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## DIVINE SIMPLICITY

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

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

medievals thought they had such good reason.

A theology structured by moving from God's existence immediately to God's simplicity and then on to God's other attributes seems part of a quaint and bygone era for anyone reared on twentieth century theology. Contemporary theologians seldom speak of God's simplicity. And when they do, they rarely (if ever) give it a significant structural role in their doctrine of God—let alone giving it the preeminent role that it enjoyed in the articulated doctrine of God developed by the medieval school theologians.

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

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

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

that

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

and that

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

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

In the Thomistic texts there is no sign—none of which I am aware, anyway—that Aquinas found anything ontologically problematic in these claims. He marshals arguments for them. He does not toss them out as self-evident. But he gives no sign of bafflement over how it can be that something would be identical with its essence, nor over

how it can be that that entity's existence would be identical with its essence, nor over how it can be that all its properties are identical with its essence (and hence, that its essence itself has no complexity).

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

(4) God is omniscient

and that

(5) God is omnibenevolent.

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

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

(6) God has free choice

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

(7) God is triune.

To the best of my knowledge it was the same for all other medieval

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

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

Admittedly there are some who do not confess to seeing any difficulty. Stump & Kretzmann in their article "Absolute Simplicity"<sup>1</sup> concentrate on the advantages and disadvantages of accepting the doctrine of divine simplicity. They think the most important reason for hesitating to accept it is the apparent incompatibility of the doctrine with God's free choice. They then argue that Aquinas had a way of harmonizing God's simplicity with whatever someone who accepts the biblical tradition would want to say about God's choice. As they see it, this leaves the theologian in the situation where there are no significant reasons for not accepting the doctrine, whereas there are significant theoretical advantages in accepting it.

Admittedly this is a considerably less ringing endorsement of the doctrine than the medievals customarily gave it. Nonetheless, in their discussion I find no sign that Stump & Kretzmann find the theistic identity claims problematic. For them the only question is whether

those claims, and the other claims making up the doctrine of simplicity, should be accepted.

Why would a medieval thinker find the theistic identity claims ontologically non-problematic, whereas so many of us find them inscrutable or incoherent? That is the question whose answer I want to pursue. The answer I shall offer is that we have here a clash between two fundamentally different ontological styles; if we are to understand and engage the medievals on this matter, we shall have to enter imaginatively into their ontological style and then debate, among other things, the tenability of these two different styles. We need, if you will, a paradigm shift. Meta-ontology is what is needed. Possibly the reason Stump & Kretzmann find nothing problematic in the doctrine is that they, being medieval scholars, themselves do their thinking in terms of this alternative ontological style.

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

But first, what exactly are the difficulties that we have with the identity claims? Alvin Plantinga has canvassed them lucidly in his book *Does God have a Nature?*<sup>2</sup> A substance's essence, says Plantinga, will be a certain one of its properties—that conjunctive property which includes as conjuncts those properties which the substance has in all possible worlds in which it exists. So if God is identical with God's essence, then God is identical with a property. But God, being a person, is not a property.

That is the most fundamental difficulty. But Plantinga also finds difficulties in roughly the region where Aquinas and most medievals found them. Let us suppose that God has the attributes of omniscience and omnibenevolence. Now the theistic identity claims entail that all God's attributes are identical with God, and hence with each other. But surely omniscience and omnibenevolence are not the identical property; and if either were identical with God, then, once again, God would be a property, which God is not (cf. p. 47).

These moves are so simple, swift, and decisive, that Plantinga

acknowledges that what he has refuted must not be what the medievals meant. So he tries again. The medievals speak of God's goodness, God's existence, God's power, God's wisdom, etc. Maybe in speaking thus they did not mean to refer to *properties*. Maybe with the expression "God's goodness" they did not intend to refer to that property of goodness which God has, maybe with the expression "God's existence" they did not intend to refer to that property of existence which God has, etc. Maybe they intended to pick out entities of some other ontological category. Perhaps, says Plantinga, they intended to pick out states of affairs, relationships. Perhaps with the locution "God's wisdom" they intended to pick out the state of affairs of God's being wise; with the locution "God's goodness," the state of affairs of God's being good; etc.

