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God, Predicates, and Aseity:

Three Approaches to the Doctrine of God

Knut Edvard Haugland Moe

VID vitenskapelige høgskole

Stavanger

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Sammendrag/abstract

Læren om guddommelig aseitet handler om at Gud ikke er avhengig av noe utenfor seg selv. I denne oppgaven presenterer jeg tre tilnærminger til gudsforståelse: apofatisme, thomisme og swinburniansk teisme. Apofatisk teologi tar utgangspunkt i at Gud er utenfor menneskets fatteevne. Thomismen forstår Gud som ren væren, uten skille mellom eksistens og essens. Den swinburnianske tilnærmingen har kritisert Thomismen for å redusere Gud til en egenskap og at dette derfor uforenlig med guddommelig frihet og en ekte relasjon til skaperverket. Dette fører til en forståelse der Gud er et åndelig vesen som eksisterer av nødvendighet, men som besitter egenskaper som ikke er identisk med dets eksistens, som dermed problematiserer aseitet. Denne oppgaven argumenterer for at en apofatisk gudsforståelse kan unngå problemene som pekes på ved Thomismen og samtidig ivareta aseitet.

The doctrine of divine aseity is about God not being dependent on anything non-God. This thesis presents three approaches to the doctrine of God: apophaticism, Thomism and Swinburnian theism. Apophatic theology conceives of God as ineffable and thus beyond human comprehension. Thomism conceives of God as existence itself, in whom existence is identical with essence. The Swinburnian approach to theism has criticized the Thomistic doctrine of God for rendering God a property which is incompatible with divine freedom and thus a real relationship to creation. This leads to the conception of God as a necessarily existing spirit, consisting of properties that are distinguishable from the divine essence, causing problems for divine aseity. This thesis argues that by embracing an apophatic doctrine of God as ineffable, one can avoid the criticism of the Thomistic conception of God while maintaining divine aseity.

Contents

1   Introduction

Christian theology claims that God is the creator and sustainer of the world and the one to whom humans are reconciled through Christ. Whereas Christ himself is certainly fundamental to Christian theology, one of the central claims about Christ is that he is divine. In other words, the concept of divinity, the idea of God, is at the very core of Christian theology. While Christian doctrine is a multifaceted web of interconnected ideas and concepts, central to all of them is the concept of God. God is generally conceived not as someone one can touch or see, and even though he became incarnate in the God-man,[1] he has now ascended to heaven. Fundamental to the Christian worldview is the idea that God as creator and he is therefore not himself created. If this is true of historic Christian theology, it thus rejects any form of monism which claims that everything that exists is basically a unified whole. According to Christian theology, in attempting to grasp with the nature of reality one is thus generally dealing with two entities: the Creator and everything created. If these are only two entities, then it follows that everything that is not God must be part of creation. Furthermore, God must be wholly independent of creation if he is to be the sole origin of it. In other words, God is *a se*. One might then ask what God is like. Traditionally, God has been described with a set of properties such as omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence, and so on, but also as loving, gracious, and good. But predicates like loving, gracious, and good are concepts one may apply to creatures as well as God. It seems difficult to imagine that God possesses these attributes in the same way that creatures do, as it raises the question of how God is related to such properties or forms. Furthermore, is God to be understood as composite of such properties or can God be conceived as a simple being without metaphysical distinctions?

1.1   The topic

This raises the question of the nature of God, and how words are predicated of him, which is the topic of study for this thesis. I am going to present three different approaches to this question and discuss which (if any) best makes sense of the understanding of God. From what I have said so far, a central question for Christian theology is the understanding of divine aseity and its implications for the understanding of how to predicate of God.

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[1] I occasionally refer to God with the masculine pronoun "he". This is not to imply that God in any way is a gendered being. I am merely following the biblical tradition, which generally use masculine pronouns to refer to God.

The first approach to the doctrine of God that I will discuss is an apophatic understanding as found in thinkers like Dionysius the Areopagite and Maximus the Confessor. Then I will discuss the Thomistic understanding of God, as well as a modern approach of conceiving of God as an unembodied spirit that I will refer to as Swinburnian theism. The latter is associated with modern analytic philosophers like Richard Swinburne and Alvin Plantinga. This is by no means an exhaustive list of different approaches to the doctrine of God. In modern times there have been new models such as process theology and open theism that conceive of God as immanent in creation in a different way than the approaches mentioned above. What the approaches that will be discussed in this thesis have in common is that they wish to maintain a traditional conception of God as omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient, *a se* and so on.

An apophatic or negative approach to theology starts with the basic distinction between the Creator and creation.[2] Since God is completely self-sufficient and *a se*, he is entirely distinct from creation. According to thus approach, human knowledge and language are essentially bound to what is finite and created, and therefore is not suitable for describing the infinite source of all things, which God is thought to be.[3] The consequence of which is that for apophatic theology, God is beyond being and thus unintelligible. This leads to the concept of the *via negativa* according to which all likeness to created things must be denied of God leading to the ultimate understanding of God as ineffable. This might seem strange since Christian theology claims to know quite a lot about God. He is said to be holy, good, loving, even having a son. These are some of the issues that will need to be resolved in the following chapters.

The next approach is the Thomistic understanding that is associated with Thomas Aquinas. Whereas the apophatic approach has clear ties to Plato and Plotinus, the Thomistic approach is usually associated with Aristotle. For Thomas, God is not conceived primarily as beyond being, but rather as existence itself. Creation is dependent on God for its existence, whereas God is existence itself, and thus wholly *a se*. Since both creation and God possess existence there is thus an analogical relation between God and creation making it possible to predicate about God analogically. For Thomas, all created things are composites of essence

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[2] Knut Alfsvåg, *What no Mind has Conceived: On the Significance of Christological Apophaticism*. Studies in Philosophical Theology 45. (Leuven: Peeters, 2010),

[3] Eric Perl, *Thinking Being: Introduction to Metaphysics in the Classical Tradition,* Studies in Platonism, Neoplatonism, and the Platonic Tradition 17 (Leiden: Brill, 2014.), 11.

and existence, whereas in God this distinction does not materialize. God is understood as a simple in the sense that he is not a composite of different properties. If he were, these properties would be more fundamental than God himself. Thus, for God to be a simple and self-existent being his essence must be identical with his existence. However, analogical predication, according to some, must involve an element of univocity. If so, is it coherent to claim that God is identical with his essence? Some have claimed that this essentially reduces God to a property making it impossible for God to relate to creation.

Lastly there is there is the understanding of God as an unembodied spirit, which I will refer to as Swinburnian theism. This is a quite different approach than the two above and is advocated by some modern philosophers in the analytic tradition, such as Richard Swinburne and Alvin Plantinga. Many of the changes in the doctrine of God found in these thinkers center around improving what is perceived as discrepancies in the Thomistic conception of God. For example, it has been argued that the understanding of God as metaphysically simple reduces God to a property and is incompatible with divine freedom. According to this understanding, God is an unembodied spirit possessing the classical divine attributes like omnipotence, omniscience, love, goodness etc. These predicates are generally understood in a univocal way assuming that God is intelligible and can thus be investigated in terms of coherence. God, then, is not simple in the Thomistic sense, but rather possesses certain properties. Divine aseity is then said to be the consequence of the fact that God exists by sheer necessity. This raises the question; can such a God be *a se* and still have properties distinct form himself?

In this thesis I will present and discuss these different approaches to the doctrine of God. What happens when the Swinburnian theists reject apophaticism and analogical predication in favor of a univocal understanding of God? Can God be conceived as simple and not be reduced to a property? And further still, can God be conceived as *a se* without becoming unable to relate to creation?

1.2   Method and Evaluation

The aim of the thesis is to investigate the different approaches to the doctrine of God described above and consider the relationship between predicating of God and divine aseity. To do this, I will first present the three different approaches on their own. This is a particularly important point, as no criticism or evaluation will be useful if the problems are

not properly understood. As representatives of an apophatic approach, I will focus on Dionysius the Areopagite and Maximus the Confessor before I move on to Thomas. Then, as representatives for Swinburnian theism I will focus on Richard Swinburne and Alvin Plantinga. Following this, I will discuss the approaches laid out in the previous chapters. The core of my thesis is that the Swinburnian theists mount a powerful case against the Thomistic doctrine of God assuming that Thomistic analogical predicates involve an element of univocity. At the same time, I will argue that the solutions proposed by the analytic Swinburnian thinkers constitute an undesirable revision of the doctrine of God in terms of aseity driven by a desire for conceptual clarity, and to predicate univocally of God. My main argument is that by accepting the apophatic tradition's insistence that God is ineffable and incomprehensible one can maintain divine aseity while simultaneously avoiding the criticism by the Swinburnian approach.

Methodologically this requires both a descriptive and normative part. The descriptive, focusing on understanding and describing the respective theological approaches, requires interaction with the primary sources of the thinkers as well as secondary sources when appropriate. The goal of these chapters will be to present the different approaches to the doctrine of God on their own merits while simultaneously highlighting some of the issues that will be primarily discussed in the 5th chapter along the way. Furthermore, there is a normative element that is the overarching goal of the study: how are one to understand the Doctrine of God in light of these three approaches? Here my main point is that God needs to be conceived as *a se*. If this is the case, then it raises the question of how to predicate about God, and the relationship of such predicates to the understanding of God as *a se*.

1.3   Why This Topic?

My own interest in the topic of the doctrine of God goes back many years. Initially, when thinking about the divine nature, I have found myself unable to make sense of it. Initially, I asked the question why God is triune. Why three rather than four, five, or a thousand divine persons united in essence? As I contemplated this, I had the idea that God being the way he is, is simply necessary. Since he is God, there is nothing above him to determine his nature, hence God does not conform to laws external to himself. Today I look back on my reasoning and think that I was onto something regarding the idea that God is not dependent on anything non-God. However, applying the concept of necessity to the divine being, implies that the

divine nature can be deduced from the laws of logic as if the nature of the divine were accessible through the law of non-contradiction and the law of the excluded middle. But clearly, the doctrine of the Trinity cannot be deduced in this way. This led me to approach the question from a different angle, that of apophaticism. This made me consider whether the questions I was asking were even meaningful, as God would then be ineffable. If God is infinite, beyond human understanding, maybe it is my own attempt to make God conform to my understanding that is the problem. Investigating these different understandings of God, then, is one of the reasons for picking this topic.

Other than personal interest, why study this topic? The doctrine of God touches upon everything in Christian theology. Christian theology is about God becoming incarnate and restoring the relationship of the created to the Creator. If we are to worship God in a restored relationship with him, then idolatry must be avoided. Idolatry is essentially worshipping what is created rather than the Creator (Romans 1:25). If the understanding of God, then, does not allow for the basic difference of God from creation, then one may risk doing just that by making an object of worship of something that belongs within creation. This thesis is therefore not only interesting from the perspective of intellectual curiosity (though I must admit, it is that too), it is also doctrinally and doxologically significant at the most basic level of Christian theology.

2   Apophaticism – God Beyond Being

The concept of apophaticism deals with an understanding of God in which the divine is conceived as completely different from creation to the point of being unintelligible. The philosophical underpinnings of this understanding are basically a Platonic and Neoplatonic framework in which being is conceived as intelligible through the forms yet needing a foundation and unifying principle known as the Good, the One, or God. It finds its most clear expression in the philosophy of Plotinus.[4] The concept of the total unknowability of God is also fundamental to Christian apophaticism.[5] In this chapter I will concern myself with two early and significant examples of Christian thinkers in the apophatic tradition, Dionysius the Areopagite (or Pseudo-Dionysius) and Maximus the Confessor. But before I turn to Dionysius the Areopagite and Maximus the Confessor, I will briefly touch on their Platonic and Neoplatonic roots. While Dionysius and Maximus thinkers have made contributions to many areas of theology, due to the limitation in scope of this thesis, I will focus my attention on the understanding of God as incomprehensible and beyond being.

2.1   The Influence of Plato and Plotinus

Apophatic theology draws on much of its framework from the philosophy of Plato and Plotinus. This is also true of its specifically Christian varieties. It will therefore be helpful to briefly address Athens before turning to Jerusalem, to borrow Tertullian's saying. The fundamental philosophical problem of Plato that needs to be solved is arguably the problem of intelligibility. According to Eric Perl, one has two options: to either "think being or embrace Nihilism".[6] By this he means the Platonic concept of being that everything that exists, *is*, and thus possesses being. But for being to be intelligible, it must be definable, distinguishable from other beings, and not subject to human opinion. In other words, beings must have an intelligible "whatness". Whatness is then the form of a thing. If beings do not possess such whatness, then as Protagoras says, man will be the measure of all things. This is what Perl means by juxtaposing being and Nihilism. For Plato, the forms are ontologically prior to the sensible objects since they are the things by which we categorize and recognize objects. Hence, they are also epistemologically prior to sensible objects, otherwise sensible objects

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[4] Perl, *Thinking Being,* 120.

