements.[30] When we say that God is love, our intention is to say something different from

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28 Katherin A. Rogers, *Perfect Being Theology* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 37.

29 William Lane Craig, "Timelessness, Creation, and God's Real Relation to the World," *Laval théologique et philosophique* 56, no. 1 (2000): 104. Cited in McWhorter, "Aquinas on God's Relation to the World," 6.

30 Mitchell LeBlanc, "on divine simplicity and malformed arguments", last modified November 22, 2009. https://www.choosinghats.com/2009/11/on-divine-simplicity-and-malformed-arguments/

when we say that God is omnipotent or omniscient. If, however, the reference of all predication is necessarily identical, then every 'true' statement about God is only 'true' to the extent that it means to ascribe what mereological simplicity allows. This can only mean that the reference of the terms we use can have no continuity with what we *think* we are saying or are intending to say when we make those ascriptions. In short, all talk collapses into what is, from a human perspective, meaningless *apophasis*. On a Fregean account, all language would be *sinnlos*, lit. 'sense-less'. In short, how could it be possible that we were 'saying' anything that made any sense whatsoever about God if we cite the Hebrew or Christian Scriptures, or Jesus' own affirmations or, indeed, the church's creedal affirmations to the extent that they make differentiated statements about God's nature and attributes.

So let us return briefly to the argument for this kind of mereological simplicity. As we saw, it is driven by the fear that if we make divine properties different from the divine being we risk generating a dependency relation – where God depends on his properties. It is this fear that has led Thomistic interpretations of simplicity to require us to regard God and all God's properties as mutually identical – thereby generating 'property collapse'. It is far from clear, however, that this Thomistic concern is not ill-conceived. First, the dependency relationship between God and his properties should not be viewed as a one-way street – the parts 'depend' on the whole for their instantiation every bit as much as the whole 'depends' on its parts. So, why should one think that the dependency relationship is from the *whole* to the *parts* and not from the *parts* to the *whole*? Clearly, if generating contingency is no longer a concern then the argument for simplicity on the grounds that we shouldn't distinguish God from his properties and thus God's properties from each other loses its justification.[31]

This brings us to a further weakness in the argument, namely, the supposition that properties and attributes are to be seen as *parts*. A long-standing fear driving Thomist, mereological simplicity has been that we risk presenting God as a 'bundle' of constituent properties. David Lewis, however, and, more recently, Peter van Inwagen, have challenged this view of properties arguing for a relational over against a constituent ontology.[32] A relational ontology opens

31 I am indebted to Aaron Cotnoir for this.

32 Peter van Inwagen summarises the distinction: "Ontologies that recognize the existence of properties (or qualities or attributes or features or characteristics) may be divided into those that hold that properties are in some sense constituents of the particulars that have (or exemplify or instantiate) them ("Constituent" ontologies) and those that deny that properties can in any sense be constituents of particulars ("Relational" ontologies). The classical bundle theory can serve as a paradigm of a constituent ontology. David Lewis's

the door to a more generous account of metaphysical simplicity by avoiding the obligation to endorse mereological simplicity that results from a prior commitment to a constituent ontology. A relational ontology does not generate the implication that God is composed of parts in this way. If God is not a 'bundle' of constituent properties which require to be viewed as parts and if there just isn't any one-way contingency of God upon his constituent properties then the pressure to endorse simplicity on these grounds no longer applies.

If valid and if taken together, challenges to the contingency argument and a constituent view of properties question the reductionism, therefore, that inevitably results from mereological simplicity. Moreover, this opens the door to reintroducing an appropriate distinction between God and his properties and also between God's various properties. This, in turn, has fundamentally important implications for the relevance of the Biblical witness for God-talk. We are no longer required to assume that the reference of the range of Biblical ascriptions reduces to the affirmation of a single, simple divine attribute. And we are no longer required to interpret Biblical ascriptions apophatically, that is, in radical discontinuity with what we think is meant by the relevant terms or what the Biblical writers thought or, indeed, what the disciples understood by the forms of speech (*rhemata*) (John 17:8) that Jesus gave them *for the sake of* communion with God – a mutual indwelling that stems from abiding in the One who is the Truth in person and who sanctifies them in the truth since his word is truth. (v.17)

Nicaea Revisited – the Challenge of Dualism

The issues that have been raised above are not new to the church. Athanasius articulated with penetrating insight how Arius' quasi-Parmenidean concept of God generated a qualitative gulf (*chorismos*) between God and the contingent order. For Arius, the incarnate Son and thus the enfleshed Logos belonged to the population of the latter. The effect of this was the inevitable collapse of all Biblical *theologein* into *muthologein*. Theology was reduced to the projection of *epinoiai* (opinions) across an infinite epistemological gulf onto that with respect to which we are *agnosis* (agnostic). What this meant was that Biblical

identification of properties with sets of possible objects (and of having or exemplifying with set-membership) can serve as a paradigm of a relational ontology (since, e.g., the set of all possible pink things is in no sense a constituent of any pink pig)." Peter van Inwagen, "Relational vs. Constituent Ontologies," *Philosophical Perspectives* 25, no. 1 (December 2011): 389–405.

and, indeed, theological statements required to be seen as the products of '*muthoplastia*' – the human fabrication of mythical terms which were devoid of reference beyond the contingent order. As such there was no possibility that they could help us to think through to (*dianoein*) the being of God. They facilitate neither *analogein* nor *theologein*. As von Harnack famously argued, if Arius had won the day, the church would not have continued to exist. Although an observation like this does not constitute a defeater (*Abusus non tollit usum!*), it remains pertinent to consider whether Athanasius' arguments don't reappear if 'god' is conceived in terms of strong, mereological simplicity. The challenge of such a position is to avoid imposing an Arian dualism on God's engagement with humanity in such a way that our terms are evacuated of their reference with the consequence that Biblical *kataphasis* is reduced to theological (or quasi-theological) *apophasis*.

God *in se* and God *pro nobis*

John claims that in Jesus Christ we have the creative *dabar* become flesh. Parallel claims are found in Paul's epistles implying that the incarnate Son is 'the one through whom and for whom all things were created', the 'fullness of the Godhead dwelling bodily', God reconciling the world to himself.

A related claim that is central not only to Paul's theology but to that of Hebrews and also the first epistle of John is that the incarnate Son intercedes for humanity. For the author of Hebrews, Jesus stands in the pre-Levitical, priestly tradition of Melchizedek as our sole representative. Paul, in Romans 8, and John, in 1 John, both use priestly language although, given that Jesus was not a Levite, sidestep confusion by avoiding the term 'priest'. The question raised by these three different New Testament traditions is how Thomas' *a priori* predetermination as to what divine perfection involves does not threaten the theology of participation *in toto* and thus the theological infrastructure of worship – namely, that, by the Spirit, human beings are given to participate (*metechein* or *koinonein*) within the triune life of God, that is, to share by the divine Spirit in the incarnate Son's *koinonia* with the Father.

Is it possible to make any sense of the above given what mereological simplicity implies with respect to the being of God? And what are the implications of suggesting that the Father's relation to the human Jesus, whom Christians perceive as the sole priest of their confession, the one Mediator between God and humanity, should be regarded as an *unreal relation* – and that the relation is grounded simply in reason or intelligence rather than in the triune life of God?

The defining criterion of Christian orthodoxy is the affirmation, articulated in the Nicene creed, that the incarnate Son is '*homoousios to patri*', of one being with the Father – that he is God from God, light from light, very God from very God, begotten not made (*gennetos agenetos*)... Central, moreover, to the Nicene tradition is the affirmation that he is only recognized in and through the indwelling, within space-time, of the Holy Spirit who is also, along with the incarnate Son, '*homoousios to patri*', of one being with the Father. The doctrine of mixed relations suggests that there is no 'real' relation between the Holy Spirit who intercedes for us and creation.

Chalcedon insisted that the divine and human natures of Jesus Christ are not to be confused. But neither are they to be separated.[33] If they are separated, the human Jesus cannot be said to disclose or enact God's being and nature in any significant way whatsoever. The result is that Jesus no more communicates who God is than a fish in a mountain stream with the result that the spectre of Arian *agnosis* reappears!

The fundamental question posed by real-unreal relations is whether it is possible to avoid separating the two hypostases. If the divine perfection requires that the Son is necessarily incorporeal, for example, that has clear implications for the possibility of 'incarnation'. If the two natures are deemed to be separate, then the incarnation becomes irrelevant for the disclosure of the divine nature and, as I have suggested, the spectre of Arianism reemerges. A quasi-Arian dualism (*chorismos*) is reintroduced between the being of the Son and the human Jesus – precisely what the fathers were so committed to oppose.

The result is that the Judaeo-Christian Scriptures risk being deprived of their '*skopos*', namely, God's 'real' presence with humanity as Immanuel. The upshot is inevitably the degradation of Biblical ascription – the consequence of a process wherein the 'pressure of interpretation' has meant imposing our

33 Eleonore Stump points to some problems that emerge for relating divine simplicity and Christology in her article, "Aquinas' Metaphysics of the Incarnation," in *The Incarnation: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Incarnation of the Son of God*, ed. Stephen Davis, Daniel Kendall, and Gerald O'Collins, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). Cited by Mullins. There she writes: "In his divine nature, he (Christ) has the operation proper to the deity. In his human nature, Christ has a complete and fully human mind, and he also has a rational appetite, that is to say, a complete and fully human will. Since intellect and will also characterize the divine nature, in virtue of having two natures Christ also has two intellects and two wills, one human and one divine." The problem, which she notes in footnote 40, is that: "Strictly speaking, this locution is inaccurate. The divine nature is simple, and so it is not accurate to speak of the divine person as having an intellect and a will. But the locutions needed to try to speak accurately in accordance with the doctrine of divine simplicity are so clumsy that Aquinas himself does not always avoid the simpler but inaccurate locutions."

prior metaphysical suppositions and speculations *on* the Biblical witness rather than *allowing the Biblical* witness *to shape* and *inform* our epistemic base. The casualty is faithful reflection (*Nachdenken*) on the (real) kinship with creatures that the eternal has established in time.