One challenge facing us immediately, in working out this suggestion, is to find a criterion of identity/diversity for *states of affairs* which is both plausible in its own right and has the consequence that God's wisdom is identical with God's goodness, with God's existence, etc. Plantinga formulates a criterion, modifies it in the light of an objection, and raises an objection to the modification. Then he drops the matter. For even if we find a satisfactory criterion, we would be left with this deep difficulty: on this account, God is identical with a certain state of affairs. But, says Plantinga, "If God is a state of affairs, then he is a mere abstract object and not a person at all; he is then without knowledge or love or the power to act. But this is clearly inconsistent with the claims of Christian theism at the most basic level (52-53).

At the point where Plantinga drops the matter, William Mann picks it up in his paper titled "Divine Simplicity."<sup>3</sup> Perhaps, says Mann, we should look once again at what the medievals had in mind by their locutions "God's existence," "God's wisdom," "God's goodness," etc. Perhaps it was not abstract objects like states of affairs that they had in mind. Perhaps they had in mind what may be called *property instances*. (Property instances are what I called *cases* in my *On Universals*; they are what D.C. Williams called *abstract particulars*, and *tropes*. They are Aristotle's *entities present in something*. And at least some of them are what the medievals called *qualia*.) Suppose that Socrates had the property of wisdom. Then we can say that whereas Socrates was an *exemplification* of wisdom, Socrates' wisdom was an *instance* of it. And as to the relation of the person Socrates to the property instance, Socrates' wisdom, perhaps

Aristotle's phrase is as good as any: Socrates' wisdom is *present in* Socrates. As his reason for thinking that property instances are not states of affairs Mann says this: "It is claimed by the friends of states of affairs that all states of affairs *exist*, but only some of them *obtain* or are actual. This feature does not hold for property instances. In order for a property instance to exist, it must be actual: some existing thing must either exemplify it or be it" (p. 457).

Two fundamental challenges face this proposal. By now we can guess what they are. We need a criterion of identity/diversity for property instances which is both plausible in its own right and whose consequences are consistent with the theistic identity claims. And we must be assured that God's being a property instance is not incompatible with God's having the properties that we want to predicate of God. Mann faces up to both these challenges; but let me, on this occasion, rush past what he says about the identity and diversity of property instances to get to what he says on the issue of whether God's being a property instance would be compatible with our convictions as to what God is like. Mann formulates the challenge to his view thus: "this conclusion offends against deeply entrenched theistic belief that God is knowing, loving, and active. In brief, God is a person; no property instance is a *person*; therefore God is not a property instance. Given the theist's beliefs about the personhood of God, the doctrine of divine simplicity must be rejected" (p. 465).

Mann's way of answering this objection is to argue that one of the principles assumed in the objection, viz., that no property instance is a person, is false. Take anything whatsoever, says Mann, and consider all its properties. From these, single out that conjunctive property which includes as its conjuncts all the properties of the thing. Call that the *rich property* of the thing. The thing itself, says Mann, is "an instantiation of the appropriate rich property." To generalize: "For anything whatsoever, there is an appropriate rich property. Therefore, everything is a property instance of some rich property or other. Therefore, every person is a property instance....It is certainly true that *most* property instances are not persons, yet every person is a property instance" (p. 467).

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

Now a person certainly *exemplifies* its rich property. But what reason is there to think that the person also *instantiates* that property—that in this case the instantiation is the exemplification? What reason is there to think that Socrates' instantiation of his rich property just is Socrates? I see no reason at all to think this; nor does Mann offer any reason. I surmise that Mann, at this crucial point in his argument, momentarily lost sight of the distinction between an exemplification of a property and an instance of a property. Mann does not think that *Socrates' wisdom* is identical with Socrates, whereas he does think that the one and only instance of Socrates' rich property is identical with him. Presumably what was going through Mann's mind was the thought that Socrates' wisdom was not rich and complex enough to be Socrates. So he proposed taking a property instance which was as rich as necessary. But taking a more complex property instance does nothing to collapse this trio of ontological relationships into a solo: Socrates *exemplifies* his properties, his property instances *instantiate* those properties, and his property instances are *present in* him.

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

In response to a criticism of his theory lodged by Thomas Morris, Mann, in a later article, has made some revisions and introduced some additions.<sup>4</sup> Morris' criticism was this: if God is an instance of a property, then "there is at least one property existing distinct from God as an abstract object on which God is, in some sense, dependent for what he is—an instance of that property." (302) But this violates the conviction that God exists *a se*. Mann's response, in the first place, is to combine a property account of divine simplicity with a property-instance account by proposing that God's property be taken as

identical with God's instance of that property—that omniscience be taken as identical with God's omniscience, omnipotence as identical with God's omnipotence, etc.