[5] A Christian understanding interprets Plato's *The Good* and Plotinus's *The One* as the Christian God. The fundamental point of contact between these ideas is the concept of an ultimate source or grounding of being and intelligibility.

[6] Perl, *Thinking Being,* 2.

would not be distinguishable, and therefore unknowable. Furthermore, since the forms are prior to sense experience they must exist independently of their concrete manifestations in space and time. [7] And since they are not physical, sensible objects, they are therefore grasped by the intellect and not by the senses. The forms are unified for Plato in what he calls The Good, which is the ultimate ground of being.

Plotinus further develops Plato's ideas, at least in the terms of specificity, arguing that this unified entity, which Plotinus calls the One, cannot itself be a being. To be intelligible, the forms must be distinguishable from one another from which it follows that they are derivative since their intelligibility are dependent on being distinguishable. But since to be is to be intelligible, and therefore distinguishable and derivative, the source of being can be none of these things. In fact, it cannot even be a being.[8] If it were, the One would not be the ground of being, as it would itself be contingent, derivative, distinguishable and therefore also intelligible. Rather, the One is total unification of the forms and is therefore not distinguishable or derivative. Since the One is beyond being, it is without any proper comparison to the created world, and hence is wholly other and therefore unintelligible. Thus, since being is essentially intelligible, the One in which everything is unified is beyond being and unknowable.[9] It is such a metaphysical framework that Christian theologians like Dionysius the Areopagite and Maximus the Confessor employ in their articulation of a Christian apophasis.

2.2   Dionysius the Areopagite

As seen, the idea that the divine nature ultimately unknowable is well attested in Greek philosophy. However, one also finds clues of divine unknowability and hiddenness in the Bible. God is understood as the creator of everything that is and is thus not part of creation. Hence, he is beyond creation and thus no one can look upon him (Exodus 33:20). The basic Christian doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* attests to the distinction between everything that is created and God the uncreated creator on which everything created depends. This doctrine is arguably the foundation of a Christian doctrine of God and is the starting point for an apophatic theology. In basic Neoplatonic terms, then, God is uncreated and therefore

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[7] It is commonly believed that Plato thinks the forms exist in a separate realm. Eric Perl has argued that this may be based on a misunderstanding of Plato's spatial metaphors for the forms, see Perl, *Thinking Being,* Chapter 2.
[8] Ibid, 11.
[9] Ibid, 6.

undifferentiated, without being, and hence unintelligible according to the apophatic tradition. A specifically Christian apophasis has its modest beginnings in thinkers like Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Gregory of Nyssa.[10] However it finds a systematic expression in the works of Dionysius the Areopagite, or Pseudo-Dionysius, to whom I now turn.

The writings of Dionysius the Areopagite are a collection of pseudonymous writings probably written in the sixth century, taking his name from the man who is converted by Paul's sermon in Athens (Acts 17:34). Given the Athenian context for Paul's speech and Pseudo-Dionysius' obvious familiarity with the Greek philosophical tradition, it is perhaps a fitting pseudonym.[11] The works are addressed to Timothy of the pastoral letters, showing that the author is clearly positioning himself in the context of the early church.[12] The nature of the work means that the real author is unknown, but I will refer to him with his pseudonym, Dionysius. There are several works written by Dionysius including the *Celestial Hierarchies* and the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchies*, but most important for my purposes here are the works *The Mystical Theology* (MT) and *The Divine Names* (DN). These deal in large part with the understanding of God as beyond human comprehension. I will not attempt to give a presentation of the different works individually, but rather try to present Dionysius' thinking regarding the understanding of God specifically. The style of Dionysius writing is more that of a proclamation of the mystery of God, rather than a clear argumentative approach with premises supporting a conclusion. This does not mean that he is not arguing for what he is proclaiming, and as will become apparent, the philosophical implications and underpinnings of his thought are clearly present.[13] As such, Dionysius provides in early example of Christian apophasis.

While for Dionysius, Neoplatonic metaphysics are significant to his whole theological project, including important topics such as the understanding of God's love and the problem of evil, I will concern myself here with the doctrine of God, even though these certainly are inter-related. A central point in the works of Dionysius is his understanding of God as beyond

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[10] Alfsvåg, *What no Mind has Conceived,* 38-44.

[11] It has been argued that the pseudonym expresses a desire for pagans to turn to Christ as the one whom their philosophy ultimately points to, similar to Paul's point in his sermon at the Areopagus in Acts 17. See Charles M. Stang, *Apophasis and Pseudonymity in Dionysius the Areopagite: 'no longer I'.* Oxford Early Christian Studies. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 199.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Eric David Perl, *Theophany: The Neoplatonic Philosophy of Dionysius the Areopagite* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 1.

being. According to Dionysius God is "Cause of being to all, but Itself not being, as beyond every essence, and as It may manifest Itself properly and scientifically concerning Itself." (DN I,I).[14] The concept of God as beyond being can be interpreted as much as a statement about Dionysius' theology of creation as it is about God. This is to say that when everything created is defined as possessing being, one is really predicating something of creation, not of God. Hence, one has ruled out God as being part of creation, but not predicated anything positive about God.

> To be, for Dionysius as for Plotinus, is to be intelligible.[15]

> "For, if all kinds of knowledge are of things existing, and are limited to things existing, that, beyond all essence, is also elevated above all knowledge." (DN I,IV).

This requires that the beings be identifiable and hence derivative as dependent on their distinguishability from other beings. Furthermore, for beings to be definable, they are derivative from and dependent on a unified definition that ensures its distinctiveness, which is what may be referred to as the One, the Good or for Dionysius, God.[16] This then forms the basis for the idea of divine simplicity, since God as the creator of everything cannot be derivative and therefore not dependent on anything non-God. Yet even simplicity needs to be thought of as a negation of compositeness and not as a positive predicate.[17] Since God is the unification of the forms, God is therefore not a being in the Neoplatonic sense, since being necessarily implies being derivative, definable, and hence distinguishable. Thus, as Eric Perl points out, for Dionysius to say that God is beyond being is not to predicate something positive about him; it is simply stating what he is not without implying anything that is to be understood as a positive predication of God.[18] Since God is not a being, he is not able to be grasped by the senses:

> "We say then- that the Cause of all, which is above all, is neither without being, nor without life--nor with- out reason, nor without mind, nor is a body--nor has shape--nor form--nor quality, or quantity, or bulk--nor is in a place--nor is seen--nor has sensible contact--nor perceives, nor is perceived, by the senses--nor has disorder and confusion, as being vexed by earthly passions,--nor is powerless, as being subject to casualties of

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[14] Citations from Dionysius are from John Parker, trans., *The Works of Dionysius the Areopagite* (London: James Parker and Co, 1897).
[15] Perl, *Theophany*, 13.
[16] Ibid, 11.
[17] Ibid, 12.
[18] Ibid.

sense,--nor is in need of light; neither is It, nor has It, change, or decay, or division, or deprivation, or flux,--or any other of the objects of sense." (MT IV,I).

Similarly, Dionysius adds in the next section that neither is God attainable through the intellect (MT IV,II). As what is attainable though the intellect are the forms, that is, what is definable by virtue of being distinguishable and derivative. God cannot fit into this category. This raises the question, then, what can one say about God? How can one know him at all? An answer to this might be given based on the doctrine of creation:

> "He is not any of existing things, nor is He known in any one of existing things. And He is all in all, and nothing in none. And He is known to all, from all, and to none from none. For, we both say these things correctly concerning God" (DN VII,III).

Here Dionysius expresses in dialectic fashion how God in one sense is completely unknown in himself, yet at the same time God's works are known throughout creation. This understanding of God as creator and sustainer of all being then creates the framework for what may be called omnipresence. As such, God is powerful over, and sustaining all creation as the source of being. These are predicates that in essence express that God is different from creation as its origin and thus the denial that God is in any way subjected to creation. Yet, as God is not being even these predicates must be conceived as denials of God's likeness to being that ultimately lead to the complete silence in the face of the ineffable ground of being. Since everything that is created is derived from God, all being ultimately finds its source in him. This means that God is immanent in creation through the things that are created. Thus, in knowing the world one is in one sense knowing God. It could at this point seem like Dionysius affirms a form of monism or pantheism, but this is mistaken. While God is immanent through the forms and hence in creation, he is not reducible to any of the forms. If God were to be identified with everything that is, he would be a being. Since everything created is distinguishable and therefore intelligible, God is not any one thing in creation, neither is he identical with it as a whole. Rather the divine immanence is constituted precisely by transcending the limited and derivative nature of creation. The relationship of divine transcendence and immanence is then seen as a relationship of mutual dependence rather than a tension to be resolved.[19] In short, God is in everything, but everything is not God.

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[19] This mutuality must not be taken to imply that God is in any way dependent on creation. The point here is merely to address the relationship between transcendence and immanence as not being one of opposition, not that God is ontologically dependent on creation. The concept of transcendence presupposes that there is something to transcend, and it is in that sense a mutually dependent relationship. Transcendence in this sense does not refer to a positive predication of an attribute of God. It simply re-states that there is such a thing as being, and that the creator of being is not himself a being, while being still is dependent on its creator. See Perl, *Theophany*, 34.

Therefore, in this sense every apprehension of being is an apprehension of the divine presence that permeates creation. Or as Eric Perl puts it, for Dionysius, the whole creation is a theophany.[20] Furthermore, Dionysius affirms the Biblical revelation as speaking of God in a legitimate way, and as such God can also be known through his acts in creation. This means that salvation history, including the incarnation, also tells us about God.[21] This is not a claim of knowledge of the divine nature, but rather a knowledge of the divine acts in the world. Ultimately, when one tries to speak about God the way he is in his very nature, there only remains complete silence.

The apophatic understanding of God found in Dionysius, then, builds on a Neoplatonic framework and sees God as fundamentally different from everything created as beyond being and hence unintelligible. This means that the essence of God is wholly unknowable and answering to questions about the nature of the divine are therefore a futile pursuit. This in turn constitutes the basis for a strong separation between the Creator and creation, to the point that the concept of being is no longer applicable to the divine. Still, as God is the creator of everything, the beings still are an appearance of the divine. Dionysius is not merely a Christianized Platonist, however. As a Christian he also affirms the Bible and the incarnation as revelatory meaning that his framework allows for knowing God in Creation.