Hypostatic Union – Ontological Pluralism, Property Pluralism or …?

So how are we to articulate the incarnation? Doing so presents us with a problem.[34] Suppose Biblical theologians want to affirm i) that the Son has the same being as the Father (beingD), and thus a different being altogether from created things (beingC), and ii) that he also has a human nature and human attributes. Then we face a dilemma: **either** divine beings (beingsD) **can** have created attributes unqualifiedly (in which case there is no need for a theory of analogy with respect to predication since predication here is univocal) **or** beingsD cannot have created attributes unqualifiedly (in which case it is hard to see how Jesus could be said truly to have a human nature).

There appear to be only two ways out of this dilemma. The first solution is that we reject ontological pluralism altogether and plead guilty to the 'bludgeon' used to critique analytic theology[35], the so-called 'ontotheological error' – the *perceived* fallacy of reducing the divine mystery to a single, all-inclusive order of beings.[36] God and contingent reality belong to the same order of being and certain terms may apply univocally to both.

The second way out is to accept that Christ is truly said to have a human nature, but that this 'truthD' is different from the 'truthC' that is possessed by predications of created attributes to created beings. This would involve the adoption of a kind of truth pluralism – or predicate/property pluralism.

Rather than seek to determine whether ontological pluralism or truth pluralism are philosophically or metaphysically viable it is worth asking whether either option makes theological sense.

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34 I am indebted to A.J. Cotnoir for helpful discussions and for formulating the options here.

35 Kevin Diller, introduction to the *Journal of Analytic Theology* 2 (May 2014).

36 Marilyn McCord Adams, "What is wrong with the Ontotheological Error?" *Journal of Analytic Theology* 2 (May 2014): 1–12.

The Divine *katallage*

Our second way out of the dilemma suggests that the Son truly assumes a human nature in a manner appropriate to his divinity but that this possession of a human nature (truthD) is different, therefore, from Abraham's possession of a human nature (truthC). As I have suggested, this appears to avoid the ontotheological error but places a question-mark over the Christological exchange (*katallage*) as the fathers articulate it, the belief that the Son of God took what is ours that we might have what is his. What our 'truth pluralist' option suggests is that the Son of God adopted the kind of 'human nature' that was appropriate to the Son but not the kind of 'human nature' that was appropriate to creatures. And the problematic dualism is reintroduced!

Clearly, the question this raises is what this apparently docetic, view does to the emphasis of Hebrews, for example:

> Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things … For it is clear that he did not come to help angels, but the descendants of Abraham. Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested. (Heb 2:14–17)

This testimony to the exchange requires that he be flesh of our flesh and bone of our bone rather than 'flesh and bone of a kind appropriate to God the Son'. This would appear to endorse a non-docetic account of the 'exchange' whereby the Son comes to possess the properties of created beings *as created beings possess them*. Such an account would appear to be in tension with one based on property dualism – the view that the truth of a proposition can be the result of different properties and thus propositions can be true in more than one way.[37]

In short, an interpretation of the incarnation that takes the patristic dictum seriously appears to require us to ignore the *a priori* demands of the still-to-be-articulated, ontotheological error and continue to operate on the basis that, ***by the free grace of God*, contingent creatures are given to participate in relation to God, their Creator, in one 'order of being'**. That is categorically not to deny, of course, that God is a necessary being and that human creatures are contingent or that the former exists in all possible worlds and the latter do not … Neither is it to deny that the fact that God is really related to creatures

37 Cf. Crispin Wright, *Truth and Objectivity* (Cambridge, MI: Harvard Univ Press, 1992) and Michael Lynch, *Truth as One and Many* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

is the result of a counter-intuitive act of divine freedom that exceeds the most extravagant hopes or expectations that mere human creatures might even contemplate in advance of God's humble Self-disclosure.

If, despite these qualifications, such an approach still succumbs to the onto-theological error, it would be helpful to have greater clarity as to where precisely the relevant error is supposed to lie!

Simplicity and Mutability – Some Simple Mutations …

The above suggests that God's perfection requires to be interpreted in an *a posteriori* manner – roughly along the lines of what Karl Barth refers to as God's love-in-freedom. God's disclosure of God's love (covenant commitment, covenant faithfulness and forgiveness) *for* creatures as manifest particularly and historically *within* the contingent order through the history of Israel and *eph'hapax* through the incarnation[38] may be seen not only as testimony to God's perfection but as denoting the expression of that perfection in a manner that removes any perceived tension between God's *aseity* and *pronobeity*. Such a course involves reschematising traditional interpretations of divine simplicity, incorporeality, immutability, impassibility and aseity not *over against* the doctrine of divine perfection but in order to reflect faithfully God's nature as it is disclosed to us – something that mixed relations fails to do.[39]

It may seem counterintuitive to suggest that epistemic access to a necessary being should involve mediated perception rather than *a priori* reflection? It may be relevant to note here that, for Laurence BonJour (*In Defense of Pure Reason*) that "*a priori* justification should be understood as involving a kind of rational 'seeing'… of the truth or necessity of the proposition in question".[40]

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38 Cf. David Moffitt's field-changing work on Hebrews which establishes that for that particular author, the atonement happens in the holy of holies and thus in the ascension where Jesus' blood represents not his death but his life. *Atonement and the Logic of Resurrection in the Epistle to the Hebrews*, (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

39 In his discussion of divine aseity in Karl Barth (Brian Asbill, *The Freedom of God for Us*, (London: T&T Clark, 2014), Brian Asbill argues that Divine aseity is characterized as the self-demonstration and self-movement of God's life, a trinitarian and entirely unique reality, a primarily positive and dynamic concept, and the manner and readiness of God's love for creatures. On this account, God's lordship requires to be understood in terms of the act of self-binding, God's uniqueness in terms of the act of self-revelation, and God's sufficiency in the act of self-giving … http://www.bloomsbury.com/uk/the-freedom-of-god-for-us-9780567301468/

40 "A Priori and A Posteriori", Baehr, Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, accessed September 5, 2022. Baehr is referring to Laurence BonJour's *In Defense of Pure Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

In the *torah* Israel 'sees' the actions of God (Exodus 14:31) and in Matthew 16, Peter simply 'sees' that Jesus is the Christ – that is, he finds himself believing it. What we have is a direct belief that is properly basic and possesses doxastic immediacy. The 'seeing' takes place, moreover, when one is given the opportunity to view the relevant reality. In recognizing who Jesus Christ is, one is seeing the reality of the One who exists in all possible worlds. We are, in short, discerning the real, contingent properties of a necessary being.

Seeing Divine Perfection – Semantic Externalism and the Biblical Witness[41]

In her 2015 Gifford Lectures, Linda Zagzebski applied semantic externalism to an exemplarist account of virtue theory. Semantic externalism is the view that 'the meaning of a term is determined, in whole or in part, by factors external to the speaker.' Hilary Putnam famously summarized the position by stating that "meanings just ain't in the head!"[42] The thrust of the Bible suggests that knowledge of what divine perfection entails just isn't 'in our heads'. *A priori* approaches are insufficient. Rather, God's perfection is something that is *witnessed* in and through 'seeing' the character of God's presence in, with and for the contingent order in his dealings with Israel and in his advent *as Jesus Christ*. God's character, and thus his perfection, is something that one 'recognizes' by the Spirit in and through being given the eyes to see. This is to say that it is *as one comes to know and reflect on who he is* that one says '*That* is what we mean by divine perfection! Or, more accurately, *You are* the one who, in and through your incarnate life, presents us with the fullness of the Godhead and thus its perfection!' In sum, it is the history of the incarnate life of the Son which discloses divine perfection conceived, not in Parmenidean terms, but in and through God's humility, covenant faithfulness and, in short, the way of the cross – a level of commitment that stands in inverse proportion to the scale of this miniscule planet. Divine perfection on this account is not to be interpreted by submitting the God of the Judaeo-Christian tradition to the Procrustean bed of mixed relations and all that underpins it.

So, if we are to interpret the divine perfection in the light of God's self-disclosure both to and by means of the elect people of Israel, and this is not

41 Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski, *Exemplarist Moral Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), especially chapter 8 "Exemplarist Semantics and Meta-Ethics".

42 Hilary Putnam: "The meaning of meaning," *Philosophical Papers Vol. 2: Mind, Language and Reality*. Cambridge University Press, (1975/1985), 227.

precluded by the commitments underlying a mixed relations account, how might this be conceived?

Divine Perfection and the Real Kinship that the Eternal Establishes in Time[43]

a) The Christian understanding of God holds that God is an eternal, triune communion of love. God is perfect love in himself independently of any relationship with the contingent order.
b) God's free act of creation manifests God's perfect love – an act that involves a change in God's 'situation'. In the act of creation God determines, by grace, to cease to be the totality of all that exists in *alpha*. (*zimsum*?).
c) Creation means that there exists *another* that is *not* God but which exists *with* God in filial relationship.

Proviso. The creation of a contingent order does not imply that God *plus* the contingent order is greater than God *minus* the contingent order. The nature of the Triune God is such that God's relation to creation does not add something to God's being and creation is not necessary for God's completion or self-realisation.