What strikes one about this proposal, as Mann presents it, is its ad hoc character. One looks for a general discussion of properties and property instances in which it is shown that certain properties are self-instantiating (n.b., not self-exemplifying but *self-instantiating*), in which the general conditions under which that is the case are laid out, and in which it is shown that these conditions are satisfied in the case of omniscience, omnipotence, omnibenevolence, and the rest of God's properties. But Mann offers no such general ontological discussion. Instead he concerns himself entirely with a certain rather obvious objection to this theory.

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

I myself fail to see, however, that this proposal secures Mann's goal. I presume that by the causal powers of objects, Mann means those capacities which objects have for causing one and another event. Water, for example, has the causal power of dissolving sugar. Mann himself speaks of causal powers as that in *virtue of which*. But if this is indeed what causal powers are, they seem to me clearly *abstract* entities. They are not concrete causal agents but abstract powers of agents. On the other hand, it is possible that I don't at all understand what Mann has in mind by "causal powers." For he speaks of *being triangular* as the same causal power of objects as *being trilateral*. I myself have considerable doubt as to whether these properties are correctly thought of as causal powers; but if one does so think of them, then it seems to me that they must be thought of as distinct causal powers. It is in virtue of the triangularity of this object, not its trilaterality, that I have these three bloody points in my hand. So also, though I find it difficult to think of omniscience as a causal

power, it appears to me that if it is a causal power, it is a different causal power from omnibenevolence—whereas of course Mann, because of the pressures of the simplicity doctrine, holds that they are the same. Perhaps, then, I do not understand what Mann has in mind by causal powers. For as I think of causal powers, the theory that properties are causal powers does not have the consequence that properties are in general concrete.

Of course it would be open to Mann to argue that in the case of God, the causal powers of the agent just *are* the causal agent. That is to say, he could hold that though causal powers are in general abstract entities, that is not true of all of them. At least one causal power just is a concrete causal agent, that one being God. And perhaps this is Mann's actual line of thought. For though he uses words which suggest that he wishes to question Plantinga's assumption that properties, in general, are abstract objects, he also says the following, which appears to go in the other direction which I have suggested: "if properties are causal powers and if God is a property, then he is a causal power. Moreover, if the property that God is is variously identified as omniscience, omnipotence, moral perfection, and the like, then the property *cum* causal power that God *is* looks more and more analogous to the causal powers that ordinary persons *have*" (352). About this, I think we must simply say that the thought is too undeveloped for us to know whether Mann's theory that properties are causal powers meets Plantinga's objection to the identification of God with any property, or whether it merely presents the proposal to which Plantinga made his objection under a new guise. I might add that Mann himself stresses the inchoate character of his theory.

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

*constituent ontology*. We typically work within a style that might be called *relation ontology*. We should expect that claims which are baffling within the one style will sometimes seem straightforward within the other. The theistic identity claims are a paradigm example of this.

I propose now to try to enter into that alternative way of thinking far enough to explain how a medieval, thinking within the style of constituent ontology, would have understood those theistic identity claims. One criterion of success in this endeavor will be that those claims cease to be baffling. Bafflement is to enter at the next point, where we try to show that divine simplicity is compatible, say, with God having free choice, and where we try to devise a theory of predication—note, not a theory of property-identity but a theory of predication—which, without compromising God’s simplicity, accounts for the multiplicity of distinct predications that Jews, Christians, and Muslims want to make about God.

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

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

It has become habitual for us twentieth century philosophers, when thinking of essences, to think of things as *having* essences, and to think of these essences as certain properties or sets of properties. An essence is thus for us an abstract entity. For a medieval, I suggest, an essence or nature was just as concrete as that of which it is the nature. That is because everything, including every concrete thing,

is a something-as-such. A medieval would have found the suggestion that that is not the case baffling—though, of course, plenty of later thinkers have made this suggestion. Naturally the medieval will speak of something as *having* a certain nature. But the *having* here is to be understood as *having as one of its constituents*. Very much of the difference between medieval and contemporary ontology hangs on these two different construals of “having.” Whereas for the medievals, *having an essence* was, having an essence as one of its constituents, for us, *having an essence* is, having an essence as one of its properties: exemplifying it.

So far then, no problem. But now we come across a perplexity which generated enormous controversy among the medievals. Socrates appears to have the same nature as Plato—appears to have the same what-it-is-as-such, viz., human nature. Yet obviously Socrates is not identical with Plato. How are we to explain this?

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

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

of if we thought about Plato's nature along the same lines, or is it identical with it?