2.3   Maximus the Confessor

Another important figure in the development of a Christian apophatic theology is Maximus the Confessor, himself influenced by Dionysius. Living in the sixth and seventh century, he faced a complex theological and political climate at a point in history nearing the end of the great Roman empire.[22] During this time there was an increasing support for Christological Monothelitism, the view that Christ only had one will. This conflicts with Chalcedonian Christology which asserts that Christ is both truly God and truly man, requiring that Christ has a will pertaining to each respective divine and human nature. Maximus defended Chalcedon withstanding torture and exile, though not living to see his position vindicated after his death at the Sixth Council of Constantinople.[23]. I have already looked at certain

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[20] Ibid,17.
[21] Alfsvåg, *What no Mind has Conceived,* 48.
[22] Michael D. Gibson, "The Beauty of the Redemption of the World: The Theological Aesthetics of Maximus the Confessor and Jonathan Edwards"*, The Harvard Theological Review* 101, no. 1 (2008), 44, DOI: 10.1017/S0017816008001727.
[23] Gibson, "The Beauty of the Redemption of the World", 49.

features of apophasis above when discussing Neoplatonism as well as Dionysius. Maximus follows this tradition in his basic outlook towards theology. Since God is uncreated, he is not a being and hence unknowable. This means that there is no point of contact in terms of similarity or commonality between God and creation such that God can be known by comparing him to creation. For Maximus, then, there is no point of contact by which one may extrapolate knowledge from the created realm unto God in such a way as to predicate about the divine nature. God is wholly other and unknowable.[24]

One the central works of Maximus is *Centuries on Love*, a compilation of four chapters consisting of one hundred sayings on the concept of agape. Agape is defined by Maximus as "a good disposition of the soul by which one prefers no being to the knowledge of God." (CL 1,1).[25] Much of Maximus' reflections in *Centuries* centers around this very theme, the goal of human reason and knowledge to rid itself of its tendency to prefer the created things (beings) over God. Here the Neoplatonic underpinnings of Maximus' theology become evident as the preferring of being is contrasted with the knowledge of God. Hence God is for Maximus, as for Plotinus and Dionysius, by implication not a being. Therefore, for Maximus, God is also beyond human knowledge and apprehension. Having preference for being over the knowledge of God is therefore idolatry, worshiping and adoring creation over the creator. Since preferring the creator is the supreme goal of love, the opposite of love, for Maximus, is therefore idolatry as "The one who loves God prefers knowledge of him to all things made by him and is constantly devoted to it by desire." (CL 1,4). After the fall, the goal of humanity is to be reunited with its creator as the ultimate expression of agape. However, because the human condition is in a state of sinfulness, humans abandon agape for their own lusts.[26] Thus for Maximus "The passionate soul is impure, filled with thoughts of lust and hatred." (CL 1,14). Idolatry, then, manifests itself in the preference of beings over God and must be replaced with agape which prefers nothing to the knowledge of God. The concept of denying lusts may have connotations to a restricted life abandoning earthly goods like access to money, sex, and power. But one must not be too quick as to conflate a popular conception of asceticism with what Maximus is saying about the nature of the Christian life. As a

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[24] Daniel Wood, "Both Mere Man and Naked God: The Incarnational Logic of Apophasis in St. Maximus the Confessor" in *Maximus the Confessor as a European Philosopher*, ed. Sotiris Mitralexis, Georgios Steiris, Marcin Podbielski and Sebastian Lalla (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2017), 120.
[25] Citations from Maximus the Confessor are from John Firana, ed., *Maximus the Confessor: Selected Writings* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1985).
[26] Alfsvåg, *What no Mind has Conveived*, 55.

Christian, Maximus is also committed to the goodness of creation, such that desiring created things is not in itself evil.[27] As Maximus himself points out,

> "It is not food which is evil but gluttony, not the begetting of children but fornication, not possessions but greed, not reputation but vainglory. And if this is so, there is nothing evil in creatures except misuse, which stems from the mind's negligence in its natural cultivation." (CL 3,4).

Asceticism, in this context, cannot therefore mean ridding oneself of things that are in themselves good. Rather it must mean placing them in the correct order of priority to avoid misuse. This means that things like sex, money and power need not be abandoned altogether, but must be put in its proper place to not become an idol. Knowledge of God is therefore for Maximus bound up with ethics, or perhaps more precisely, with aesthetics, in terms of what one loves and thereby deems beautiful, praiseworthy, and supremely desirable.[28] Since ultimately, for Maximus, it is only the love of the creator beyond being that can lead to the proper ordering of desires for created things.

Here one also gets a glimpse of Maximus's anthropology and doctrine of creation. Reconciliation implies restoring a relationship that has been broken. For Maximus, the relationship between God and man has been fundamentally broken because of human sin. Sin means rejecting God and preferring what is created above the Creator, which is contrary to human nature since humans are created for loving God.[29] This in turn leads to rejecting the inherent goal that is implied by the world's being created with a purpose, and hence abusing the good creation in a disordered way. "A blameworthy passion is a movement of the soul contrary to nature." (CL 1,35) for Maximus. The preferring of being over the creator beyond being, then, is a contrary to nature, which is the essence of sin and idolatry. Naturally, the solution to such a problem must be a correct ordering of desires, which must include preferring the creator over everything else, as this is the essence of love and the opposite of idolatry. Since the love of God is the natural human orientation, when humans distort their desires by turning to created things this is ultimately an act of irrationality. Hence for Maximus reconciliation with God also redirects human reason towards its proper and natural end.[30] The problem of human sinfulness cannot be solved without God's intervention, however. Rather, it ultimately finds its solution in the incarnation. Here the infinite,

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[27] Alfsvåg, *What no Mind has Conceived*, 56.
[28] Gibson, "The Beauty of the Redemption of the World", 47.
[29] Alfsvåg, *What no Mind has Conveived,* 56.
[30] Ibid.

incomprehensible, and unutterable divine nature is united with a finite, intelligible, and visible human nature providing a point of contact between the unknowable and the knowable, God and man, that ultimately will lead to reconciliation between the two.

While the disregarding of evil passions and the incarnation may provide answers to the question of knowing God by referring to his actions in the world, it does not address the question of knowledge of the divine nature. This is the fundamental point for apophatic theology for Maximus as in the theology of Dionysius.[31] However, through the incarnation God became man which is a knowable entity. Since Christ is indivisibly truly God and truly man, predicating of the God-man becomes a way of predicating about God. Not in the sense of knowing the ineffable divine nature but as knowledge of God revealed in flesh in history. It might seem that the incarnation creates more problems since God is already ineffable and unintelligible. God being joined to a human nature, then, would be even more mysterious. Paradoxically, this is one of the significant points of Maximus' defense against monotheletism; it is precisely the unknowability of the divine that renders the Chalcedonian doctrine of the complete unity of natures without division plausible. If Christ were to have merely one will, there would be a mixing of the two natures of Christ and dyotheletism must be adopted. But if God is ineffable, then the same must be said of the union of God and man in Christ. Thus, though God is revealed in Christ, this does not negate apophaticism since, as Knut Alfsvåg remarks, "the more God becomes comprehensible through the incarnation, the more he becomes incomprehensible."[32] God then is revealed by virtue of the mystical union of God and man, but this can only be an acceptable proposition if one grants the apophatic mystery of the divine nature in the first place. In this sense, apophatic theology ensures Chalcedonian Christology as the revelation of God in human flesh for Maximus.

For Maximus, the relationship between God and man is broken due to humanity demonstrating their lack of love by preferring creation over the creator. By reconciling humanity to himself and ridding them of sinful passions God once again reorients humanity towards himself in love. However, genuine knowledge of the divine nature is still beyond reach as God is not a being, and hence transcends all definition, limitation and is therefore utterly unintelligible. Still, in Christ God is manifested in a new way as both a revelation in himself and the one who is revealed. Thus, God is hidden in the mystery of the incarnation

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[31] Wood, "Both Mere Man and Naked God: The Incarnational Logic of Apophasis in St. Maximus the Confessor", 122.

[32] Alfsvåg, *What no Mind has Conceived,* 79.

while simultaneously revealed in the person of Christ. Still, the divine nature remains ineffable, ensuring the true unity of the two natures in the God-man as the revelation of God.

2.4   An Apophatic Doctrine of God

The purpose of this chapter has been to introduce the concept of apophatic theology and two of its central thinkers, Dionysius the Areopagite, and Maximus the Confessor. This will serve as a basis for an understanding of the doctrine of God found in apophatic theology which I will later discuss in relation to Thomism and Swinburnian theism.

The roots of Christian apophaticism are traceable in the understanding of the God as beyond comprehension in Plato and Plotinus. As discussed above, this point is related to the understanding of creation, intelligibility, and contingency. The apophatic understanding of God, then, is closely tied to Platonic and Neoplatonic epistemology. Ideas in the platonic sense are concepts that can be grasped by the mind. And since to be is to be intelligible, and to be intelligible is to be distinguishable from other beings the ideas are distinguishable from one another and hence dependent on one another, and ultimately on a unifying principle. As God is the ground of all being, he is not himself a being, and therefore incomprehensible. Hence one is left with nothing but apophasis and utter silence when speaking of the divine nature. This is not to say that apophatic Christian theology is merely a Christianized Neoplatonism, however. One might argue based on natural theology, for example, that the convergence of Christianity and Neoplatonism constitutes an example of how God has revealed himself in nature. Dionysius represents an early exposition of an apophatic Christian theology seeing God as unknowable mystery. Maximus follows Dionysius in this approach, further emphasizing the hypostatic union in the person of Christ as the place of contact between God and man. The divine nature is still unknowable, but God has been mediated through the human nature of Christ in salvation history.

Since my purposes here is not primarily historical, but rather to investigate different approaches to the doctrine of God it will be useful to summarize in general terms an apophatic understanding of God. The foundation of apophatic theology is a sharp distinction between the creator and creation. While other approaches to theology also will seek to uphold this distinction, the apophatic understanding does this by denying any intelligible relation between them resulting in a total unknowability of the divine nature. God is therefore not a being, not even being itself, rather, he is completely different. Hence God is beyond categories of

existence and non-existence (being and non-being). Furthermore, God is beyond description since he is without comparison and without differentiation which are preconditions for intelligibility.[33] This means that any talk about the divine nature, any attempt to describe God the way he is in himself, is futile.

Apophaticism does not place demand on the doctrine of God to be able to explain the logical coherence of the divine nature, since such a conception is not possible in the first place. Other approaches to the doctrine of God that take more of a univocal approach to the doctrine of God may run into problems when trying to articulate what is, according to apophatic theology, ineffable. This is not to say that apophaticism is irrational or fideistic, however. As argued above, the Neoplatonic epistemology found in Dionysius and Maximus argues rationally for what is intelligible and what is not. To say that God is beyond rational comprehension is therefore simply to point out the limits of human reason. Since apophaticism rejects the knowability of the divine nature, one is in essence not making any positive claim about him at all. One is rather denying that the phenomenon of being is self-explanatory and that beings exist independently in any ultimate sense. Thus, if one wishes to criticize apophatic theology for not speaking about God, one must first provide plausible epistemic justification for such knowledge. Apophatic theology's refusal to embark on this project of describing God is then perhaps its greatest strength, as I will argue later. Furthermore, by emphasizing divine transcendence to the point of total unknowability, one maintains divine aseity not conceived as a positive predication about God, but simply the negation of God as in any way dependent on anything that is non-God. How this relates to Thomism and Swinburnian theism I will come back to in the 5th chapter.

This then raises a very basic question about Christian theology. After all, is not the whole point to have a restored relationship with God through Christ? How then, can one know God? Apophatic theologians may answer that since God is immanent by virtue of his transcendence, as in the example of Dionysius, God is in everything, yet everything is not God. Thus, any interaction, even simply the state of existing (being) is an experience of God. One may expand this to the experiences of ordinary human life or specific events such as God acting critically in history, for example in the events concerning Moses and ultimately, in the incarnation of the Son of God. This means that according to the apophatic tradition, one

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[33] Wood, "Both Mere Man and Naked God: The Incarnational Logic of Apophasis in St. Maximus the Confessor", 120.

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cannot know God's nature, but God is known through his works in the created realm. This is supremely seen in the incarnation where God is manifested in human flesh while at the same time transcending all being in Christ's divine nature.

3　God as *Ipsum Esse* in Thomas Aquinas

Thomas Aquinas is one of the most influential philosophers and theologians throughout Church history, especially for the Roman Catholic Church where his philosophy was given the position as the official philosophy of the Church in 1879 by Pope Leo XIII.[34] Some of Thomas' most influential works are the *Summa Contra Gentiles* (SCG) and *Summa Theologiæ* (ST), the former dealing with what were for Thomas unbelieving worldviews such as Islam and Judaism, the latter is a major work of philosophical and systematic theology, touching on all major branches of Christian theology. Thomas has made major contributions to the understanding of God, natural theology, the relationship between faith and reason, as well as the understanding of the Lord's supper.

In the ST as Thomas gives an account for Christian theology some of his major sources are Aristotle and Dionysius. Thomas is famous for his use of Aristotle attempting to unify Aristotelianism with Christian theology as exemplified in the understanding of God as the unmoved mover. At the same time, Dionysius the Areopagite is a major influence. When I discussed Dionysius above, I presented his understanding of God as in basic alignment with a Neoplatonic metaphysic of being as fundamentally derivative and intelligible and God as therefore beyond these. This means that God is unlimited, ineffable, undefinable, and unintelligible by virtue of not possessing being like created things do. For Thomas, however, God is called *ipsum esse*, or existence itself. Since God as well as creation possess existence, this ties into the doctrine of analogy which makes it possible for Thomas to predicate analogically of God, raising the question of the compatibility of Thomas and Dionysius. Thomas is committed to an understanding of God as distinct from creation, its sole originator, almighty, *a se*, etc. This raises further questions about the nature of God according to Thomas and its relationship to creation. These are some issues that must be kept in mind as the understanding of God found in Thomas will be discussed below.