(Georg Cantor's argument that there are an infinite number of possible 'sizes' for infinite sets might provide a possible analogy here. If God is infinitely great *in se*, this is not altered by adding to this his relationship to contingent reality – although Cantor operated with a *different* category of infinity when applied to God.)

d) The extent of God's love for creatures is manifest in and through God's election of Israel and finds supreme expression in God's incarnation as a Jew.
e) That same love, as expressed in God's righteousness and covenant faithfulness, finds defining, once and for all expression in the brutal death of the one who is the eternal Word made flesh. This, together with the resurrection and ascension, manifests the extent of God's all-inclusive covenant commitment toward humanity as a whole. "God so (*perfectly*) loved the world that he gave …"

43 "There is no immanental underlying kinship [*Slægtskab*] between the temporal and the eternal, because the eternal itself has entered into time and wants to establish kinship [*Slægtskabet*] there." Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 573 / *SKS* 7, 520.

f) The Christian Scriptures witness to an 'analogy of communion' which runs from the triune communion, to the communion of the church and finally to the eschatological communion that is the fulfillment of God's *telos* for creation.[44]

In sum, the history of the triune God's *real* engagement with creatures constitutes testimony to what the Bible presents as God's filial love. To conceive of God's perfection *a posteriori*, that is, in the light of God's Self-disclosure suggests, therefore, that the divine *koinonia* be seen as the form of God's perfection in all possible worlds and the ground of God's filial purposes reflected in God's dealings (with creation) in *alpha*.[45]

It is God's filial engagement with humanity within history that provides an adequate response to Tim Mulgan's insightful challenge (OUP, Nov 2015). For Mulgan, the arguments for the existence of God demonstrate divine purposiveness vis-à-vis the universe. However, natural theology points to 'ananthropocentric purposivism' (AP). That is, there are no grounds for suggesting that human beings are, in any way, central to this purposiveness. Challenging the doctrine of 'mixed relations' is imperative if we are to avoid opening the door to AP and submitting the irreducibly historical character of the Judaeo-Christian witness to just such a Procrustean bed.[46] To affirm that God loves perfectly stems from recognising the *reality* of God's creation of and the character of God's engagement with that contingent reality.

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44 The form of this analogy of communion is as follows: **AS** the divine persons are related to each other **SO** i) the Father is related to Jesus, the incarnate Son, **SO** ii) Jesus is related to Israel, **SO** iii) the reconciled Body of Christ is related to the world, **so** iv) all people are related to one another in the Kingdom in fulfillment of God's *telos* for humanity.

The principle that grounds this form of analogy is not the supposition of a universal intrinsic likeness between agents and their effects but God's free Self-identification with humanity in the person of the incarnate Son and through the creative presence of the Holy Spirit. By this means, God commandeers, reconciles and refers human language to himself for the sake of communion.

(John 17: I have given them the *rhemata* (means of speaking)... so that the love which is in us may be in them ...)

45 The latter would apply even if the particular form of God's love in freedom (as this relates, for example, to the content of God's consciousness) differed across possible worlds thereby entailing that God possessed different accidental properties in *alpha* from those that God possesses in PW^n.

It is not clear, therefore, that the possession by God of accidental/contingent properties would be inimical to his perfection if that perfection were conceived in terms of God's love in freedom and if the immutability of that defining property entailed that God possess contingent properties.

46 Tim Mulgan, *Purpose in the Universe: The moral and metaphysical case for Ananthropocentric Purposivism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

Postscript: Compatibility With Leftow?

Although such an account takes radically God's aseity, it may involve 'parsimonious' accounts not only of simplicity and incorporeality but also of mutability.

Does such an approach to thinking about divine perfection find itself in radical tension with Brian Leftow's perfect being theology, for example? Very simply, I am proposing, in his terminology, that the definition of God's perfection where F = '(filial) love in freedom' suggests that "God would be a better G (or better in G) were he F than were he not F precisely because of being F, rather than due to something being F would bring with it."[47]

Leftow has commented that perfect-being theology is speculative and our human intuitions as to what it is to be perfect are inconsistent and flawed. With admirable humility, he comments on the perfect-being arguments that he provides, "As I give them, I have a nagging fear that I am just making stuff up." Perfect being theology, he explains, "is one sort of metaphysics, and so inherits a share of our worries about whether metaphysical reasoning ever shows us more than the inside of our own concepts."[48]

The interpretation of the perfection of the Triune God in terms of *koinonia* and expressed in God's filial relationship to human creatures could simply be the description of the inside of a particular theological conceptuality. As to whether its intuitions are genuinely reconciled or 'reschematized' such that they mediate the given *rhemata* consonant with sharing in the divine life, that is not something that can be demonstrated or confirmed in advance of the life of the new humanity. The above argumentation would suggest that it is in the context of reconciled, filial *participation* that properly functional intuitions are bestowed on human creatures. This may be in harmony with Paul's express desire that we have 'that mind which is in Christ Jesus'.

47 Leftow, Brian *God and Necessity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 9.
48 Leftow, *God and Necessity*, 11–12.

Mullā Ṣadrā on God's Simplicity

Reza Akbari

1. Introduction

This article examines God's simplicity from Mullā Ṣadrā's point of view[1]. To reach this goal, first, I explain that Mullā Ṣadrā is a revolutionary philosopher who has made a turn in the path of Islamic philosophy by putting the principality of existence (*aṣālat al-wujūd*) instead of the principality of quiddity (*aṣālat al-māhiyyah*). Given the gradual nature of this philosophical turn, we face two kinds of articulation of his views using quiddity-centered and existence-centered languages. Then I explain that there are two separate and, at the same time, related issues in the subject of God's simplicity in Islamic philosophy: the negation of God's components and the relationship between God's essence and attributes in a way that does not imply any composition. Next, I will formulate Mullā Ṣadrā's arguments (two in quiddity-centered and two in existence-centered languages) for negating any components from God. Going further, I will analyze his theory on the relationship between God's essence and attributes. Finally, in criticizing Mullā Ṣadrā's view, I show that the principality of existence is a metaphorical scheme without adequate epistemic justification. Hence, his view on the simplicity of God, is partially and indirectly based on a metaphor.

2. Mullā Ṣadrā: A Revolutionary Philosopher

Mullā Ṣadrā should be regarded as a revolutionary philosopher in Islamic philosophy in Iran. He turned the focus of philosophers from quiddity to the existence. According to his former generations, the reality is nothing but different

1 A simultaneous consideration of this paper and Thomas Schärtl's article, which examines divine simplicity in Christian theology, allows readers to gain a more refined understanding of this issue from a comparative perspective between the Islamic and Christian traditions. I have chosen Mullā Ṣadrā as the primary philosopher in this study, as his thought uniquely integrates philosophical, theological, Qur'anic, and hadith-based insights. Although references to the views of other scholars have been made as appropriate throughout the discussion, it is essential to consider the article written by Mehmet Sait Reçber in which the confrontation between Al-Ghazālī and Muslim philosophers is analyzed.

quiddities. Addressing a human and a horse, for example, means referring to two different quiddities. In this paradigm, notions such as genus and differentia, matter and form are predominant in speaking about things in the world. In contrast, Mullā Ṣadrā believed that the concept of existence has referents in reality.[2]

By facing various beings, our minds form a proposition composed of two concepts, the particular quiddity (*al-māhiyyah al-khāṣṣah*) such as man or horse, and the existent (*mawjūd*) to indicate their external reality. Ibn Sīnā had earlier asserted that these two concepts are not synonymous.[3] The key question is which notion is real and extra-mental and which one is mental and a mere concept posited in mind. The leading view was the principality of quiddity in the case of possible beings, and the principality of existence in the case of the necessary being, adopted by Mīr Dāmād and Mullā Jalāl al-Dīn al-Davānī. According to this theory, God is the pure and the only existence in the world. The quiddities of possible beings need God. They have illuminative relation (*al-'intisāb al-'ishrāqī*) with God, from which our minds abstract the notion of existence. So, existence in the case of possible beings has no referent in the external world. It is just a concept in our minds.

Mulla Ṣadrā refused this picture of the world. Instead, he presented another theory known as the principality of existence. It is a paradigm shift, in which existence occupies the place of quiddities. Here, quiddities are concepts posterior to existence. There is nothing in the world but different levels of existence. Quiddities are concepts abstracted from the shortcomings of possible beings. God who doesn't have any limitation is without quiddity.

Concentrating on existence instead of quiddities changed Mullā Ṣadrā's conceptual framework in many areas. Borrowing Wittgenstein's term, it is appropriate to say that he changed the grammar. Using an existence-centered language instead of a quiddity-centered language, he preferred terms such as existence, nothingness, gradation, unity, multiplicity, movement, indigence, and richness over genus, differentia, matter, form, essence, and alike. These

2 Muhammad ibn 'Ibrāhīm Mullā Ṣadrā al-Shīrazī, *Al-Shawāhid al-rubūbiyyah*, ed. Sayyed Jalāl al-Dīn 'Āshtiyanī (Mashhad, Iran: al-Markaz al-Jāmi' li'n-nashr, 1981), 6; Muhammad ibn 'Ibrāhīm Mullā Ṣadrā al-Shīrazī, *al-Mashā'ir* (Tehran: Ṭahūrī, 1984), 9; Muhammad ibn Ibrāhīm Mullā Ṣadrā al-Shīrazī, *Al-Ḥikmah al-Muta'āliyah fī al-'Asfār al-'aqliyyah al-'Arba'ah* (Beyrūt: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth, 1990), 1:38–39. From now on, for brevity, I will use the other name of this book, which has become famous among Muslim philosophers: *Al-'Asfār*.

3 Ibn Sīnā, *'Ilāhiyyāt al-Shifā'* (Qum: Maktabah al-Mar'ashī, 1983), 31.

two languages give researchers a helpful tool for distinguishing his former and later theories on a single philosophical problem.

3. God Has No Components

Mullā Ṣadrā has proposed many arguments to justify that God has no components. Here, I formalize two of them in the framework of quiddity-centered language and two others in the framework of existence-centered language.

3.1 *Two Arguments in the Framework of Quiddity-centered Language*

Let me start with the argument I call "Indigence Argument".

1. God has components (Assumption)
2. Every component has priority to the whole in terms of rank.
3. God's components have priority to God in terms of rank. (from 1 and 2)
4. The whole is indigent to its components.
5. God is indigent to His components. (from 3 and 4)
6. If God has components then He will be indigent to them. (1–5 CP)
7. But the consequence is false. (This is not the case that God is indigent to components)
8. So, the antecedent is false too. (6 and 7, MT)

This argument goes this way. One may say that God is not simple. It means that she believes that God has components. We assume this proposition in the first premise and go further to show its wrongness.

The second premise tells something obvious about the relationship between components and the whole. Although components and the whole are one thing, our reason admits that components are before the whole in terms of rank. The third premise comes from connecting the first and the second premises. The fourth premise is also telling something explicit about the relationship between components and the whole. The fifth premise comes from the combination of the third and the fourth premises. The sixth line combines the first and the fifth propositions using conditional proof.