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

I have already suggested that what enters into the sorts of composites which you and I are is more than a certain nature and a certain bit of matter. We also possess various attributes which, though they are not involved in what we are as such, nonetheless characterize us. Some of these are essential to us; some, non-essential. We should not think of these attributes themselves as constituents of those composites which we are. But for each of these properties not belonging to a thing's nature, be they essential or non-essential, there will be a property instance which is present in that thing. Let us call these the *accidents* of the thing. The composite that I am will include my accidents. To say it once again: I am an articulated composite, with different sorts of constituents playing different roles in the composite, explaining different facts about me.

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

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

God is the same as His essence or nature. To understand this, it must be noted that in things composed of matter and form, the

nature or essence must differ from the *suppositum*, because the essence or nature connotes only what is included in the definition of the species; as, humanity connotes all that is included in the definition of man, for it is by this that man is man, and it is this that humanity signifies, that, namely, whereby man is man. Now individual matter, with all the individualizing accidents, is not included in the definition of the species. For this particular flesh, these bones, this blackness or whiteness, etc., are not included in the definition of a man. Therefore this flesh, these bones, and the accidental qualities distinguishing this particular matter, are not included in [humanity. Nevertheless they are included in] the thing which is a man. Hence the thing which is a man has something more in it than has humanity. Consequently humanity and a man are not wholly identical; but humanity is taken to mean the formal part of a man, because the principles whereby a thing is defined are regarded as the formal constituent in regard to the individualizing matter. On the other hand, in things not composed of matter and form, in which individualization is not due to individual matter—that is to say, to *this* matter—the very forms being individualized of themselves,—it is necessary the forms themselves should be subsisting *supposita*. Therefore *suppositum* and nature in them are identified. Since God is not composed of matter and form, He must be His own Godhead, His own Life, and whatever else is thus predicated of Him.<sup>5</sup>

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

We are ready to look at the second of the three theistic identity claims. The first, that God is not distinct from God's essence, has proved to be non-problematic when considered within the medieval frame of thought; perplexities arise instead for certain of those entities not identical with their essences. But what about the claim that God's

existence is not distinct from God's essence. Isn't God's existence an accident, or an accident-like entity? If so, how can it possibly be identical with God's nature?

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

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

So what about entities which exist necessarily? Is their existence distinct from or identical with their essence? Perhaps for some it is distinct. For it may be that for certain necessarily existing entities, there is something external to the thing which accounts for why it exists. Aquinas was of the conviction that God accounts for the existence not only of contingently existing entities but of all necessarily existing entities distinct from God. To account for why they exist, we have to appeal to God—whereas appealing to them does nothing whatever to account for why God exists. Articulating the concept of account/explanation/cause which is operative here is a challenging intellectual task.<sup>6</sup> But suppose it can be done. Then

it seems right to say that whether or not some entity X exists necessarily, if to account for its existence one has to refer to something other than its own nature, its existence is distinct from its nature—does not belong to what it is as such. Aquinas says that “that thing, whose existence differs from its essence, must have its existence caused by another” (S.Th.I, Q.3), art. 4 resp.). And clearly he intends to affirm the converse as well. It was the uniform conviction of the medievals that there is nothing other than God’s nature which accounts for why God exists. Hence God’s existence is not distinct from God’s essence—as also, for example, Bucephalus’ equinity is not distinct from Bucephalus’ essence.

Aquinas was of the view that, for every non-divine nature, what belongs to the nature is not existence but *potentiality for existing*. What belong to what I am as such is not existence but being capable of existing. My existence is the realization, the actualization, of this potential. Thus for non-divine entities, their essence and their existence stand in a potentiality/actualization relation to each other. “Existence must be compared to essence, if the latter is a distinct reality,” says Aquinas, “as actuality to potentiality” (ibid.). What makes God different from everything else is that it is not *potentiality for existing* which belongs to what God is as such, but *existing*.

There seems, then, to be nothing ontologically problematic in the second of the theistic identity claims, the claim that God’s existence is not distinct from God’s essence, when that claim is considered within the framework of the constituent ontology characteristic of the medievals. The principal problem in this area will be to explain how, for an entity which exists necessarily, there can yet be something which accounts for its existence.

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

distinction. For take the two properties of having believed that God is simple, and having been mentioned by me. Aquinas possesses both of these properties. Clearly the former is intrinsic to him, the latter, extrinsic. Yet both are contingent properties of him.