3.1　Faith and Reason

An important point for Thomas' epistemology is the relationship between faith and reason. For him, the two are both valid sources of knowledge, but they operate in different ways.[35]

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[34] Store norske leksikon, "Thomas Aquinas." Last modified 17 September 2020. https://snl.no/Thomas_Aquinas.
[35] Torstein Tollefsen, Henrik Syse and Rune Fritz Nikolaisen, *Tenkere og ideer: Filosofiens historie fra antikken til vår egen tid* 2. ed. (Oslo: Ad Notam Gyldendal, 1998), 221.

Since, "It should be urged that human well-being called for schooling in what God has revealed, in addition to the philosophical researches purposed by human reasoning." (ST 1a.1.1), according to Thomas.[36] Faith takes as its object Christ; faith thus consists of things that God has revealed in Scripture and in the Incarnation mediated through the Church. Some important things that can be known through faith are the existence of God, that Christ is God incarnate, and the Trinity. There are thus things in the Christian faith that cannot be known through reason alone, "hence the necessity for our welfare that divine truths surpassing reason should be signified to us through divine revelation." (ST 1a.1.1), according to Thomas. Through reason one can know what is attainable through natural knowledge, things that can be deduced from what is visible and knowable from nature without the aid of special revelation. Examples of this kind of knowledge would be certain ethical views about the nature of the good life and the existence of God. One may have noticed that the existence of God was mentioned as an example both regarding things known through revelation, but also by reason, and this is precisely the point. For Thomas, the two categories, reason, and revelation, do not constitute sharply separated realms of knowledge. Rather, at times, they overlap. In this way reason and revelation can confirm each other while at other times something is only known through one or the other. This ties into another important Thomistic concept, namely the relationship between nature and grace. Rather than opposites that conflict, for Thomas, nature is good and becomes perfected through grace (ST1.1.1; 1.1.8, 2.2.4). The relationship between faith and reason leads us to the question of the existence and nature of God, which is the topic of this thesis to which I now turn.

3.2   Existence and Knowledge of God

Does God exist? According to the Neoplatonic apophatic tradition, including Christian thinkers like Dionysius, this question could in a sense be answered in the negative. This might seem odd, as they also claim that God became incarnate in Christ, that he created the world, and that he loves his creation. That is quite an accomplishment for a non-existent entity. But as explained in the previous chapter, the claim that God does not exist in the strict sense, must be understood within the framework of a Neoplatonic metaphysic of being in which existence means possessing being and hence being derivative, definable, and intelligible. In that sense, saying that God does not exist this is not an assertion of atheism, but an acknowledgement

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[36] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiæ: Latin text and English translations, notes, appendices and glossaries*, trans. Thomas Gilby (Cambridge University Press, 2006).

that God as the ground of all being, is not itself being, and can therefore not be spoken of, not even in terms of existence. Thomas says that:

> "God is not said to be 'not there' in the sense that he does not exist at all, but because being his own existence he transcends all that is there. It follows from this not that he cannot be known but that he is beyond all that can be known of him – this is what is meant by saying that he cannot be comprehended" (ST 1a.12.1).

Thomas wants to maintain that God exists, while simultaneously affirm the Dionysian point that God is incomprehensible. Here there is a shift, at least in terminology, form that of Dionysius and Neoplatonism in general. Thomas thus employs Aristotelian terminology of existence as opposed to God as unification of the forms beyond being, as in the Neoplatonist tradition. In ST 1a.2.3 Thomas responds to the objection that God does not exist by stating that "There are five ways in which one can prove that there is a God." Thomas is famous for his five ways that show the existence of God which are the arguments from motion, efficient causes, contingency, goodness, and teleology. These are sometimes taken to mean that Thomas is attempting to give philosophical proofs for the existence of God, but this is questionable. First, given the time and cultural climate of the writing of Thomas, he hardly believed that philosophical demonstrations of God were necessary, thus one can make an argument for the five ways as reflecting as a Christian on the nature of God.[37] Second, it is worth noting that the conclusions to each of the ways is not merely that God exists, rather, Thomas is establishing the reference for the word "God". Thus, rather than rationalistic proofs consisting of deductive arguments leading to the conclusion that God exists, these may be interpreted then as ways to show that creation itself is contingent and thereby not self-sufficient or self-existing. The conclusion then follows that creation is dependent on something outside of itself, and this "something" is what is referred to when Thomas speaks of God (ST 1a.2.3). Since all that is created is dependent on God for its existence, it also provides the framework for God as the omnipresent sustainer of creation (ST 1a.8.1). Thomas is thus not predicating existence of God in the same way one might of a created thing. At the very least Thomas is claiming that God is existence itself, and thus *a se*.[38]

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[37] Fergus Kerr, *Thomas Aquinas.* Very Short Introductions (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 38.
[38] Thomas could at this point be interpreted in a way that is in line with the apophatic theologians before him, as the five ways basically attempt to show the contingency of creation as pointing to the creator. See Perl, *Thinking Being,* 157.

This leads to another significant point in the understanding of God for Thomas, namely his understanding of the relationship between essence and existence.[39] The terminology of existence, essence, and their relationship to terms like *being* and *form* in the Neoplatonist apophatic tradition can be confusing. Here I am following the translations of the terms provided by Perl.[40] Essence for Thomas is similar to the understanding of form that was explored in the section on Plato and Plotinus above. For them form denotes the "whatness" of a thing. The Thomistic concept of essence differs slightly because it does not only include the form or whatness of a thing, but also the matter, that is, what a thing is made of.[41] Existence is also slightly different in Thomas from the concept of being in the Neoplatonists discussed above. The Neoplatonic understanding of being would be the equivalent of the Latin *ens* or the Greek *hon*. What is here translated existence, however, is the Latin *esse*.[42] Existence in this context refers to "the act by which something is a being".[43] This distinction allows Thomas to distinguish between what a thing is and its act of existing, this distinction between essence and existence is true of all created things, but not of God, according to Thomas, since for him "The substance of God is his existence" (ST 1a.3.4).

This leads us to the understanding of God as *ipsum esse* or existence itself. Since all things for whom their existence is not their essence have been caused to exist by something outside of themselves, this does not apply to God. Rather, since God is the ultimate reality, that which cannot not exist, his essence must be identical with his existence. Thus, to be God is to exist. Thomas remarks that:

> "in the first existent thing, everything must be actual; there can be no potentiality whatsoever. For although, when we consider things coming to exist, potential existence precedes actual existence in those particular things; nevertheless, absolutely speaking, actual existence takes precedence of potential existence. For what is able to exist is brought into existence only by what already exists. Now we have seen that the first existent is God. In God then there can be no potentiality." (ST 1a.3.1)

To say that God is actual, is to say that there is no potentiality in him to be actualized. If this is the case, God must be fully actualized, fully existent by virtue of his own nature to the point that there is no possibility for anything new to come about in God. Hence, existence itself is to be God. From this it follows there are therefore no parts in God. For Thomas, God is not

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[39] Ibid, 152.
[40] See Perl, *Thinking Being*, 152-158 for a more detailed explanation of this terminology.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Ibid, 153.
[43] Ibid.

the product of all the right properties added together, as that would make God reducible to the properties, hence he would not be fully actualized in himself. James Dolezal summarizes this point well when he says that "all that is in God, is God".[44] This means that there are no accidents in God, as accidents imply potentiality, something that could have been different, and therefore something to be actualized. Hence, God as pure actuality cannot have any accidents. This is what is known as the doctrine of divine simplicity which is also finds its expression in doctrines of divine immutability and aseity. As such a God can neither change in any way nor be dependent on anything. However, the concept of simplicity can be stated in two ways: first, that God's existence is identical with his essence, and second, that God is not composed of parts. Both ways of articulating this are found in Thomas (ST 1a.3.1; 1a.3.3) Notice that the former is a cataphatic statement, whereas the latter is apophatic. The concept of simplicity, immutability and aseity are concepts that I will return to, as Alvin Plantinga has alleged that the Thomistic concept of divine simplicity reduces God to a property.[45]

3.3   God and Analogy

Another important element in the Thomistic doctrine of God is what has been called the analogy of being. I remarked above that for Maximus the Confessor there is no point of contact within creation that relates the mode of being in creation to its creator that can be extrapolated to give propositional knowledge about the divine nature. This follows from the doctrine of God as beyond being. The concept of the analogy of being may be understood more generally to refer to whatever relation there is in creation to its creator, and, as was argued above, that God is indeed manifested everywhere in creation through the forms, according to the thinkers in the Christian Neoplatonic tradition. For Thomas, however, this analogy is arguably related to existence, as for him God is existence itself. Hence the analogy in question is one in which one might see a relation between the creator and creation in terms of existence.

With the understanding of analogy in Thomas, it opens for him the possibility of predicating about God analogically. Aquinas does recognize that "In this life we cannot understand the essence of God as he is in himself" (ST 1a.13.3), a point that is well in line with his Dionysian influence. Yet, he goes on to talk about the nature of predication, rejecting

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[44] James Dolezal, *All that is in God: Evangelical Theology and the Challenge of Classical Christian Theism* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2017), 137.
[45] Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?* (Milwaukee, Marquette University Press, 1980)*,* 47.

the possibility of univocal predicates of anything, whether God or creatures (ST 1a.13.5), as nothing perfectly resembles the meaning of a given word. Still, however much the meaning of words may differ from each individual predication of a created thing, it is even more different from when it refers to God. Thomas goes on to use the example of a man that is said to be wise. Saying that a person is wise, predicates a quality possessed by the person, which could conceivably not have been so. Hence, predicating wisdom of a person, is to refer to a quality that is distinct from the person. However, Thomas explains, that "when we use this word about God, we do not intend to signify something distinct from his essence, power or existence." (ST 1a.13.5). This point goes back to the doctrine of divine simplicity, which states that God is not composed of parts. This in turn means that God is not the sum of just the right set of qualities added together, as that would make God composite, which means that he would possess potentiality, and not be fully actualized as existence itself. Thus, wisdom cannot be a distinct quality in God, as it is in a man, since there are no distinctions in Thomas' simple God of pure existence. The consequence of which is that words are not predicated about created things and God in the same way, thus they are not univocal. Saying that God is wise cannot mean the same thing that it does when one predicates of a man to be wise.

The next alternative in consideration is the possibility of language of God as equivocal. This would mean that when something is predicated of God it does not have any connection to what it means when one is speaking of created things. To take the example of predicating of something to be wise, if this were to be applied to God equivocally, it would simply say nothing intelligible about God, as it would have no intelligible connection to the concept of wisdom. Thomas is not satisfied with equivocal statements about God, as he goes on to argue that this would amount to a rejection of natural theology. The reasoning is quite straight forward: for God to be known through nature, there must be a possibility of resemblance to something in nature that points to God. But if all one can achieve are equivocal statements, one has not really arrived at any sort of knowledge of God whatsoever. God, then, would not be accessible through nature. Thomas sees this as conflicting with Scripture quoting the apostle Paul's first chapter of the letter to the Romans in which Paul says that the invisible things of God are known through what has been created (ST 1a.13.5). The options of univocism and equivocism are then both ruled out.

Thomas needs to find a third option, which he finds in the concept of analogical predication. Whereas univocity insists on the same meaning in each instance and equivocity

rejects all resemblance, analogy uses a given word proportionally or analogically meaning that there is some resemblance to the word as used of creatures, but not completely. To illustrate this, Thomas uses the concept of health. One may describe a man as healthy and similarly describe his diet as healthy. In these cases, the word "heathy" is univocal. For a man to be healthy refers to something like a state of bodily wellbeing, whereas a healthy diet may be the cause of his bodily state. If the word "healthy" were used univocally of the man's diet, it would refer to the bodily wellbeing of the diet, which is absurd. Hence, the word "healthy" in this case is used analogically, according to Thomas (ST 1a.13.5). Thomas' solution, then, appears to be that one can predicate about God in analogical terms, retaining some resemblance of the original concept, yet keeping in mind that it is not directly applicable to a God in whom essence and existence are identical.

3.4   Thomas, Dionysius, and Analogy – in Opposition to Neoplatonism?

According to Thomas, "reason should not pry into things too high for human knowledge, nevertheless when they are revealed by God they should be welcomed by faith" (ST 1a.1.1). This point echoes my own desire to write on this topic of the doctrine of God, as going beyond our human capacity for knowledge results in error, making statements of God too grand for the created mind. But as I have hinted at earlier, the question of Thomas's understanding of the doctrine of analogy raises this very question of whether Thomas at times goes too far. The Christian Neoplatonists discussed in the previous chapter evade referring to God as being of any sort, as for them, this implies that God is one among the totality of beings. Even if God is regarded as supreme among them, God would still be at the level of being as opposed to totally different. Thomas rarely uses the vocabulary of God as beyond being, and prefers to say that God exists, and that he is existence itself. As noted above, there is a difference in terminology regarding being (ens) for the Neoplatonists and what I referred to as existence (esse). But this problem is not reducible to semantics, as once existence is predicated of created things as well as God, it opens the possibility for a relationship of analogy in terms of existence.