To complete the argument we need a proof for the truth of the seventh premise. Here is the proof:

1. God is the necessary being.
2. The necessary being is not indigent to anything.
3. God is not indigent to anything (including His components).

Adding the conclusion of this sub argument to the main argument by modus tollens, we come to the final conclusion that God has no components.[4] Now let me formulate another argument I call "Contingent-Necessary Argument".

1. God has components. (Assumption)
2. Everything in the world is either contingent or necessary.
3. God's components are either contingent or necessary. (from 1 and 2)
4. There are three alternatives: All components of God are necessary; all components are contingent; some components are necessary and some are contingent.
5. If God has components, then all his components are necessary, or all are contingent, or some components are necessary and some are contingent. (1–4, CP)
6. But all three alternatives are false.
7. Therefore, the antecedent is also false. (5 and 6, MT)

To form a valid Modus Tollens argument, Mullā Ṣadrā has presented three sub-arguments to reject all three options mentioned in the conditional proposition. Each of them is in the form of conditional proof with Modus Tollens at the end. Here is the argument for denying the first alternative:

1. All components of God are necessary. (Assumption, the first alternative)
2. Any component needs other components.
3. Any component of God needs other components. (From 1 and 2)
4. If all components of God are necessary, then every component needs other components. (1–3, CP)
5. But it is impossible for a necessary component to need something else in its existence.
6. Therefore, the consequence of the fourth premise is false.
7. Thus, the antecedent is also false. (This is not the case that all components of God are necessary.) (from 4 and 6, MT)

4 Muhammad ibn Ibrāhīm Mullā Ṣadrā al-Shīrazī, *Al-Ἀsfār* (Beyrūt: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth, 1990), 6: 100; Muhammad ibn 'Ibrāhīm Mullā Ṣadrā al-Shīrazī, *Al-Mabda' wa'l-Ma'ād*, ed. Sayyed Jalāl al-Dīn 'Āshtiyanī (Tehran: Anjuman-e Hekmat wa Falsafe-ye Iran, 1976), 41.

And now we go to deny the second alternative:

1. All components of God are contingent. (Assumption)
2. It is impossible that contingent components make a necessary being; the whole will be a contingent being.
3. If God's components are contingent, God as the whole will be contingent. (1–2, CP)
4. But God is not contingent. God is the Necessary Being.
5. Therefore, this is not the case that all components of God are contingent. (3 and 4, MT)

Now, let me present his argument for refuting the third alternative:

1. Some components of God are contingent and some are necessary. (Assumption)
2. Every whole is indigent to its components.
3. God is indigent to His components. (From 1 and 2)
4. God is indigent to His contingent components. (The analysis of 3)
5. God is indigent to His necessary components. (The analysis of 3)
6. Every contingent being needs God (the Necessary Being) in its existence.
7. Those components that are contingent are indigent to God (the Necessary Being.)
8. God is indigent to His contingent components and these contingent components are indigent to God. (From 4 and 7, Add.)
9. If some components of God are contingent and some are necessary, then God is indigent to His contingent components and these contingent components are indigent to God. (1–8, CP)
10. But the consequence is false.
11. Therefore, the antecedent is also false. So, this is not the case that some components of God are contingent and some are necessary. (from 9 and 10, MT)

The reason for the falsehood of the consequence is clear. There is a vicious circle between God and His contingent components.

Now, we have the arguments for rejecting all three alternatives in the main argument. It means that God has no components.[5]

5 Mullā Ṣadrā, *Al-'Asfār*, 6:102–103; Mullā Ṣadrā, *al-Mabda' wa'l-Ma'ād*, 41–42.

3.2 *Two Arguments in the Framework of Existence-centered Language*

I call the first argument in this framework, I mean existence-centered language, "Pure-existence Argument":

1. God is pure existence.
2. Only those beings that are not pure existence have quiddity.
3. God does not have quiddity. (From 1 and 2)
4. Only those beings that have quiddity have components
5. God does not have any components. (From 3 and 4)[6]

Here, you see that the focus is on existence. God is pure existence and this means that He is free of components. But, what is pure existence? In Mullā Ṣadrā's existence-centered language, this term refers to a being that has no deficiencies; a being that is rich in existence. He is absolutely rich, self-sufficient and all other beings need Him. The second premise describes limited and mixed beings. Because of deficiencies, these beings are analyzable into existence and quiddity. So, the second premise restates what Mullā Ṣadrā expressed in the first premise in another way. The first and the second premises bring us to the third premise. The fourth line is meaningful in existence-centered language. These are quiddities that can be analyzed to genus, differentia, matter, form, etc. Existence is a simple reality. The notion of existence is also a simple notion without any elements of definition.

Here, Mullā Ṣadrā's explanation is remarkable. In an existence-centered language, the package of the terms used to deal with reality is very limited; three notions: existence, quiddity, and nothingness. Numerous names referring to different quiddities in quiddity-centered language will be reduced to the levels of existence. In this new grammar, existence, whether in the external world or our mind, as a concept, is simple. The ground is well-formed. Existence cannot be a component of itself; quiddities are posterior to existence; nothingness is nothing. So, none of these three alternatives can be a component of existence. By combining the third and the fourth premises, the conclusion will be obvious. Now, let me introduce the other argument. I call it "The Strong-existence Argument":

1. Every being composed of components is weak in existence.

6 Mullā Ṣadrā, *Al-'Asfār*, 6:103; Mullā Ṣadrā, *al-Mabda' wa'l-Ma'ād*, 42.

Mullā Ṣadrā gives two examples: Time and body. Time is such that when one component comes, the other component disappears. Its components are scattered; they do not exist together. In Mullā Ṣadrā's viewpoint, this feature originates from the weakness in existence. The body is another example. Its components spread in three dimensions. One can say this is one side, and that is another side of a body. 'a' as one component is different from 'b' as another component. The spread of the body through three dimensions is a sign of its weakness in existence.

Mullā Ṣadrā formulates this premise in another expression. Those beings composed of components are a mixture of existence and nothingness. Initially, this formulation seems odd because nothingness is nothing and cannot be a component of one thing. So, what does Mullā Ṣadrā mean? He means that a weak being has some deficiencies. Nothingness here is used to tell that one being lacks some actuality that another being has. For example comparing a human being with a tree, one finds that a tree cannot think. Here you can formalize your finding in two ways. You can say:

A) A tree has some deficiencies in comparison to a human being.
B) A tree is a mixture of existence and nothingness in comparison to a human being.

Nothingness here is another way to talk about what is in contrast to existential richness. A being mixed of existence and nothingness is a being that is not rich.

Elsewhere, Mullā Ṣadrā uses "the mixture of presence and absence" to show the weakness of time and body. Their components are absent from each other.

1. God is strong in His existence. He is the strongest being in the world.

Comparing this premise with the first premise brings us to the conclusion of the argument:

2. God has no components.

He is All-Rich, absolutely Rich, Self-Sufficient, and the Necessary Existence.[7]

7 Mullā Ṣadrā, *Al-ʾAsfār*, 6:101–102.

4. God's Simplicity and God's Attributes

The relationship between God's essence and attributes has a long history in Muslim theology and philosophy. Mullā Ṣadrā considers the theories of Mu'tazilites (the sameness of God's essence and attributes), Ash'arites (the eternal concomitant of God's essence and His attributes) and Karrāmiyyah (the creation of God's attributes by His essence) unacceptable. He also rejects Ibn Sīnā's view (the synonymy of all God's attributes). He expresses his theory under the title of this famous principle of his philosophy: A simple reality is all things and is none of them (*basīṭ al-haqīqa kull al-ashyā' wa laysa bi-shay'in minhā*).

His theory on this issue, like his other theories, is based on the principality of existence. To better understand Mullā Ṣadrā's view, it is necessary to point out divisions of attributes in his works. It helps us know how he has analyzed the relationship between God's essence and attributes without leading to composition. So, this is my plan in this part. First I express different divisions of God's attributes in Mullā Ṣadrā's works. Then I explain how he uses them to show that all attributes at the end of day reduce to only one single attribute. Then I will show that by using the principality of existence he concludes that God's attributes make no composition in God's Essence.

Somewhere, Mullā Ṣadrā divides the attributes into tangible (*maḥsūsah*) and rational (*ma'qūlah*).[8] Each of them may be identical with its possessor or accidental. So, they are in four categories:

a) A tangible attribute that is identical with its possessor like contiguity for the body. I call it a tangible essential attribute.
b) A tangible attribute that is accidental for its possessor like blackness for the body. I call it a tangible accidental attribute.
c) A rational attribute that is identical with its possessor like knowledge for the intellect. I call it a rational essential attribute.
d) A rational attribute that is accidental for its possessor like knowledge for an earthly human. I call it a rational accidental attribute.

Mullā Ṣadrā believes that God does not have tangible attributes, whether essential or accidental, because God is not a body. He also rejects the theory of God's possessing rational accidental attributes accepted by Ash'arites and Karrāmiyyah. He has given several grounds for invalidating this theory:

8 Mullā Ṣadrā, *Al-'Asfār*, 6:123.

a) If God's attributes are accidental, God's essence must lack perfection, but God has absolute perfection.
b) If God's attributes are accidental, we can imagine a being whose attributes are identical to its essence. In that case, that being will be superior to God, which will conflict with God's absolute perfection.
c) If God's attributes are accidental, these attributes must be given to Himself by His essence. In this case, the divine essence has two states; One in which He does not have any attributes and one in which He bestows attributes to Himself. In this case, the divine essence will be prior and posterior to himself at the same level, which is unacceptable.[9]

He accepts that God has only rational essential attributes. But there is a problem here. It seems that the identity between God's essence and attributes contradicts God's simplicity. It seems that Ibn Sīnā had faced this problem before him and his solution was to accept the synonymy of God's attributes.[10] Their plurality is linguistic, not semantic. They have one meaning, one reality, but different terms.