Now it seems plausible to think that all the intrinsic properties of the number 9 are essential to it. It even seems plausible to think that they all belong to what the number 9 is as such, i.e., to the nature of 9. So I think there is also nothing especially problematic in the third identity claim, that none of God's properties is distinct from God's nature. Admittedly Aquinas would not have made the point in the way I just made it, in terms of a distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic properties of a thing. He would have denied that what I have called extrinsic properties are truly properties. Whatever I do when I assertively utter of something, "was referred to by me," Aquinas would not have described that as predicating a property of it. If he *had* conceded that they are extrinsic properties, he would have faced the question: in what are their property instances present? He would have been extremely reluctant to view those as constituents of that entity which purportedly possesses the extrinsic properties. (Furthermore, he would probably have thought it misleading to speak of anything other than the nature of the thing as *intrinsic* to it.)

The task I set myself in this article has been completed. I wanted to show that the three theistic identity claims, which to many of us who do ontology in the twentieth century seem so baffling, are, when approached within the ontological framework of the medievals, not at all baffling. The root of the difference, I have suggested, is that whereas the medievals worked within the style of constituent ontology, we typically work within the style of relation ontology and as part of this difference we work with a different view of essence. Of course not every constituent ontology will render the theistic identity claims non-problematic. The great exception to my generalization about the style of twentieth century ontology is Gustav Bergmann. Bergmann worked relentlessly in the style of constituent ontology.<sup>7</sup> His way of developing constituent ontology was such, however, that he would probably find the theistic identity claims as baffling as do the rest of us. So my point has not been that working in the style of constituent ontology automatically makes the theistic identity claims non-problematic, but rather that working in the style of relation ontology automatically makes them problematic.

According to the dominant style of twentieth century ontology,

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

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

Shortly after noticing the difference of ontological style between us and the medievals, however, the thought comes to mind that the twentieth century ontologist actually has no difficulty at all with the doctrine of divine simplicity. True, he finds the three theistic identity claims to be baffling, if not incoherent. But these three claims emerged from the attempt of the medieval philosophers to articulate the doctrine of divine simplicity. They are not to be identified with the doctrine itself. The relation ontologist doesn't think of things as composites. In a way, then, he thinks of everything as simple. If one goes about the ontological enterprise trying to discern the constituents that each sort of thing must be acknowledged as having, then the claim that there is something with no constituents comes as an extraordinary limiting case to one's whole style of thinking. One can see why a theologian who is a constituent ontologist would feel compelled to lead off with this claim in his reflections on the

nature of God. But if one's fundamental ontological model is that of entities standing in relation rather than of entities composed of constituents—well then, as it were, everything is simple, nothing is a composite. The doctrine of divine simplicity fits even more smoothly into the contemporary style of ontology than into the medieval. In the medieval style, simplicity is a limiting case—albeit, an intelligible one. In the contemporary style, simplicity is the general case.

Unfortunately, victory in the debate is not to be won so easily. For though the medievals deduced a great many of God's attributes from God's simplicity, they deduced that in turn from something else even more fundamental; namely, from God's self-sufficiency and sovereignty. As I read the history of medieval philosophy and theology, the medievals were ineluctably gripped by the Plotinian vision of reality as requiring something which is the unconditioned condition of everything not identical with itself; this they identified with God. Says Plotinus: "If there were nothing outside all alliance and compromise, nothing authentically one, there would be no Source. Untouched by multiplicity, it will be wholly self-sufficing, an absolute First, whereas any not-first demands its earlier, and any non-simplex needs the simplicities within itself as the very foundations of its composite existence" (Fifth Ennead IV,1). Anyone who is gripped by these convictions and arguments would see our twentieth century claim, that God has an essence—i.e., that God stands in the relation of exemplification to an essence—as an obvious violation of God's self-sufficiency. Thus in my judgment Plantinga is absolutely right in concluding that the fundamental issue facing us in our reflections—us, who think in the style of relation ontology—is whether God has a nature. And he is quite right in suggesting that in reflecting on this we will find ourselves dealing with a fundamental conflict of intuitions.