The terminology of existence in Thomas is complex and subject to debate. Some conceive of Thomas as essentially employing a Dionysian understanding of God as unknowable while deviating from the traditional Neoplatonic and Dionysian terminology of

being, hence employing the term existence with reference to God. [46] The basic point according to this strand is that Thomas does not deviate from the Dionysian understanding in terms of the substance of his theological metaphysics. Rather, they argue, Thomas is employing his own set of terms, hence the difference is merely semantic.[47] Others claim that while Thomas is appreciative of Dionysius, and agrees to an extent that God is unknowable, he deviates from his Dionysian influence in favor of a more positive theology that permits predicating of God by way of analogy.

As has been noted above, Thomas is not shy about his Dionysian influence, but this raises the question of whether Thomas agrees with the Dionysian *via negativa* and his understanding of God as totally unknowable and beyond being. Gregory Rocca argues that Thomas breaks with the thinking of Dionysius in attempting to predicate analogically of God.[48] He goes so far as to set Thomas in opposition to Dionysian apophaticism arguing that the theology of Thomas by way of his theory of analogical predication simply becomes an example of positive theology.[49] While Thomas does recognize some concept of the incomprehensibility of God, this is only maintained with a certain set of qualifications: First, while one cannot know in this life what God is, one can only know that God is. Second, since God is infinite, no created being can comprehend his essence fully, not even in the beatific vision.[50] Though infinite knowledge of God's essence is impossible, the beatific vision does allow for some knowledge of the divine essence, as "A mere man cannot see the essence of God unless he be uplifted out of this mortal life." (ST 1a.12.11), according to Thomas. The full knowledge of God's essence then remains unknowable. Thomas also incorporates negation as an important aspect of his way of speaking about God which can be divided in three categories: qualitative negations, objective modal negations, and subjective modal negations.[51] Qualitative negations deny of God qualities which are in themselves inherently imperfections, these must be denied of God since he cannot possess any imperfections. Objective modal negations deny of God the specific qualities of a predication that would be limited by creaturely existence. For example, saying that God is good denies that God is good in the same way as a man. Subjective modal negations deny that qualities predicated of God

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[46] Perl, *Thinking Being,* 161.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Rocca, "Aquinas on God-Talk: Hovering over the Abyss." *Theological Studies (Bailtimore)* 54, no 4 (1993), 642.
[49] Ibid, 645.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Ibid, 648.

constitute an accidental quality in the same way that it does in a man. Saying that God is wise is not to say that God possesses wisdom as an accidental quality, for example.[52] Such negations would likely not have been objectionable to Dionysius, but Rocca claims that Thomas goes further by attempting a positive theology by way of analogy.[53] Rocca goes on to discuss the nature of such predication, ruling out Cajetan's fourfold distinction of analogy for being reducible to either univocity or equivocity. Rocca ends up conceiving of Thomas's understanding of analogical predication as fundamentally a reflection on epistemological justification of theological beliefs and judgements.[54] This means that univocity is rejected because it simply cannot account for the theological convictions that Thomas presupposes, as language of attributes, accidents, parts, and qualities are unable to express a purely simple God. Likewise, pure equivocity must be rejected as that would render God unknowable, as Thomas insists on God's knowability through creation as well as revelation. Analogical predication then becomes a way of reflecting on the justification the theological understanding that Thomas already possesses, while simultaneously recognizing that such expressions can never describe God perfectly. Rocca sums up his understanding by pointing out that this leaves Thomas' understanding is closer to equivocity than univocity as it implies an ambiguity regarding the words predicated of God. The analogous nature of words, then, are not found in a unified concept denoted by a given predicate, but rather the fact that analogates have some (perhaps unspecified) intelligible relations to one another.[55]

On the other hand, Eric Perl in his book *Thinking Being* provides an interpretation of Thomas that is more in line with Dionysius and Neoplatonism in general, taking the view that God is basically unknowable.[56] Perl takes as his point of the departure the question of why there are beings rather than nothing and argues that Thomas, at his very outlook, agrees with Plotinus in conceding that the fact that there are beings means that they are contingent. Perl goes on to argue that Thomas, by his famous five ways, concludes that God is not an existing entity, as he is the cause of all the existing entities.[57] This is a somewhat odd claim as Thomas clearly wants to use the terminology of existence to refer to God, as seen above. However, Perl's point quite clear: Thomas is arguing that whatever things are caused to have existence,

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[52] Ibid, 648.
[53] Ibid, 649.
[54] Ibid, 650-653.
[55] Ibid, 656.
[56] Perl, *Thinking Being*, 151-189.
[57] Ibid, 157.

God is not among them. Perl therefore seems to imply that Thomas is merely differing from the Neoplatonic tradition in his terminology. Thus, he argues that Thomas indeed conceives of God in a way that is in line with the Neoplatonic tradition.[58] In ST 1.44.2 Thomas refers to creation as emanating from God, which Perl takes to mean that God is not a member of the totality of existence, but rather transcends it as that on which creation is dependent for its existence.[59] This means for Perl that the concept of God as existence itself is not to be interpreted to say that God exists among other existing entities, but rather that God is the unifying principle on which everything depends. Hence, even the concept of existence itself is interpreted by Perl in as an apophatic concept, making the same point as Plotinus' concept of the One, namely that God is the one beyond being on whom all being depends.[60] Perl further makes his case referring to SCG 1.14 in which Thomas says that one approaches the knowledge of God by removing from him the wrong concepts of the human intellect. This point is very much in line with the Neoplatonic metaphysics of Dionysius and Maximus, as the more one denies of God, the closer one gets.[61] Turning then to the understanding of God as existing, it is interpreted as justified by being analogical. Perl understands analogical predication in line with Aristotelian *pros hen* predicates which are essentially equivocal. As the example of health goes, a person can be healthy, but saying the same thing of food is not to say that the word means the same in both instances. Predicating the word "healthy" of medicine is not to refer to the state of bodily well-being of the medicine itself, but the sense that it causes or sustains health, thus negating some of the meaning of the concept of health as applied to a man. Applied to God, Perl takes the concept of God as a being, interpreted analogically to mean that God is not in the order of beings in the same way as creatures.[62] This means that for Perl, Thomas' understanding of analogical predication confirms Neoplatonic metaphysics of being, and the apophasis it requires.

The interpretation of Thomas is a complicated endeavor, and it seems to be to some extent dependent on whether one presupposes that Thomas agrees with his Neoplatonic forebearers or not. In the interpretation of Rocca, Thomas clearly wants to break with Dionysius by attempting a positive theology. This requires that he does away with pure apophaticism, but since equivocism is unsatisfactory, analogical predication becomes a

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[58] Ibid, 159.
[59] Ibid, 160.
[60] Ibid, 161.
[61] Ibid, 162.
[62] Ibid, 174.

middle road. When Thomas discusses this in 1a.12.5 it seems indeed quite clear that he does not want to accept that one cannot predicate about God. This would be equivocism, and in Thomas' estimation this would amount to a rejection of natural theology. Thomas must also reject univocism as this contradicts his doctrine of God as simple and existence itself. However, Thomas explicitly claims that analogical predication is an alternative to the two options of equivocism and univocism, making it plausible that he is not merely to be interpreted as in line with Dionysius. Furthermore, Rocca's interpretation is strengthened by Thomas' understanding that the beatific vision will permit knowledge of the divine essence. In Dionysian terms, this would ruin his whole apophatic project, as it would require not a mere theosis understood as a mystical unification of God and man, rather, it would shed the distinction between creator and creation by reducing God to a knowable entity and thus a being. On Perl's account, this seems amount to an apparent inconsistency in Thomas' theology by claiming that God is both beyond being and simultaneously that the divine essence can be known in the beatific vision. Thomas does maintain that one would not know the divine essence infinitely, but any claim of knowing the divine essence would, according to a Neoplatonic metaphysic, amount to God's being intelligible, determinate, and a being. It seems that the only way for Thomas to avoid this, is to reject a strict negative theology and attempt to justify the claim to positive knowledge of God. This, then, would be the problem that analogical predication of God attempts to solve.

Richard Swinburne, to whom I will turn shortly, has argued like Duns Scotus and William of Ockham before him that Thomistic analogical predication must involve some univocal element to be intelligible.[63] Otherwise, it reduces to either univocism or equivocism. Regardless of the historical question of how to interpret Thomas, for the sake of discussion, I will assume an understanding of Thomistic analogical predication that includes some element of univocity. The criticism of Thomas' doctrine of God by Swinburne and Plantinga assumes such an interpretation. Thus, for the sake of this discussion, I will take Thomas to be a theologian that allows for a type of positive predicates of God that include at least some univocal element.

3.5   A Thomistic Doctrine of God

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[63] Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 81.

Since this thesis is primarily concerned with the doctrine of God, it is beyond its scope to attempt to completely resolve the historical question of how to interpret Thomistic analogical predicates. However, since the interpretation of Perl and others simply take Thomas to mean the same basic concepts as the Neoplatonists, Dionysius and Maximus, the points made in chapter 5 regarding the apophatic tradition will in that case largely also be applicable to Thomas.

Another option is that Thomas is simply inconsistent:[64] on the one hand, he wants to agree with Dionysius that God is unknowable, while on the other hand attempting to comply with Aristotle's unmoved mover, making God *ipsum esse*, not recognizing that according to Dionysius, this is in direct conflict with an apophatic understanding if the beatific vision involves knowledge of the divine essence. This means that God would not be qualitatively different from creation at all. Rather, he would be quantitatively different by possessing the same "stuff" of creation, namely being, to a greater extent than his creation. In the introduction I explained that one of the basic Christian doctrines regarding the understanding of God is precisely the rejection of monism, affirming the idea that Creator and creation are distinct. Here it is evident how a conception of God as basically possessing the same quality of being as creation risks compromising this distinction, ultimately making God into something that is less than what Christian theology has traditionally believed him to be as *a se*.

Ultimately, since I am here primarily concerned with the doctrine of God, and not terminology or semantics beyond their usefulness. Thus, one can assume that Perl's interpretation of Thomas as in agreement with the Neoplatonists to be in line with the understanding that is found in Dionysius and Maximus. An interpretation of Thomas that is more oriented towards positive theology, such that analogical predicates involve an element of univocity, deserves its own spot in the following chapters. I will occasionally refer to such an interpretation as a univocal-analogical interpretation of Thomas. Nevertheless, because Thomas affirms the doctrine of divine simplicity, his understanding is also distinct from the next approach that will be discussed, namely Swinburnian theism.

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[64] For a discussion of this option see Alfsvåg, *What no Mind has Conceived,* 105-109.

4 Swinburnian Theism – God as Existing Necessarily

Apophaticism and Thomism have considerable commonalities in that both try to do justice to the claim that God is in simple, ineffable, and that human language is ultimately incapable of describing him. They may diverge on the nature of predication of the divine nature, and ontological questions of the most basic reality, whether it is constituted by pure existence or unity understood as an ineffable, undifferentiated unification beyond being. Within the modern analytical school of philosophy, it has risen a different understanding of God that conceives of God in univocal terms. This is driven by a desire for conceptual clarity and coherence in the understanding of God. Central proponents of such an understanding are Richard Swinburne and Alvin Plantinga. This conception of God in one sense bears many resemblances to an apophatic and Thomistic understanding in that God is conceptualized as an almighty, all knowing creator of the universe. Unlike some other modern conceptualizations like process theology and open theism that may deny omniscience or omnipotence of God, the proponents of this approach wish to maintain these traditional divine attributes. I will refer to such an understanding as Swinburnian theism. However, for these thinkers, the tendency to use language in a primarily univocal way to predicate about the nature of God, renders the concept of God rather different than the approaches discussed above. God appears to be graspable by the mind in a way that was not the case for the apophatic thinkers or Thomas. This leads to an understanding of God as a mind or spirit possessing certain divine attributes and being the cause of the physical world. Thus, by conceiving of God as possessing attributes, it amounts to a denial of divine simplicity as it is conceived by Thomas. Thomas is in many ways a point of reference for the changes these thinkers make to the doctrine of God in their quest for coherence. The emphasis on conceptual clarity means that God as the ultimate foundation of reality must be intelligible, raising the question of whether such a project is even possible as it seems to require a neutral and objective perspective from which humans are to investigate the most basic nature of reality. In the following I will explore the understanding of God found in the thinking of Richard Swinburne as well as Alvin Plantinga's conception of God's relationship to properties.