Because of its too many problems, Mullā Ṣadrā was not satisfied with this solution. First, it conflicts with common sense. The meaning of omniscient is different from the meaning of omnipotent. On the other hand, it requires that one attribute is enough to refer to God. There is no need to use others.[11] But why are there too many attributes of God in the Qur'an?

Mullā Ṣadrā chose another path. To explain his theory, let me point out that God's attributes are positive or negative, and the difference goes to the possibility or impossibility of describing God with them. Citing the Qur'an, Mullā Ṣadrā calls negative attributes "the attributes of glory" and positive attributes the "attributes of honor."[12]

In the next step, Mullā Ṣadrā divides positive attributes into real and relational. Real attributes, such as life and self-knowledge, are not relations and require nothing outside God's Existence. Mullā Ṣadrā called them "pure real attributes." Attributes such as God's knowledge of beings are not relations, but they require something outside God's Existence to relate to them. Mullā Ṣadrā's term for this kind is "real attributes with relation."[13] In addition, Mullā Ṣadrā introduces another category as relational attributes. These attributes,

9 Mullā Ṣadrā, *Al-'Asfār*, 6:123–124, 133–134.
10 Ibn Sīnā, *'Ilāhiyyāt al-Shifā'*, 367.
11 Mullā Ṣadrā, *Al-'Asfār*, 6:145.
12 Mullā Ṣadrā, *Al-'Asfār*, 6:118.
13 Mullā Ṣadrā, *Al-'Asfār*, 6:119.

such as the Creator and the Provider, are nothing but the relationship between God and beings.[14]

Having this terminology, Mullā Ṣadrā walks in the path of his epistemic theory of justification. Like other Muslim philosophers, he returns all inferential propositions to one self-justified proposition – the principle of non-contradiction. He uses the same approach here and attempts to return all of God's attributes to one. So, let us call his theory of God's attributes foundationalism. There are many negative attributes, but they all return to one: God is not possible. In other words, God lacks contingency. "Pure real attributes" such as life and self-knowledge come back to one: God is a necessary being. "Real attributes with relation" originate from one: God is the Sustainer of beings.[15]

As you see, Mullā Ṣadrā reduces the excessive attributes of God to three fundamental ones. But there is still a composition that conflicts with the simplicity of God. Mullā Ṣadrā needs to reduce these three attributes to one. But how? According to him, the one foundation of all these three attributes is His necessity. God is the Sustainer of all creatures, and God is not contingent, both because He is a necessary being.[16]

Does reducing all attributes to one solve the problem of compositionality? No. Still, there is the composition of the essence of God and one attribute. Mullā Ṣadrā needs to go further, and the principality of existence is his philosophical tool. God is existence, a perfect necessary being. Necessity is not an attribute different from the essence of God. Essence, Existence, and Necessity are three different conceptualizations of one thing.

This position is different from the Mu'tazilites' view. According to one theory, Khwāja Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī ascribes to Mu'tazilites, Abū Hāshim al-Jubbā'ī believed that God has attributes, but these attributes are modes (*Aḥwāl*). They are neither existent nor non-existent. The second theory is ascribed by Khwāja to Abū al-Husayn al-Baṣrī, according to which God has three main attributes of Power, Knowledge, and Life, not distinct from God's essence. In this view, God is, for example, omnipotent by His essence, not by Power as a distinct attribute. Although there are some similarities between Mullā Ṣadrā and al-Baṣrī's theories, the main difference is that al-Baṣrī does not mention what the essence of God is, whether quiddity or existence.

14 Mullā Ṣadrā, *Al-'Asfār*, 6:118.
15 Mullā Ṣadrā, *Al-'Asfār*, 6:119–120.
16 Mullā Ṣadrā, *Al-'Asfār*, 6:144.

5. The Principality of Existence and the Light Metaphor

So, here the principality of existence plays a central role. A natural question arises: Did Mullā Ṣadrā give any philosophical justification for its truth? The answer is twofold. From one side, one can find more than fifteen arguments in his books and treatises. On another side, all these arguments are in the framework of a metaphor without offering enough justification. Mullā Ṣadrā perceives the world as a single reality, called existence, which has a source and illumination like light. The ground for this metaphor, in my opinion, is a mystical experience. God is the source, and other beings are His illumination. In Mullā Ṣadrā's philosophy, existence is like a magic wand. Using this wand, he has an answer in his pocket for every philosophical challenge. It is enough to presuppose some features for an object and then use this magic wand. For example, God is supposed to be simple, so let us ascribe Him by this attribute with this magic wand. How? God is existence, and existence is simple, so God is simple.

But if existence is simple, isn't it true that man is also simple? With this magic wand, the solution is already in hand. Man, unlike God, has a limited existence; he is a composition of actuality and possibility, richness and deficiencies.

Let's look at this issue from another viewpoint. God's simplicity, a rigorous philosophical problem, has been solved easily in Mullā Ṣadrā's philosophy. It gives us some justifications for doubting the validity of his philosophical framework.

Going back to Mullā Ṣadrā's metaphor, it's justificatory to ask why we should accept this metaphor and its metaphysical results. Mullā Ṣadrā's suggestion is contemplation. He wants us to reflect to understand reality as he understands it. But isn't such a view a bit selfish? Why should a person put aside her point of view and take Mullā Ṣadrā's viewpoint? It seems that Mullā Ṣadrā's recommendation is not enough, and we need something more; philosophical justification. It is the still-open-to-question part of Mulla Sadra's philosophy. His commentators don't give us any philosophical justification for why and how one should accept this metaphor.

6. Conclusion

I began the article by introducing Mullā Ṣadrā as a revolutionary philosopher who replaced quiddities with existence. In the issue of God's simplicity, I described two kinds of its addressing in Mullā Ṣadrā's works; refusing any

components from God's Essence and God's relationship to His attributes. Revolving around such concepts as contingency, necessity, and existence, I formalized four arguments to negate any components of God's Essence. Regarding the relationship between God and His attributes, I clarified that Mullā Ṣadrā has taken a new way, in which the principality of existence is his starting point. To express his theory, I introduced the principle that a simple reality is all things and is none of them (*basīṭ al-haqīqah kull al-ashyā' wa laysa bi-shay'$_{in}$ minhā*). I ended by explaining that "the principality of existence" is based on a metaphor rather than being justified by the evidence.

Divine Attributes as a Subject of Comparative Theology

Conclusions

Klaus von Stosch

1. God, Time, and Free Will Philosophy

In contemporary German-speaking theology, God is frequently conceived as perfect freedom. Against the background of this approach are thoughts of philosophers of the so-called German idealism, such as Johann Gottlieb Fichte and Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, who have led to a fundamental revision of classical theism in parts of German-speaking theology. For logical reasons, the act of freedom needs processuality and temporality, even if one attempts to define this freedom as perfect freedom. Accordingly, the Freiburg fundamental theologian Magnus Striet, for example, states that, "The actuality of personal freedom presupposes time, because time opens up the possibility of a free being able to relate, the possibility of being able to open up to content and its affirmation."[1] Only time enables distancing from contents, which is the prerequisite for the ability to relate freely to them – this is a basic axiom of libertarian free will philosophy. Therefore, if God must also be conceived with libertarian freedom, then he can no longer be conceived beyond time.

This rupture with traditional thinking is justified in terms not only of free will philosophy but also of incarnational logic. According to the reconstruction of Magnus Striet following Hans Urs von Balthasar, the man Jesus "inscribes a temporal experience into the experience of eternal life" in such a manner that "the temporal and finite experiences of the creature, such as being born, growing, working, praying, tiring, enduring, and dying become experiences of the eternal and unchanging God Himself on the basis of the hypostatic union."[2] Thus, temporal consummation receives a place in God; they become a reality in God, thus, dynamizing and temporalizing his being. Magnus Striet concludes

1 Magnus Striet, "Konkreter Monotheismus als trinitarische Fortbestimmung des Gottes Israels," in *Monotheismus Israels und christlicher Trinitätsglaube*, ed. Magnus Striet. QD 210 (Freiburg-Basel-Wien: Herder, 2004), 155–198, 189 (my translation).

2 Balthasar quoted from Magnus Striet, "Monotheismus und Schöpfungsdifferenz. Eine trinitätstheologische Erkundung," in *Das Gewaltpotential des Monotheismus und der dreieine Gott*, ed. Peter Walter. QD 216 (Freiburg-Basel-Wien: Herder, 2005) (QD 216), 151–2. Fn. 34.

that the fundamental datum of faith in Christianity, that is, the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, can be conceived only "if God stands in a real relation to time."[3] Accordingly, God can become human only if God is not conceived beyond all becoming.

However, Striet does not base his freedom-theoretical dynamization of the concept of God only on specifically Christian theologumena but carries it into the concept of creation. If creation is to be conceived as a freedom event, then it needs time, and the decision for it also needs time. Therefore, Striet asks "whether even a God creating out of nothing must not already exist temporally in order to be able to create, and this because the concept of creation transcendentallogically presupposes time relations."[4]

However, the theologumenon of *creatio ex nihilo* is typically understood in such a manner that time cannot be regarded as a given of God but as something created by God. Alternatively, one may ask in the sense of a freedom-theoretical reformulation of theism: could not the creatureliness of time be understood in such a manner that God voluntarily binds himself to it in his relation to the world? Swinburne expresses this thought relatively overpointedly by speaking of a voluntarily chosen captivity of God in time. Just as God's omnipotence does not exclude respecting the free will decisions of human beings, omniscience can also continue to be predicated of God if God allows a genuine openness of the future and binds himself to time for the sake of human freedom. The apparent disadvantage of a temporalization of God could be avoided by conceiving God's dependence on time as freely chosen.[5]

The advantage of this conception is that a God who did not know everything before the creation of the world can be better conceived as dialogical-personal in the sense that he can interact with humans and react to their decisions and actions.[6] Moreover, a God that exists in perpetual duration can easily be attributed all actions that Biblical tradition claims of God. Especially if one intends to understand the relationship between God and human as a relationship of freedom, then a freely chosen temporality of God can definitely be understood

3 Magnus Striet, *Offenbares Geheimnis. Zur Kritik der negativen Theologie*. ratio fidei 14 (Regensburg: Pustet, 2003), 251 (my translation).