I hope I have shown, however, that that was *not* the fundamental perplexity facing the medievals. For them, as I have already suggested, the fundamental perplexities were two fold. The doctrine that God has no properties distinct from God's essence seems, on the face of it, incompatible with some of the things that Christians hold about God, e.g., that God has free choice. And secondly, the medievals found it difficult to devise a theory of predication which would adequately account for the multiplicity of distinct things that we find ourselves required to affirm of this simple being which is God. We say of God that God is wise, and that God is good, and that God is

powerful. In speaking thus, we are not simply repeating ourselves. The general strategy of the medievals was clear: to interpret these different predications as expressing different “cognitive fixes” on God. What they could not say, however, was that the difference between these different cognitive fixes on God is grounded in some difference within God’s essence or God’s accidents; for that, of course, would introduce composition. But neither were they willing to give up the conviction that these predicates do indeed express some sort of cognitive fix on God. Their recourse was to say that our predications concerning God express either determinate negations concerning God, or refer to some relation of God to entities other than God. But working this out in detail proved difficult, and proposed solutions to the difficulties, almost always controversial.

Plotinus and Kant, wrestling with the same issues, gave up on the attempt to offer a cognitive construal of predications concerning God. We are, they said, to select and choose among ways of thinking and speaking of God by reference to some non-cognitive purpose. For Kant, the relevant purpose was the moral Life: it is conducive to the moral life to think of the transcendent as if it were a God related to us as a father. For Plotinus, the relevant purpose was the mystical vision: to think of the One as existing, as one, etc., is more conducive to the mystical vision than to think of it as not thus:

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

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

“Not to be told; not to be written”: in our writing and telling we are but urging towards it: out of discussion we call to vision: to those desiring to see, we point the path; our teaching is of the road and the travelling; the seeing must be the very act of one that has made this choice (Sixth Ennead IX, 3-4).

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

It would require another paper to canvas and appraise the strategies that the medievals adopted in their struggle to explain how it can be that we can make a multiplicity of distinct true predications concerning the simple God. But I suggest that if we grant them their ontological style, the *constituent* style, then the place to engage them is not on the theistic identity claims as such. Those prove to be non-problematic. The place to engage them, in the first place, is on the tenability in general of constituent ontology. The place to engage them, in the second place, is on the general question of whether it is possible, while holding that God is simple, to develop a theory of predication which adequately accounts for the multiplicity of distinct things Christians wish to say about God. And the place to engage them, thirdly, is in their attempt to show that the doctrine of simplicity does not contradict other fundamental doctrines. As part of this third engagement, we shall want to look closely at their attempt to find something in the simple God and its relationships to other things which can be called knowledge, something else to be called love, something else to be called creating, something else to be called revealing, something else to be called redeeming, etc. We shall want to ask whether what they identify as knowledge, love, creation, revelation, redemption, etc., in the simple self-sufficient God, can be viewed as what the theist is speaking of when she says that God knows and loves what God has created, that God reveals to human beings God's will, and that God is working for the redemption of the cosmos. I have my doubts. But that, too, is another tale.<sup>8\*</sup>

## Notes

1. In *Faith and Philosophy*, Vol. 2, No. 4, October 1985, 353-382.
2. Alvin Plantinga, *Does God have a Nature?* (Milwaukee, Marquette University Press; 1980).
3. William Mann, "Divine Simplicity" in *Religious Studies* 18 (1982), 451-471.
4. Morris' discussion is in "On God and Mann," *Religious Studies* 21 (1985), pp. 299-318. Mann's response is in "Simplicity and Properties," *Religious Studies* 22 (1986), pp. 343-353.
5. My colleague, Jan Aertsen, called my attention to the fact that there are some words in Thomas' Latin text for which the equivalents are missing in the Dominican translation which I have been using. I have inserted them in brackets. With the passage quoted, compare *Summa contra gentiles*, Book One, chapter 21, section 2: "There must be some composition in every being that is not its essence or quiddity. Since, indeed, each thing possesses its own essence, if there were nothing in

a thing outside its essence all that the thing is would be its essence, which would mean that the thing is its essence. But, if some thing were not its essence, there should be something in it outside its essence. Thus, there must be composition in it. Hence it is that the essence in composite things is signified as a part, for example, humanity in man. Now, it has been shown that there is no composition in God. God is, therefore, His essence.”

6. Cf. Chris Menzel, “Theism, Platonism, and the Metaphysics of Mathematics” in *Faith and Philosophy* Vol. 4, No. 4 (Oct. 1987), pp. 365-382.
  7. See my “Bergmann’s Constituent Ontology” in *Nous*, May 1970.
  8. I discussed some of the issues in my “Suffering Love” in Thomas V. Morris (ed.) *Philosophy and the Christian Faith* (Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press; 1988).
- \* I wish to thank Jan Aertsen for his very helpful comments on an early draft of this paper.