4.1 Richard Swinburne – God as a Necessarily Existing Spirit

Swinburnian theism obviously derives its name from Richard Swinburne, one of the chief architects of such an understanding of God. Swinburne is an influential contemporary

Christian philosopher, so moving now from Dionysius, Maximus, and Thomas, I not only move from conceptions of God with clear Neoplatonic ties, but I also turn from medieval to modern analytic philosophy. The basic questions with which the doctrine of God of Swinburne is concerned are still much the same. Questions about the nature of predicating about God, the nature of divine existence and questions about the status of God's aseity in relation to his properties are central. The emphasis on conceptual clarity and the desire to conceptualize God in a way analyzable in a way that makes it possible to conceive of God coherently in a univocal (or mostly univocal)[65] fashion drives this understanding of God to some rather different conclusions than what I have discussed above. In his book *The Coherence of Theism* Swinburne lays out an understanding of God and argues that this understanding meets the criteria for coherence. His task, then, is twofold: first, to establish satisfactory criteria for coherence and second, to provide a doctrine of God that meets these criteria. I will concern myself primarily with laying out Swinburne's conception of God in this chapter, though this certainly cannot be completely divorced from the question of coherence, since the desire for coherence is central to the ways in which Swinburne diverges from Thomas. Swinburne begins by arguing about the nature of coherence and coherent propositions. For him, coherent propositions cannot be self-contradictory and must be such that they can conceivably be thought to be real. Thus, propositions like "the square root of purple is 3" are incoherent, not because it is false, but because purple is not a quantitative entity of which one can calculate its square root. Coherent propositions need not be true, it only requires that one can imagine what it would be like for such a proposition and propositions entailed by it to be true.[66] The task then is to articulate an understanding of God that is coherent in such a way.

4.1.1   Language and Theology

The question of theological language is central to the discussion of the conception of God. For the apophatic tradition, the metaphysics of being leads to the impossibility of predicating about God's nature, whereas for Thomas, analogical predicates are intended to serve as a middle road between univocism and equivocism in order to maintain the possibility of predicating about God while still maintaining divine simplicity. The question is no less central for Swinburne, yet the goal of his conception of God is one of coherence and conceptual

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[65] Swinburne does account for a form of talking about God that he calls analogical, which I will get to.
[66] Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism, 13.*

clarity which leads him to consider the question of language afresh. Swinburne starts by considering Thomistic analogical predicates and argues that such predication must ultimately involve an element of univocity to be intelligible. [67] Thus he agrees with the criticism of John Duns Scotus and William of Ockham and argues that Thomas' doctrine of analogy boil down to the type of predication also advocated by Scotus an Ockham.[68] Swinburne agrees that words, in the way that they are predicated of God, differ from the way they are in creatures. Since, if God is the source of good, for example, his goodness differs from that of creatures. But this does not change the fundamental meaning of the predicate itself. Thus, both God and a man, say, Socrates, are good. The difference is in the extent to which they possess this quality and is thus quantitative, not qualitative. [69] Swinburne's project of coherence and conceptual clarity requires univocity when predicating of God as much as possible. Still, Swinburne concedes, it may at times be appropriate to use words in new senses, which he calls analogical senses (not to be confused with Thomistic analogical predication). [70] By analogical sense Swinburne means using words in ways that stretch the semantic and syntactic rules for how these words are ordinarily used. Yet even then, for Swinburne, one must specify the ways in which these rules are modified.[71] Thus, even with analogical senses these predicates must be conceptually clear as to maintain the possibility for coherence. For the purposes of my discussion later in chapter five I will consider this as a version of univocal predication as it is still reducible to clear words in ordinary senses by virtue of being explainable in such terms. Swinburne also considers apophatic theology and regards the *via negativa* as inadequate as for him it is insufficient to express what one wishes to say about God. It is not enough to negate what God is not, according to Swinburne (I will return to this point in chapter five). [72] Swinburne's discussion of theological language makes a clear that to conceptualize God coherently, it requires univocal predicates.

4.1.2 A Coherent God

Having clarified questions regarding the nature of theological language, Swinburne sets out to articulate precisely what kind of understanding of God he is defending:

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[67] Ibid, 81.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Ibid, 52.
[70] Ibid, 62.
[71] Ibid, 81.
[72] Ibid, 82.

> "(…) I shall consider what it means to claim that there exists eternally an omnipresent spirit, free, creator of the universe, omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good, and a source of moral obligation(…)".[73]

In addition, he defends the claims that God is eternal and immutable as well as a necessary existing being. According to the discussion of theological language preceding this statement, it seems that Swinburne intends this concept of God to be understood univocally. That is to say, the claim that there exists such an entity as described in the quotation above, understood according to the ordinary (or analogical as described above) senses of the words. Of particular interest for the topic of this thesis are the claims that God is an omnipresent spirit, the creator of the universe, eternal and immutable as well as the question of necessity as it applies to God's existence. These claims will be my focus in the following.

Swinburne conceives of God as an omnipresent spirit. Thus, he is an immaterial being, as opposed to embodied, who is nevertheless a person and this person is present everywhere.[74] To investigate this claim, Swinburne considers the nature of personhood. Criteria for personhood that Swinburne regards as viable are such as the ability to communicate by language and the ability to have second order wants (that is, not mere wants but the ability to want to want X or want not to want X). These serve to distinguish between persons and other conscious entities like animals.[75] To evaluate the question of whether God is a person, Swinburne must establish that God meets these criteria. Swinburne argues that it is coherent to suppose that God as an omnipresent spirit can have second order wants, as a conscious being, and that God also can communicate by language. Furthermore, Swinburne denies that personhood is tied to bodily continuity such that God, as an unembodied spirit is indeed compatible with personhood.[76] Swinburne then extrapolates from the nature of personhood and his conception of God that God fits this description. Thus, considering this a coherent proposition, Swinburne defends the claim that God is a person.

The next point in question is that of omnipresence. Swinburne bases his understanding on that of Thomas, conceiving of omnipresence by virtue of God's being the source and cause of existence in everything contingent. Swinburne conceives of omnipresence as God's ability to observe everything that is going on in the world at any moment. However, since God is conceived as a spirit, God is not a material being and thus lacks senses, leading Swinburne to

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[73] Ibid, 99.
[74] Ibid, 101.
[75] Ibid, 103.
[76] Ibid, 127.

conceive of God achieving this without the aid of bodily intermediaries such as eyes and ears.[77] This is therefore closely related to the understanding of omniscience, though I will not discuss that in further detail. To conceptualize this, Swinburne considers a thought experiment in which he invites the reader to imagine oneself becoming suddenly capable of perceiving everything that happens in the world without the aid of eyes and ears, becoming able to move objects without using one's body, remaining able to have wants, fears, thoughts etc., ultimately becoming one possessing the qualities that he ascribes to God.[78] While this may seem a strange thought experiment, it is intended to show that it is at least coherent to suppose that there might be such a being. That is to say, there is nothing inherently self-contradictory to invalidate the coherence of such an idea. The point being that it can be conceived that there is such a person as an omnipresent spirit, which Swinburne takes to support his contention that this is a coherent claim.[79] Thus, this is a conception that can be evaluated as coherent leading Swinburne a step closer to his coherent understanding of God.

Swinburne discusses the understanding of God as the creator of the universe. The understanding of God as creator must for Swinburne be nuanced to specify that God is not the creator of himself, as this would be incoherent as this would imply that a cause is its own effect and vice versa. Furthermore, Swinburne denies that God is the creator of logically necessary truths like mathematical and logical truths, which leaves him with God's creating applying only to "all logically contingent things apart from himself."[80] [81] The term "create" is understood by Swinburne to mean not simply that God brings about everything that exists, as this is open to the objection that many things are brought about by other means, such as a chair being brought about by a craftsman and so on. He conceives of the doctrine of creation as follows:

> "the doctrine that God himself either brings about or makes or permits some other being to bring about the existence of all logically contingent things that exist (i.e. have existed, exist, or will exist), apart from himself."[82]

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[77] Ibid, 106.
[78] Ibid, 107.
[79] Ibid, 107.
[80] Ibid, 130.
[81] This definition is somewhat ambiguous as it might be interpreted as stating that God is part of the category "logically contingent things", but not his own creator. Swinburne does not conceive of God as a contingent being.
[82] Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*, 131.

Swinburne's concept of creation thus accounts for what one might call secondary causes. Considering what Swinburne has said before about theological language, I take this to mean that God is the efficient cause of the universe and everything logically contingent or that he is permits whatever other efficient causes there might be. Thus, it seems that Swinburne distinguishes between the creator and creation in terms of causality as well as contingency of existence, with the implication that of logically necessary truths which also exist necessarily are not created. This raises the question of divine aseity, but I will consider this when I turn to Alvin Plantinga below.

The eternality and immutability have been traditionally ascribed to God. Generally, eternality has been conceived as timelessness or atemporality in the sense that God does not undergo successive temporal states. Similarly, immutability has been conceived in an absolute sense as a total changelessness. This is expressed clearly in Thomas, for example, as the simple God cannot have any accidents or potentiality and thus there is no logical possibility for change of any kind. Swinburne, on the other hand, takes a different approach to these concepts. In terms of immutability, Swinburne distinguishes between strong and weak immutability. The former being the kind found in Thomas where God as simple is not able to change at all, whereas the latter involves the possibility to for God to change in some respects. Swinburne regards the conception of God as immutable in the strong sense as inadequate he sees it as incompatible with divine freedom. It is thus rejected.[83] Swinburne then develops his concept of weak immutability based on the relationship between freedom, omniscience, and goodness in God.[84] If God is good, then he will always do what is good. If God is omniscient, then he will know all true propositions. As free, God will always be able to choose what he wants to do. These three added together result in a God that always will do good, always knows what is good, and always is free to do it.[85] For such a being it is therefore logically impossible to change in character, as that would involve some discrepancy in at least one of the properties mentioned. Thus, such a being would be immutable in the weak sense. Still, as God is a person, he can relate to creation and thus still be free. Thus, Swinburne conceives of divine immutability in terms of consistency of character, and not in the strong sense which he regards as Neoplatonic baggage lacking sufficient biblical basis.[86] Similarly Swinburne also rejects the idea of divine timelessness as Neoplatonic influence that is not necessary to carry

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[83] Ibid, 222.
[84] Ibid, 219.
[85] Ibid.
[86] Ibid, 224-225.

on in the Christian theistic tradition. He prefers rather to conceive of God as eternal in the sense that he has existed as far back in time to the point of having no beginning and that he will continue to do so in the future. God, then, is not timeless, but simply exists forever throughout all duration of time.[87]

This raises the question of why such a being like God exists at all, and why God is a certain way rather than another. Up to this point Swinburne might give the impression of claiming that there just arbitrarily happens to exist the sort of being with the specific qualities of traditional theism. Swinburne's answer to this is that God exists necessarily. But that is not to say that he believes that God exists by logical necessity. Rather, Swinburne distinguishes between a set of different types of necessity, then consider in what sense God might exist necessarily. Swinburne wishes to avoid basing the claim of God's necessary existence on logical necessity, as this would make the proposition "God exists" equivalent to an analytic statement as the ontological argument attempts to show. Swinburne argues that one may say God is necessary according to three of his criteria for necessity, but he prefers his criteria D as the one the theist wishes to attribute to God.[88] I will focus on this criterion. Criterion D states that:

> "A proposition p is necessary if and only if it is true, but the truth of what it states is not (was not, or will not be) dependent on anything, the description of which is not entailed by p."[89]

This implies that whatever exists independently is a necessary brute fact, which is how Swinburne conceives of God's necessary existence.[90] It is not the case, then, that there is some logical principle by which God needs to conform in order to exist. Rather, God simply exists independently as a brute fact. Swinburne considers that God is not the creator of himself (as this would be incoherent), and since nothing else has the power to create him, it follows that it cannot be by chance that God exists. That God exists must therefore for Swinburne simply be the way things are,[91] which Swinburne calls this ontological necessity. Since God is the ultimate object to which one can reason, establishing a principle for the ultimate ground of existence, simply is not possible. There is nothing more to reason towards, nothing more to look for, nothing more to explain. The fact that God exists, is thus the end of

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[87] Ibid, 218.
[88] Ibid, 276-77.
[89] Ibid, 258.
[90] Ibid, 277.
[91] Ibid, 256.