4 Striet, *Offenbares Geheimnis*, 250 (my translation).

5 Cf. Richard Swinburne, "Gott und Zeit," in *Analytische Religionsphilosophie*, ed. Christoph Jäger (Paderborn: utb, 1998), 213: "In dem Maß, in dem er Gefangener der Zeit ist, hat er gewählt dies zu sein."

6 Cf. William P. Alston, "Divine action: shadow or substance?" in *The God who acts. Philosophical and theological explorations*, ed. Thomas F. Tracy (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), 44.

as perfection.[7] At least the resulting loss of control over the future is not an imperfection if a truly autonomous freedom of creatures is considered desirable.[8]

However, the proposal of Swinburne suffers from the fact that the free choice to temporality logically presupposes time and, thus, God is dependent on a reality apart from himself, that is, time, for enacting his being as freedom. Despite the advantages posed by a detachment of the concept of God from the metaphysical construct of timelessness, the concept of God must, therefore and nevertheless, be conceived in such a manner that not only the disadvantages of timelessness are avoided but God always remains Lord and the origin of time.[9]

Therefore, Striet develops a different strategy at this point and proposes to conceive God's relation to time in this manner:

> that he, as the one who exists temporally from eternity, is at the same time the eternal origin and source of time, and in this sense, without a temporal beginning, he, as the one who exists temporally, is independent of time in his existence: the eternity of God must therefore be able to be determined as a "determination of his freedom" that is beginningless-temporal.[10]

Hence, God needs to be conceived in time and as the generation of time.

In this conception, eternity may no longer be conceived as the everlasting duration of time.[11] Understanding God, such as Pannenberg[12], Menke,[13]

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7 Cf. Keith Ward, "The temporality of God," *IJPR* 50 (2001), 160–5.

8 Cf. ibid., 165.

9 Cf. ibid., 168.

10 Striet, *Offenbares Geheimnis*, 251.

11 Cf. Paul Tillich, *Systematische Theologie I*, 3rd ed. (Stuttgart: Evangelische Verlag-Werk, 1956), 315: "Ewigkeit ist weder Zeitlosigkeit noch Endlosigkeit der Zeit." Cf. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematische Theologie I* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck u. Ruprecht, 1988), 438: "Diese Vorstellung macht jedoch aus Gott ein endliches Wesen, wenn sie bedeutet, daß Gott in jedem Moment seines Lebens ebenso wie wir auf eine von seiner Gegenwart verschiedene Zukunft vorausblickt und die Vergangenheit ihm entsinkt. Von beiden Seiten wäre dann seine Gegenwart begrenzt; er wäre weder der eigenen Zukunft, noch seiner Vergangenheit voll und ganz mächtig."

12 Cf. Pannenberg, *Systematische Theologie I*, 443: "Gott ist ewig, weil er keine Zukunft außer sich hat, sondern die Zukunft seiner selbst und alles von ihm Verschiedenen ist."

13 Cf. Karl-Heinz Menke, "Der Gott, der jetzt schon Zukunft schenkt. Plädoyer für eine christologische Theodizee," in *Mit Gott streiten. Neue Zugänge zum Theodizee-Problem*, ed. Harald Wagner. QD 169 (Freiburg-Basel-Wien: Herder, 1998), 129–30.

and Metz[14], as the future of time, which always opens up new possibilities of freedom for it, is seemingly more appropriate. Metaphysically, it would be evident to speak of a "unity of timelessness and multitemporality of time" in God[15] or, similar to process theology, to conceive a temporal and an atemporal pole in God.[16] At this point, Karl Barth suggested to use the trinitarian figure of thought of the distinguishing in-relation to mediate the poles of timelessness and multitemporality in God: "One can and must speak here, as in the doctrine of the Trinity itself, of a perichoresis, an interbeing and interworking of the three figures of eternity"[17]: pretemporality, supertemporality, and posttemporality. According to Barth, "true eternity includes … the potentiality to time within itself."[18] It is "without being time itself, as the schlechthinniger ground of time at the same time the schlechthinnige readiness for it".[19] God is not timeless but supra-temporal, that is, his eternity positively relates to time, and he accompanies us through time.

Thus, God's eternity not only is the opposite of time but also it embraces and enables it. Alternatively, as Pannenberg puts it:

> The idea of eternity, which is not only opposed to time, but at the same time positively related to it and embraces it in its totality, forms an almost paradigmatic illustration and concretization of the structure of the truly infinite, which is not merely opposed to the finite, but at the same time embraces its opposite. The conception of a timeless eternity only opposed to time; however, corresponds to the badly infinite, which in its opposition to the finite is determined only as different from it and thus proves itself to be finite.[20]

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14 Cf. Johann Baptist Metz and Johann Reikerstorfer, "Theologie als Theodizee – Beobachtungen zu einer aktuellen Diskussion," *ThRev* 95 (1999), 186: "Die biblische Gottesrede ist eine temporale Rede, die Gott nicht als ein Jenseits zur Zeit, sondern als ihr rettendes Ende weiß."

15 Ingolf U. Dalferth, "Gott und Zeit," in *Religion und Gestaltung der Zeit*, ed. Dieter Georgi, Hans-Günter Heimbrock and Michael Moxter (Kampen: Kok Pharos Publ. House, 1994), 30 (my translation).

16 In process theology, the two following poles are distinguished within the reality of God, namely, his abstract being (which is eternal, absolute, independent, and unchanging) and his concrete actuality (which is temporal, relative, dependent, and in constant change). Cf. the reflections of John Polkinghorne, which was inspired at this point by process theology. "The metaphysics of divine action," in *Chaos and complexity. Scientific perspectives on divine action*, ed. Robert J. Russell, Nancey Murphy and Arthur R. Peacocke (Vatican-Notre Dame/ Ind., 1995), 156.

17 Karl Barth, *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik II/1*, vol. 9, *Die Wirklichkeit Gottes* (Zürich: Zollikon, 1987), 721 (my translation).

18 Ibid., 696 (my translation).

19 Ibid. (my translation).

20 Pannenberg, *Systematische Theologie I*, 441 (my translation).

At this point, then, Hegel's determination of the infinite is the godfather of the redefinition of God's relation to time. God and finite time are accordingly dialectically linked.

My point is not to unfold the subtleties of the differences between various conceptions. Evidently, Striet is more influenced by Fichte than by Hegel and, evidently once again, fundamentally different conceptions of freedom follow from this. Nevertheless, all of the abovementioned modern concepts lead one to question the classical notion of God's timelessness. In addition, the reasons for this paradigm shift lie not only in the paradigm shift from classical metaphysics to free will theism but also in the manner of the conception of incarnation and Trinity.[21] Apparently, especially the theological paradigm shift in Christology and the doctrine of the Trinity is controversial even within German-speaking theology.[22] Moreover, the relationship between modern thinking and free will has recently become the cause of fierce intratheological disputes.[23] However, the perception of all debates on divine attributes is clearly deeply dependent on one's position in this debate between classical theism and free will theism. Furthermore, God's relationship to time can be viewed as a *locus classicus* for the shift that has occurred in recent theology.

2. Omniscience and Omnipotence

The central determination of God in free will theism consists of the fact that God as love invites the love of humans only through the means of love.

21 For example, Striet argues that Gott has to be "als zeitlich existierend gedacht werden, weil ansonsten das ursprünglich wechselseitige Sich-Öffnen und Sich-Entschließen der drei Personen als immer schon realisiertes Kommerzium von Freiheiten nicht mehr denkbar wäre" (Striet, *Offenbares Geheimnis*, 229).

22 No temporal succession exists in God, thus, incarnation cannot be conceived in terms of a continuation in the history of freedom of the Logos, and the difference between the inner-Trinitarian Logos and Logos in the man Jesus must be more strongly observed (cf. Hoping, Helmut. "Die Selbstvermittlung der vollkommenen Freiheit Gottes. Kritische Anmerkungen zu Magnus Striets trinitätstheologischem Vorstoß," in *Das Gewaltpotential des Monotheismus und der dreieine Gott*. QD 216 (Freiburg i.Br.-Basel-Wien: Herder, 2005), 170, which refers to the difference between LOGOS ASARKOS and LOGOS ENSARKOS). A similar argumentation can be found in Schärtl's reflections, who presupposes God's timelessness and time withdrawal in denying the possibility of a succession of individual acts in divine action (cf. Thomas Schärtl, *Theo-Grammatik. Zur Logik der Rede vom trinitarischen Gott*. Ratio fidei 18 (Regensburg: Pustet, 2003), 538. Fn. 235.

23 Cf. as an introduction to this debate, Aaron Langenfeld and Klaus von Stosch, *Allumfassend – Vielfalt als Grammatik des Katholischen* (Freiburg-Basel-Wien: Herder, 2022), 53–72.

Accordingly, God's power does not appear as overwhelming omnipotence but as an inviting power of love, which attracts humans for itself in freedom. In the meantime, this thought has become the matrix of German-language theology across schools.[24]

Only recently has this thought also been applied to God's omniscience. Interestingly, at this point, especially the English-speaking philosophy of religion has led to intense debates that can be well connected with the modern thinking on freedom that was previously characterized. They are all directed against the classical conception of God's timelessness as simultaneity to history. Thus, the question emerges: can a being conceived as timeless be omniscient at all? The reason is that a timeless being is seemingly unable to know all these statements that contain an irreducible time element.[25] This objection can be met by the fact that a timeless God can also be granted the knowledge at which point within the conceptually conceived context of history the respective statement is valid.[26] Nevertheless, even if a timeless God knows for each statement *p* at which point in time *t* it is true, God cannot know whether *p* is true right now. As Ebrahim Azadegan reminds us in his contribution in this volume, Kretzmann compares God's knowledge of history with the knowledge of humans of a movie that they made. However, which scene is currently playing in a neighboring cinema is unknown.[27] Admittedly, this comparison is not resounding in as far as God knows at each time *t* which scene is running in each cinema, such that the indexicals could be replaced by objective space and time indications.[28] However, the extent to which such an elimination of indexical statements is permissible without partially losing the meaning of the sentence is debatable.