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explanations. Here Swinburne is close to the Thomistic concept of God as *ipsum esse*, yet he rejects what for Thomas follows from this, namely divine simplicity for the reasons described above. The understanding of God's existence as ontologically necessary therefore also forms the basis for Swinburne's understanding divine aseity as God exists *a se* by virtue of existing necessarily. Swinburne's alternative to divine simplicity is therefore that God exists necessarily *a se* as a brute fact with the attributes and properties that he possesses.

A foundational concept for Swinburne's understanding of God is his understanding of God in univocal terms, desiring to speak and conceive of God with ordinary terms in ordinary senses This leads Swinburne to conceive of divine immutability as consistency of character, as a person existing eternally throughout time. Thus, rather than affirm simplicity, Swinburne affirms God as a brute fact. The quest for coherence and conceptual clarity has thus led to several revisions in the doctrine of God found in Thomas. Apophaticism is thus also incompatible with Swinburnian theism as the idea that God is beyond being and incomprehensible would not satisfy what Swinburne believes the theist wants to say about the God. Rather, for Swinburne, God's distinctiveness as creator is not due to his being wholly different by virtue of not possessing being. Rather, the difference between creator and creation lies in the mode of existence attributed to God and creation. God exists necessarily as a brute fact, whereas created things are contingent. I will now briefly discuss Alvin Plantinga who take a similar approach before turning to my final chapter in which I will evaluate the different approaches to the doctrine of God explored so far.

4.2   Alvin Plantinga – God, Aseity and, Abstract Objects

Alvin Plantinga has provided several contributions to Christian philosophy, including a version of the ontological argument for God's existence using modal logic, the free will defense of the problem of evil, and his work on religious epistemology arguing that if God exists, then beliefs produced by the *sensus divinitatis* probably have rational warrant. He has also written on the doctrine of God, criticizing the concept of divine simplicity, and arguing for a different conception of the divine nature in his short book *Does God have a Nature?* which I will look at briefly. I will refrain from addressing whether Plantinga's criticism of the traditional Thomistic conception of simplicity is successful until the next chapter. For now, I will consider Plantinga's understanding of God's having a nature.

Plantinga sets out to ask the question of the nature of God. What is God like, and what is his relationship to forms and abstract objects? For example, if God is the sovereign creator of everything, does that include the number 7? What about his own properties like sovereignty and goodness? Christians usually wish to claim that God possesses these, but if these are properties that make up God, then God seems to be dependent on them for being the way that he is.[92] The problem is similar to the ancient dilemma of Euthyphro: is God good because he conforms to goodness, or is goodness whatever God makes it to be? The former seems to deny divine aseity, the latter moral realism, as goodness becomes the result of arbitrary divine decision making. The concept of independently existing properties therefore challenges divine aseity and sovereignty (as objects existing independently of God would mean that they are outside of his control). This apparent incompatibility of God's being sovereign and *a se* and the existence of abstract objects independent of him Plantinga calls the aseity-sovereignty intuition. The answer to these problems Plantinga explores by considering the question of whether God has a nature. For perhaps these properties of goodness, power and self-existence are inherent to the divine nature, such that if a being like God exists at all, then he possesses these attributes necessarily.[93] If not, this poses a challenge for a traditional conception of God as sovereign and *a se*.

One answer to the question of whether God has a nature, is that such knowledge is simply inaccessible. Plantinga then begins by considering the claim that none of human concepts apply to God. Since Kant it has been claimed that our human concepts for understanding the world are imposed on reality and hence does not apply to the reality in itself. Neither then does it apply to God since God transcends human experience. But in making this claim, one assumes that one knows what it means for God to transcend human experience, therefore at least one concept, namely that of knowing what it means to transcend human experience, applies to God. Plantinga therefore rejects this option as incoherent.[94]

Plantinga moves on to consider the Thomistic idea of divine simplicity. This understanding answers in the affirmative the question of whether God has a nature. However, it does so by stating that God is simply identical with it. That is to say, God's nature is identical with his existence, hence there are no accidents in God, as otherwise God would be reducible and therefore dependent on a set of properties. This implies that there are no

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[92] Plantinga, *Does God have a Nature,* 5-6.
[93] Ibid, 7.
[94] Ibid, 24.

distinctions in God, so goodness, power and existence are all the same. This doctrine preserves God's aseity, but Plantinga argues that it is incoherent for two reasons: First, he argues, this would mean that properties like power and mercifulness are identical, which they are not. And second, since God is identical with his properties, and God really only has one property, then he is a property and therefore an abstract object.[95] This option is therefore also rejected.

Another option is that of nominalism, which Plantinga takes to mean that there are no properties, but logical necessities still exist.[96] Since the problem to be addressed is the question of God's aseity and sovereignty and their compatibility with God's having properties, why not reject the idea of properties altogether? If that is the case, then one can claim that whatever God is like, this is not the product of him possessing a certain set of properties. This would mean that God is not dependent on properties outside of himself for his existence,[97] so that the problem of God's aseity and relationship to properties does not even arise. While this solution may seem attractive, Plantinga argues that the nominalist solution fails. Even if there are no properties, the facts of the world and logically necessary relations still apply. Claiming that there is no property of being red or color does not mean that whatever objects happen to be red necessarily are colored.[98] Such logical relations would still be logically necessary and therefore outside of God's control. That is to say, the question of God's control over these properties is distinct from the question of whether the properties exist in the first place. Thus, nominalism does not solve the problem for Plantinga. In rejecting both nominalism and divine simplicity Plantinga argues that both these solutions misdiagnose the problem as being one of God's ontological relationship to properties and argues that the real problem is God's control over properties.[99]

The nominalist might go a step further and deny that there are any necessary truths. If so, everything becomes possible, even the logically impossible. This view is known as possibilism. Plantinga distinguishes between universal possibilism, that there are no necessary truths and no impossible falsehoods, and limited possibilism, that God has made certain truths necessary but that he could have done otherwise. Plantinga focuses on universal possibilism. One could argue that this view should be rejected as being incoherent as well. Since universal

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[95] Ibid, 47.
[96] Ibid, 64.
[97] Ibid, 63.
[98] Ibid, 86.
[99] Ibid, 125.

possibilism asserts that God's infinite power entails that there are no necessary truths, one might object that the proposition "if God is infinitely powerful, then there are no necessary truths" is a necessary truth, and so it is incoherent.[100] But the fact that this conclusion follows, is not as strong of an objection since on universal possibilism it seems that God could have made even this different if he so desired. Plantinga then concludes that this view cannot be shown to be either incoherent or unintelligible but rejects it for being strongly counterintuitive, as it would entail that God has no nature.[101]

Plantinga's solution to the problem of the divine nature is that God indeed has a nature, but God is not identical with it. Plantinga thus agrees with Thomas that God has a nature but rejects divine simplicity. Plantinga's alternative is that God, with all the properties essential to his being, exists necessarily. If so, God can have a nature and exist necessarily, similar to Swinburne's understanding. Therefore, if God exists necessarily, then God has a nature and there are at least some necessary propositions, like "God necessarily exists" and "God knows that he does not exist contingently". Plantinga asks the question of whether God could know that he does not exist. According to absolute possibilism this is possible; since God is sovereign, this entails that God is in control of everything. Therefore, every truth is within his control, including the logical absurdity of whether it is true that God is aware of his own non-existence.[102] The alternative is that there are certain propositions that are logically impossible, for instance "God is aware of his own non-existence". This would in effect admitting that there is a divine nature, as the inability to be aware of his own non-existence would entail that this is an essential property of God, from which it follows that God has a nature. In the end this question boils down to a conflict of intuition of whether to accept absolute possibilism or that God indeed has a nature, as Plantinga sees it.[103] Plantinga goes on to suppose that it then makes sense that if God exists necessarily, he may possess the traditional divine attributes of omniscience, omnipotence, and goodness essentially. Furthermore, if God possesses these attributes by virtue of his nature, then he also must affirm the existence of whatever abstract objects may be as this would be implied by divine sovereignty and aseity. Plantinga states that

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[100] Ibid, 121.
[101] Ibid, 125.
[102] Ibid, 134.
[103] Ibid, 137.

> "Indeed, for any necessarily existing abstract object O, the property of affirming the existence of O is part of God's nature. It is thus part of God's nature to say, "Let there be the number 1; let there be 2; let there be 3".[104]

Plantinga then solves the problem of the aseity-sovereignty intuition by proposing that some abstract objects like numbers indeed are uncreated and exist necessarily, but God affirms their existence, and their truth is arguably even grounded in the fact that God affirms them, which would make them dependent on or even part of God's nature.[105]

In summary Plantinga wishes to uphold traditional divine attributes including the aseity and sovereignty of God while maintaining that God necessarily exists. In doing so Plantinga has to reject Thomism, nominalism and universal possibilism and affirm that God has a nature, hinting at the possibility of logic and necessary abstract objects being part of God's nature.

4.3   The God of Coherence and Properties

Swinburnian theism takes a rather different approach to understanding God than does apophaticism and Thomism. Fundamental to this understanding is the idea of predicating about God in ordinary senses of terms used, conceiving of God as a necessarily existing entity possessing the qualities of a personal agent without a body. Thus, God is understood as a spirit for Richard Swinburne. This immaterial person then possesses the traditional divine attributes of omnipotence, omnipresence, omniscience, goodness, eternality.

This raises the question of God's relationship to the attributes he possesses. According to apophaticism one cannot predicate about the divine nature and so this problem seems irrelevant. According to Thomism (at least as conceived by the thinkers discussed in this chapter) the problem is solved by saying that God is identical with his properties, which is the doctrine of divine simplicity. The adherents of Swinburnian theism argue that divine simplicity is incoherent as properties ascribed to God are said to be identical when they are, according to them, obviously not identical. Plantinga has argued that this reduces God to a property. The solution to this problem is to say that God exists necessarily, whether by ontological necessity (as Swinburne argues) or logical necessity. The divine attributes are thus

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[104] Ibid, 142.
[105] Ibid, 146.

necessarily part of God's nature, and he cannot be any other way. This then serves to form the basis for the doctrine of divine aseity as divine simplicity is not an option.

This understanding of theism has a clear tendency towards univocism in its predication of God, leading to the rejection of divine simplicity, making it quite a different apprehension of theism than apophaticism and Thomism discussed above, both influenced by Neoplatonism. The Swinburnian theists do not appear interested in preserving the Neoplatonic heritage in the Christian understanding of God, leading them to reject apophaticism and Thomism and revise the doctrine of God. In doing so, they need to revise the doctrine of aseity to fit with a God that is not metaphysically simple, and so God, according to such an understanding, must exist by sheer necessity. Such a God possesses parts distinguishable from himself, and as such, it is difficult to conceive how God is not in some sense dependent on non-God entities for his existence. Furthermore, there appears to be a desire to take Biblical statements about God acting in the world "at face value", raising the question of whether this as a hermeneutical approach takes for granted its own metaphysical assumptions.

5   The Coherence of Mystery

Having surveyed the three different approaches to the doctrine of God, it is clear that there are significant disagreements between them. For the apophatic thinkers, the creator-creation distinction shapes their theology with its fullest force rendering the divine nature inaccessible to the intellect of created beings. Since being in the Neoplatonic sense is a thing's whatness, it presupposes definability and therefore limitation, derivativeness, and finitude. God is therefore beyond being as he is none of these things. Apophaticism takes as one of its basic points that the divine is infinite and therefore unknowable in terms of his nature. Thomas Aquinas, while occasionally addressing God as beyond being,[106] prefers conceptualizing God in terms of existence. Thomas' God as fully actualized existence cannot be dependent on anything outside of himself and is therefore a simple being, he is existence itself. Predicating about God is still not straight forwardly univocal. Rather, Thomas develops the concept of analogical predication attempting to reconcile the infinite God with the predicates of finite beings. Thomas can be interpreted as more or less in line with Neoplatonism, and this is thus a debated subject. The Swinburnian thinkers reject apophatic theology and Thomism in their quest for coherence and conceptual clarity in their understanding of God. In doing so, they dispense both with the *via negativa* of apophatic theology and a Thomistic understanding of analogical predication in favor of univocism. The result is a necessary existing spirit possessing traditional divine attributes and being the creator of all contingent existence.