A second problem pertains to the question of whether or not human freedom of will continues to exist with the assumption of the timelessness of an omniscient God. If God views the entire history from God's eternal timelessness,

24 Cf. Klaus von Stosch, "Allmacht als Liebe denken. Zur Verteidigung einer theologischen Grunderkenntnis neuerer Theologie," in *Eigenschaften Gottes. Ein Gespräch zwischen systematischer Theologie und analytischer Philosophie*, ed. Thomas Marschler and Thomas Schärtl. STEP 6, 251–266. (Münster: Aschendorff, 2016).

25 Cf. Nelson Pike, *God and timelessness* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), 88–89; Anthony Kenny, *The God of the philosophers* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 45.

26 Cf. Boniface Enyeribe Nwigwe, *Temporal logic, omniscience, human freedom. Perspectives in analytical philosophy*. EHS.T 319 (Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang, 1991), 127.

27 Cf. Norman Kretzmann, "Allwissenheit und Unveränderlichkeit," in *Analytische Religionsphilosophie*, ed. Christoph Jäger, 152; with regard to Kretzmann cf. Kenny, *The God of the philosophers*, 40.

28 Cf. Paul Helm, "Timelessness and foreknowledge," *Mind* 84 (1975), 518.

then it is certain in God's perspective at t_1 what will happen at t_2. However, how can a person continue to be free to perform action A at t_2 if whether or not he will perform action A was already established at t_1? Alternatively, expressed with a much-discussed example of a recent debate: Cuthbert buys an iguana at t_1. If God knows this event with infallible knowledge at t_1, then Cuthbert is no longer free at t_2 not to buy the iguana.[29]

In my opinion, the solution of classical theism seemingly misses the crucial point of the problem at this point. The statement that God presently knows how A will decide in the future can be rephrased into the statement that it is presently true that God knows how A will decide in the future. In the second version, care is taken to consider God as beyond time; accordingly, divine knowledge is conceived without a temporal index. Nevertheless, the same problem examined in the example of the iguana purchase exists in both formulations: even if divine knowledge is no longer a foreknowledge, the fact that God has a present knowledge of the future decision of A continues to seemingly contradict the human freedom of will. The reason is that if God's knowledge is presently true due to its simultaneity to every moment of history, then the same freedom-impeding consequences emerge from God's omniscience as from God's foreknowledge.[30] In this respect, unsurprisingly, many theologians and philosophers consider the Boethian-Thomistic understanding of eternity or the speech of God's timelessness and his practical knowledge of the contingent future to be incompatible with the human freedom of will, especially in the context of analytic philosophy.[31]

The cited debate between classical theism and free will theism has, thus far, occurred mainly within Christian-influenced western philosophy. Therefore, it is remarkable that it is a Muslim theologian from Iran, *Ebrahim Azadegan*, who in the first part of our book strengthens the arguments only hinted here and connects them with Qur'anic ideas. In his contribution entitled "On God's Eternal Knowledge and the Problem of the Efficacy of Petitionary Prayers," he argues for an I-Thou relationship of free agents between God and humans and invites us to resist the Greek doctrine of Divine immutability (28–29). He elucidates that the Qur'anic as the Biblical "God is the one who mercifully changes His face toward the people" (26). In his opinion, this change in God is part of a living and personal relationship between God and humans and

29 Cf. William P. Hasker, "The foreknowledge conundrum," *IJPR* 50 (2001), 98.

30 Cf. Armin Kreiner, *Gott im Leid. Zur Stichhaltigkeit der Theodizee-Argumente*. QD 168 (Freiburg-Basel-Wien: Herder, 1997), 292f.

31 Cf. Brian J. Shanley, "Aquinas on God's causal knowledge. A reply to Stump and Kretzmann," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 72 (1998), 457.

seems to be constitutive of the Bible and the Qur'an. For example, the story of Jonah in both Holy Scriptures "demonstrates that God would like to change His decision according to the prayer of the people and expects a prophet to think about God as such" (26). In this regard, the intimacy of the God-human relationship makes the notion necessary that God has not always ordered the world in a certain manner in response to intercessory prayers; instead, God, in fact, allows Godself to be moved by prayer and enters into a reciprocal relationship with human beings.

Thus, Azadegan represents a position close to that of open theism[32], which is disputed among the Muslim voices in this volume. For example, in his contribution, *Rahim Acar* defends the conception of divine omniscience by Ibn Sīnā and clarifies why this conception is compatible with God's knowledge of particulars. Similar to Aquinas, God's creative power, thus, appears as key to his knowledge, which from this context is to be understood as a form of knowledge of one's creation. In summary, Acar presents omniscience at the outset as "modified by relevant divine formal properties, such as simplicity, eternity and necessity" (16).

The Iranian-American philosopher of religion *Muhammad Legenhausen* also defends classical theism in his contribution by understanding God's omniscience as knowledge by presence. God poses no representational or conceptual knowledge for conceptual reasons but knows through presential knowledge that every moment of history is present to him beyond time. This solution, which entirely corresponds to classical theism, is then compatible with a revealing action of God in history, which may occur through angels for example. For Legenhausen, claiming that God has no presential knowledge of indexicals is not allowed. God can include our relative perspective in God's presential knowledge.

In contrast, the Christian philosopher of religion *Brian Leftow* argues that "an atemporal God cannot know what time it is" (47); at this point, God cannot have indexical knowledge. He uses a strong understanding of Einstein's theory of relativity to justify that this incapacity does not mean a lack of power or knowledge. Just as God has no *here* (and this superspaciousness is not a limitation to his perfection), God has no *now*. This statement does not imply a limitation of God's omniscience; instead, at this point, there is objectively no knowledge that God lacks. Thus, Leftow is completely in line with Ibn Sīnā/Avicenna, whom he also explicitly receives and elaborates in his foundations.

32 Cf. John Sanders and Klaus von Stosch, ed., *Divine Action. Challenges for Muslim and Christian Theology*. Beiträge zur Komparativen Theologie 35 (Paderborn: Brill Germany, 2022).

It is all the more revealing that Legenhausen is unable to follow Leftow when he reaches the conclusion that God does not know time. As much as he shares the metaphysical premises that do not lead to the consideration of such indexical statements as knowledge, a characteristic of Islamic thinking becomes visible in his attempt to attribute corresponding knowledge in a mediated manner. Typically, Muslims have inhibitions to form sentences that lead to saying that God cannot do something. Accordingly, the insights of classical theism were anything but uncontroversial in Sunni Islam. In an insightful manner, Legenhausen demonstrates how to address this sensitivity and still render classical theism strong.

Therefore, one can certainly learn from this sensitivity if one wants to discover ways on how to productively take up the new conceptions of omniscience and omnipotence on the Islamic side as well. However, Azadegan is a good example of how the new departures from Christian theology and philosophy of religion can also be received on the Islamic side when they are introduced into conversations with the wording of the Qur'an. At this point, receiving evangelical theologies, such as open theism, on the Islamic side is seemingly easier than those that apply freedom thinking to God with more philosophical foundations such as in process theism or German idealism. However, the main reason may be less of philosophical conception than readiness to test one's thoughts intensively against the Holy Scripture.[33]

The debate on omniscience and omnipotence in this volume mainly concentrates on formal philosophical arguments, which are typically linked with the question of the importance of indexical knowledge. However, the difficulty in conceiving a free will relationship between God and humans from the perspective of classical theism may be an even more important reason for the modern development in Christian theology. Against this development, we witness the debate on the question of theodicy, which is addressed in this book in the debate on the divine attributes of justice and mercy.

33 The dissertation of Nasrin Bani Assadi is an excellent recent example of how building on German free will theism founded in transcendental philosophy and combining it with a close reading of the Qur'an is possible. Cf. Nasrin Bani Assadi, *Freedom Revisited. A Comparative Theological Approach to the Problem of Free Will in Islam* (Paderborn: Brill Germany, 2024).

3. Justice and Mercy

Free will theism insists that evil exists in the world that is neither caused nor willed by God. From this perspective, the fact that humans possess libertarian free will explains why God cannot stop the occurrence of certain forms of horrendous evil – due to God's respect for free will.[34] The Christian theologian *Maureen Junker-Kenny*, who shares some of the main ideas of the German version of free will theism, utilizes Paul Ricœur to argue against any naturalisation of sin, as it can be found in Schleiermacher from her perspective (80). If moral evil is always accountable to humans and if reconciliation is also dependent on the mutual acts of humans, then no divine reconciliation exists between justice and mercy beyond history. God needs and wants to need humans to perform God's justice and mercy, and this performance is deeply dependent on free will relationships.

For this reason, Junker-Kenny, similar to many of her German colleagues, is also at odds with the idea of analytical philosophy as a neutral ground for interreligious encounters. She also recommends free will philosophy as first philosophy (81). However, emphasizing analytical philosophy in this volume does not promote the idea of analytical philosophy as first philosophy. It simply observes that analytical philosophy is received among Muslim philosophers in the Muslim world. Hence, it can be used as a common tool for discussion. As the collected articles illustrate, not all philosophers and theologians in this volume share the basic premises of analytic theology. However, by referring to this language, we identify commonalities and differences among them that are not dependent on religious belonging. Hence, the fact that the authors in this book can controversially discuss on classical theism across religious borders is due to the fact that they have not only the classical common language of metaphysics but also the new language of analytical philosophy of religion as a tool for communication. However, the contribution by Junker-Kenny demonstrates that no single philosophical approach should claim to be the only legitimate articulation of faith and doctrine. Thus, building bridges not only across religious traditions but also across philosophical schools remains an important task.[35]

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34 Cf. Klaus von Stosch, "Stärken und Schwächen des Arguments von der Willensfreiheit im Kontext der Theodizee," in *Logische Brillanz – Ruchlose Denkungsart? Möglichkeiten und Grenzen der Diskussionen des Problems des Übels in der analytischen Religionsphilosophie*, ed. Oliver J. Wiertz. STEP 20 (Münster: Aschendorff, 2021), 146–171.

35 Cf. the attempt to bridge the gap between analytical and continental forms of thinking within theology in Hans-Joachim Höhn et al. (ed.), *Analytische und Kontinentale Theologie im Dialog*. Quaestiones disputatae 314 (Freiburg: Herder, 2021).

The Christian philosopher *Georg Gasser* uses the language of the analytical philosophy of religion to address the problem of evil in combining insights from classical theism with free will theism. On the one hand, he reads the book of Job in line with classical theism and subscribes to an understanding of creative goodness, which is in contrast with moral categories. From this perspective, "God as creator takes delight in nature's overall fecundity, creativity and order, even if suffering is an integral and unavoidable part of it." (91) This perspective can be found in God's speeches in the end of the book: "The aim of these speeches is to widen Job's perspective from places of secure boundaries to places where human culture and an ordered universe is put at risk and the 'primary symbol of the chaotic' is experienced" (96). For Gasser, the speeches "direct his attention away from the question of justice towards the splendour, beauty and wildness of creation" (101). However, the book of Job also witnesses a direct encounter between Job and God. Job sees God, and he is reconciled through the means of a personal relationship. Hence, not only one philosophical interpretation of the book of Job exists; to a degree, classical theism and personal theism need to mutually relativize each other. In this context, I am very much in favor of the Chassidic teacher whom Gasser quotes:

> [T]he Hassidic teacher, Rabbi Bunam, said that "A man should carry two stones in his pocket. On one should be inscribed, 'I am just dust and ashes.' On the other, 'For my sake was the world created.' And he should use each stone as he needs it. (106)

However, a problem exists with such a quietist account, which becomes clear in the contribution of the Muslim theologian *Saida Mirsadri* (113). In her diagnosis, we live so much in a vale of tears such that reconciliations based on classical or free will theism have both to be criticized. She argues for an Islamic theodicy of protest that is less based on the speeches of God in Job or in the Qur'an. However, it is based on the protest articulated by Job and by Muslim poets, as she illustrates very convincingly in her text. Evidently, such a theodicy of protest is also a critique of classical theism to a certain degree, because it presupposes God as a person. Otherwise, the protest cannot be addressed. Moreover, the form of practical theodicy that Mirsadri proposes is very much in line with German theologians who advocate practical theodicy and are always quoted by free will theologians. Thus, to a certain degree, her anti-theodicy can be interpreted as a plea for free will theism, although she would articulate this free will theism more in the lines of process theism than those of German idealism.

In his approach, Gasser attempts to integrate this form of thinking, which is similar to Eleonore Stump's construction of a Franciscan school of thought that

proposes an I-Thou relationship between God and humans and that renounces all attempts of the speculative mediation of the problem of evil. However, this integrative approach is unable to give space to the unconditionality of the protest, which is the very foundation of Mirsadri's protest. At this moment, the source of the notions of theology becomes decisive. If the formal unconditionality of free will is the point used for the intelligibility of the talk of God, then accepting the unconditionality of protest may be easier than in the framework of classical theism. In any case, the extent to which the second part of the book leaves the classical framework of the debate of divine attributes is very telling. It is very much the challenge of God's justice and mercy through horrendous evil, which has shaped modern theology and led to the critique of classical theism. Thus, the notion that a Muslim voice articulates this point in our volume is very exciting.

4. Divine Simplicity and Divine Action

In classical theism, the doctrine of divine simplicity lies in the background of the classical conceptions on the divine attributes. Hence, the arguments by Ibn Sīnā on omniscience, for example, are grounded in his idea of simplicity. As Thomas Schärtl elucidates in his contribution, this doctrine of divine simplicity is the best way to defend God's transcendence and aseity (173). Therefore, Schärtl defends God's simplicity and the rule of non-composition, because doing so also helps to defend God as being uncreated and non-finite: "in the strictest sense; he is his very own source of being and existing" (172). At the same time, Schärtl admits that his strong commitment to Divine simplicity changes his image of God in a manner that seems to be in a certain degree of tension with the Biblical language: "God looks more like a principle of unlimited creativity than an agent who […] shares a history of salvation with us" (184). In the end, Schärtl seemingly thinks that this outcome is necessary if a coherent metaphysical theory is desired. However, this presupposition could be challenged and debated, especially in the framework of free will theism. Especially, the practical grounding of free will theology in a theology of protest is an aspect that should be considered in his account.

In the last part of the book, Reza Akbari comes closest to Schärtl's defense of divine simplicity. Schärtl argues why God cannot have any components. Alternatively, Akbari illustrates how the notion of God as a necessary being can be used to possess a coherent understanding of classical theism. However, he also shares a few of his doubts regarding whether or not the idea of the *principality of existence*, which is an important foundation of the doctrine

of divine simplicity, has sufficient justification in Mullā Ṣadrā's philosophy (220). We cannot discuss these doubts in this book. An evident coherence exists between Legenhausen and Akbari on the Muslim side and between Leftow and Schärtl on the Christian side, if they are considered from the perspective of the debate between classical theism and free will theism. Nevertheless, many puzzling questions remain within the debate of classical theism. Moreover, Schärtl and Akbari articulating weak points in the theories that they are defending is very helpful. Doing so makes perfectly clear that the philosophical debates on divine attributes do not intend to imply that one side is wrong or right. On both sides, however, different theories with their strengths and weaknesses exist. Moreover, interreligious encounters can help to see them better and to work on them.[36]

However, the debate between classical theism and free will theism is not only one between competing philosophical schools or on the ground of metaphysical and logical coherence. As mentioned in the first part of this chapter, the modern shift to free will theism is grounded in the theology of incarnation and the Trinitarian theology. The Christian theologian *Alan J. Torrance* refers to this debate in a very thought-provoking manner. One of the most basic ideas of classical theism in Christianity and Islam is the idea that God cannot have real relations to creation. As creation is dependent on the creator, the creator is self-sufficient, while God's aseity makes God independent from creation. For this reason, Aquinas argues "that there neither is nor can be any real relation between God and the world" (189) However, "the Hebrew bible portrays a God that is really and intimately related to the universe." (194) Against this background, Torrance – pace Aquinas – argues that "*by the free grace of God*, contingent creatures are given to participate in relation to God, their Creator, in one 'order of being'" (203). Through the doctrine of incarnation, the reality of God's relation to humankind becomes a form of axiomatic starting point for Christian thinking (204). At the same time, Torrance attempts to do justice to the tradition of classical theism and to be fidele to the Christian faith. This forces him to revise classical theism in a manner that is in line with relational theism.

The Muslim philosopher *Mehmet Sait Reçber* sees relational theism or relational ontology in the background of al-Ghazālī's critique of classical theism in the tradition of Ibn Sīnā (153). However, he does not use theological sources for his reconstruction of al-Ghazālī's critique. For him, al-Ghazālī argues philosophically, and he uses the same philosophical framework from

36 Brian Leftow articulated this attitude most convincingly in his talks and discussions at the first summer school, which is documented in this volume.

Greek philosophy as did Ibn Sīnā to reach completely opposite conclusions (137). Occasionally, Torrance also demonstrates that his critique of classical theism can be grounded philosophically. In Reçber, one can find a completely philosophical critique of classical theism that leads to the same conclusions as those of Torrance – without the doctrine of incarnation and the doctrine of trinity. Reçber clarifies that the truths of revelation also contradict classical theism. However, he does not use this statement in his argumentation, which relies on distinctions between God's self-knowledge and God's knowledge of other things (146) or on the fact that a few of the divine attributes are, indeed, different (144). He also wonders how a necessary being without quiddity can be intelligible (151). Once again, we cannot evaluate these arguments here. Evidently, various ways can be used to defend classical theism against such philosophical arguments, which theologians and philosophers from both religions do such as Acar, Akbari, Legenhausen, Schärtl, and Leftow in this volume. However, these counter-arguments can also be addressed, and following thinkers such as Azadegan, Mirsadri, Reçber, and Torrance, in their ways of opening the way for other theological conceptions is fascinating. These conceptions are diverse and do not all accept the ideas of free will theism, as articulated in the first part of this chapter. Perhaps, relational theism is a more integrative concept than free will theism.

As demonstrated by these concluding remarks, the debate on the divine attributes not only crosses religious boundaries but may also lead to mutual learning. The conversation documented in this volume suggests that engaging concrete thinkers and their theologies is most fruitful instead of assuming monolithic positions of either religions or philosophical schools. Christians and Muslims can constructively argue about how to spell out the doctrine of the divine attributes and, by doing so, occasionally reach similar solutions. In terms of content, this suggests that no exclusively Christian understanding exists as opposed to an exclusively Muslim one of the divine attributes. It is rather the philosophical commitment that plays a decisive role in the formation of the understanding of the divine.

Regarding the language game used to articulate these understandings, one aspect becomes clear through this volume: this discourse on the most accurate philosophical framework for the relationship between God and humans can be undertaken interreligiously. Analytical philosophy can be *one* potential and useful style of engaging in the debate that facilitates understanding across thinkers of different religious traditions. As the papers of Junker-Kenny and Mirsadri demonstrated, the same can be said for approaches that exceed analytical style and include an explicit critique thereof or make use of poetic

language. This demonstrates that the current discussions on the appropriateness of philosophical frameworks are equally not limited to one religious tradition.

The conversation initiated by this volume suggests a broadening of the debate with the objective of being enriched by the strengths of various philosophical language games. Moreover, presenting comparative theologians from both sides who endeavor to learn from one another would be most helpful in increasing the coherence of concepts on all sides within the philosophical debate. The realization through this volume that we can help one another in this respect across the borders of religions is encouraging.

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This volume engages traditional and contemporary approaches to the divine attributes in Christian-Muslim dialogue. A particular focus lies on the attributes of omnipotence and omniscience, justice and mercy, as well as simplicity and divine action. Engaging these attributes comparatively, two questions are posed: How can these attributes be conceived today, and to what extent is a mutual learning across religious traditions possible? Thereby, a special focus is placed on the role of analytic philosophy. How do the philosopical 'language games□ used contribute to communicability across religions?

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