In this chapter I will discuss the different approaches to the doctrine of God laid out in the previous chapters. Since one of the main points of reference for the Swinburnian thinkers is Thomism and what is perceived as its inadequacies, I change the order of the more descriptive chapters above, starting with Thomas, moving to Swinburnian theism, and finally apophaticism. My contention is that it is desirable for Christian theology to maintain a doctrine of God that includes simplicity, immutability (in Swinburne's strong sense) and timelessness, as this provides a stronger affirmation of aseity than a necessarily existing God possessing distinct properties. However, Swinburnian theism poses serious difficulties for such a conception of God, calling into question its coherence and therefore its place in theology. In the first part of this chapter, then, I will discuss the merits of the objections against Thomism from the adherents of Swinburnian theism. Next, I will consider at what cost the Swinburnian theists are able to dispense with the perceived incoherence of the Thomistic

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[106] Perl, *Thinking Being,* 159.

conception of God. I will argue that the revisions they make are quite significant to the point of challenging divine aseity, raising the question of whether there is another way of approaching the doctrine of God. I will also touch upon the lack of Christological significance for the Swinburnian approach. Lastly, I will argue that while a univocal-analogical interpretation of Thomism has been called into question by the Swinburnian thinkers, they have done so at too great a cost to the understanding of God as *a se*. I will argue that an apophatic understanding of God possesses the proper metaphysical tools for avoiding the criticisms aimed at Thomism without sacrificing a conception of God as *a se* and simple, though this requires accepting that God's nature is ultimately beyond intelligibility.

A reasonable starting point for a Christian doctrine of God is the basic distinction between creation and creator. These are qualitatively different as the former is dependent and contingent whereas the latter as the origin of contingency cannot itself be contingent. A basic criterion for the doctrine of God, then, is the concept of aseity, as this is fundamentally what distinguishes God from what is created. Is God to be conceived as a simple being? If so, that might be helpful for conceptualizing a God that is not dependent on properties outside of himself. Other options include conceiving of God as existing in the way that he does by sheer necessity. In the following discussion I will refer to a concept which I call "classical theism".[107] By this I mean a conception of God as metaphysically simple, and that God therefore is absolutely immutable, timeless and *a se*. This is in line with a basic Neoplatonic conception of God, and I take both the apophatic and Thomistic approach to be generally in line with what I call classical theism. Another central (and related) point is the nature of predicates concerning God. How can one predicate about God in a way that is both consistent with divine aseity and simultaneously avoid making incoherent statements? I will also discuss the significance of Christology with respect to Swinburnian theism and apophaticism, as this highlights a crucial difference between them. Yet divine aseity and the nature of predicates concerning God will be the two main issues in the following discussion.

5.1 The Coherence of Thomism

In chapter 3 I noted how the different interpretations of Thomas's understanding of analogical predication leads to different views of his entire theology. If, as Eric Perl argues, Thomas is in

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[107] The terminology of "classical theism" is also used by Brower, see Jeffrey E. Brower, "Making Sense of Divine Simplicity," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*, 25, 1 (2008), 3.

basic agreement with the Neoplatonic tradition as expressed in Dionysius and Maximus then the comments I will make concerning apophatic theology at the end of this chapter will also be broadly applicable to Thomas. However, if one takes analogical predication to include an element of univocity, a way to predicate positively about God, this makes Thomas quite distinct from the apophatic thinkers, making him susceptible to criticism in terms of the coherence of his claims concerning God. Of particular relevance is the nature of simplicity, immutability, and God's relationship to properties or forms. Assuming a univocal-analogical interpretation of Thomas, how does he fare against the criticism of Swinburne and Plantinga? While their criticisms are many, I have grouped them together in two main criticisms: first, the criticism of the coherence of divine simplicity, and second, criticism of the nature of God's immutability and timelessness leading to fatalism and the inability for God to have real relationships. These objections are also interrelated as it is by virtue of God's simple nature that he does not possess accidents, because of which he is immutable etc. Still, the former is focused on the internal coherence of the concept, whereas the latter focuses on the possibility of such a being acting in the world.

5.1.1   *Properties and Divine Simplicity*

Consider Plantinga's criticism of Thomism that divine simplicity makes divine properties identical. As God is simple according to Thomas, God's essence and existence are identical, possessing no accidents. Neither is God dependent on any properties outside of himself, as that would mean that there was something other than God on which he is dependent. In such a being any attribute would not be distinguishable from another since to be God (with all his being) is simply to exist. Thus, God's power becomes identical with his love, knowledge and so on. This Plantinga charges to be incoherent as these attributes obviously refer to different properties. Love and knowledge, for instance, is clearly not the same thing according to Plantinga, and so he concludes that divine simplicity is false. The Thomist might respond that Plantinga ignores the very premise of divine simplicity that in God the distinction between the subject and its properties does not materialize. Thus, for Plantinga to criticize divine simplicity based on the lack of differentiation of the divine properties is simply to beg the question of then nature of these attributes of God in the first place. According to an interpretation of Thomas like that of Eric Perl, this might be plausible as he can account for Thomas's understanding of simplicity based on a fundamentally apophatic approach. However, taking a more univocal understanding of Thomistic analogical predication, one is

forced to answer the question of whether there can be such a being that simultaneously can be said to possess power, goodness, knowledge etc. According to this understanding, if simplicity is understood in terms of properties being identical, Plantinga seems right that simplicity would be having one's cake and eat it too. Divine simplicity conceived as identical properties does cause logical problems.

Plantinga goes further and argues that the identification of God with his nature not only renders clearly distinct properties in God indistinguishable, but it even reduces God to a property. Since God's properties are identical by virtue of the doctrine of simplicity, God does not have a multiplicity of properties; he only has one. And since God is identical with his properties, which is really one property, it follows that God is a property. Jeffrey E. Brower has argued in his paper *Making Sense of Divine Simplicity* that there is another way to interpret divine simplicity. He concedes Plantinga's point that if simplicity is to be interpreted in terms of divine properties, then indeed it follows that God is a property.[108] However, Brower argues that if one conceives of predicates about God as referring to God as the truthmaker for that predicate, rather than referring to properties, this might solve the problem. Saying that the simple God is "good" on this account is not to say that God is or possesses the property of being good, but rather that the simple undivided divine nature constitutes the truthmaker for predicates that may be distinct properties in creatures, but are not so in God.[109] Saying that God is good on this account would be saying that the simple God is such that the claim that God is good is true, but denying that this is by virtue of God possessing the distinct property of goodness. Rather it is true because God's nature serves as the truthmaker for the predicate. This then would be the case for all true predicates of God. Brower claims that

> "In taking the referents of abstract expressions to be truthmakers, it places no restriction whatsoever on the nature or ontological category to which they belong. For the same reason, the referents of such expressions can, at least in principle, be identified not only with concrete particulars in the case of God, but also with properties in the case of creatures."[110]

Accordingly predicating goodness of God does not refer to a property in him, but rather to its truthmaker, namely God's simple nature. The same thing could of course be said of other predicates like power and knowledge. God's simple nature can then serve as the truthmaker for all these predicates, avoiding the inconvenient implication of these predicates referring to

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[108] Ibid, 7.
[109] Ibid, 17.
[110] Ibid, 18-19.

properties. Brower's conception of predication in terms of truthmakers seems to me an improvement over conceiving of divine simplicity in terms of properties. But in doing so it seems that Brower moves away from predicating about the divine nature itself and is rather saying that whatever God is like (as simple and devoid of parts) is sufficient as a truthmaker for the predicate that God is good. There thus seems to be a tendency towards a more apophatic conception of divine simplicity: rather than trying to justify predicates about God based on knowledge of the makeup of his nature, one must simply concur that God's nature, whatever it is, is identical with the truthmaker for the predicates made of him.[111] I will return to this in 5.3.2 of this chapter.

It seems that Plantinga is successful in rendering a conception of divine simplicity in terms of divine properties as unsatisfactory and incoherent. If God is identical with his properties, and he only has one property (namely himself), then he is a property. I also believe Brower to be headed in the right direction interpreting the doctrine not in terms of properties, but in terms of truthmakers. This is also a step towards an apophatic conception of the doctrine of God. For now, I concede Plantinga's point that divine simplicity conceptualized in terms of predicates about divine properties is incoherent.

5.1.2   Immutability, Timelessness, and Created Beings

Turning now to criticisms of the possibility of God having real relationships to the world, as well as being free. According to the Thomistic understanding of God, God is a metaphysically simple being. Hence there are no corporeal or metaphysical parts that make up God, as this would make him reducible to his constituents. Furthermore, a simple being must be immutable, possessing no accidents or potentiality that can be acted upon or changed, since this would in effect be denying simplicity, implying that some aspects of God are interchangeable. Rather, God is for Thomas, as for Aristotle the unmoved mover. Furthermore, for Thomas, simplicity and immutability imply timelessness, as any being undergoing subsequent temporal states cannot be immutable. But this raises the question or whether God himself can be considered a free being and how he can relate to the world.

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[111] This then raises the question of the source of these predicates, which could be from sources of divine revelation. I will not pursue this further due to the scope of the thesis, however.

Swinburne charges the Thomistic understanding of simplicity with making God static by virtue of the absolute immutability that follows from it.[112] Similarly William Lane Craig and J.P. Moreland argue that such a God leads to everything happening by strict logical necessity thus leading to fatalism or determinism.[113] Thus, according to this line of thinking, this results in a God that has no real relations whatsoever, God's acts in history and relation to creation is merely an illusion of what is really a thoroughly deterministic system. This would not just be deterministic in a Calvinist sense (that is, by virtue of God's eternal all-encompassing decree), but by logical necessity, by virtue of God's very nature. God, then, cannot be free in creating or relating to the world. Since there are no accidents in God, there is no change, no acting, no movement. Rather, God must do everything by necessity of his own nature, removing any possibility of divine freedom and relationships to the world, rendering God static.

From the perspective of a classically oriented understanding of God, the charge of no personal relationships in God seems to require that God would be a being much like created beings with a consciousness undergoing successive temporal states. This is precisely the kind of being envisioned by the thinkers in the tradition of Swinburne. However, this conception of God seems awfully anthropomorphic. Certainly, it seems plausible that the almighty sustainer of creation might relate somewhat differently to creation than created beings. But this point illustrates quite well the tendency of Swinburnian thinkers to conceive of God as a being among beings. God, according to Swinburne, is after all a spirit, a conscious being without a body possessing the traditional divine attributes while being unchangeable in character, nevertheless undergoing temporal changes. For Swinburne God is indeed the greatest being, but a being still. And so, God must relate to persons like a person, otherwise it is difficult to conceive how God can coherently relate to the world. Anthropomorphisms aside, the question remains whether such a being as a simple God possessing no accidents can relate to creation, given that he immutable and timeless.

For the purposes of the present discussion, I am still assuming an interpretation of Thomas as employing some univocal element in analogical predication of God. Given this assumption, the objection from Swinburne seems quite substantial. If God has no accidents, then indeed he is immutable and cannot change, not even with respect to interaction with

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[112] Swinburne, *Coherence of Theism,* 222.

[113] J.P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 525.

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others, as that implies the possibility of being acted upon which requires potentiality. Thus, if one wishes to conceive of the Thomistic God in these terms it is difficult to imagine that this can be reconciled with any form of ordinary understanding of reciprocal relationships. Consider the concept of divine freedom. This question is certainly related to the question of God's relationship to creation but focuses more specifically on the internal workings of God irrespective of creation. Here it seems that the Thomist might have a rebuttal in terms of what constitutes freedom. If one conceives of freedom in a libertarian sense, one is usually referring to a person's ability to choose without the influence of pre-determined causes. The Thomist might object that true freedom is the ability to choose the good over its opposite. In that case, God's possessing goodness and omnipotence will result in the ultimate freedom as God would always know what is good, and always have the power to choose it. While this is a plausible concept of freedom, it does not address the problem of explaining the relationship of God to creation. In this context it makes the equivocal fallacy by redefining the concept of freedom in question. Therefore, it still does not address the question of fatalism. Another rebuttal might be that God is relating to creation constantly by virtue of his omnipresent sustaining of everything that exists. Certainly, this provides the framework for some relationship to creation, but God's sustaining presence is precisely the opposite of reciprocal. Indeed, if God is without accidents, then nothing in him can have reciprocal relationships, which, coupled with divine sovereignty, makes libertarian freedom for creatures seemingly impossible, even if God himself can be free in the moral sense described above. Such a position then seems unsatisfactory if one believes that creaturely libertarian freedom is essential for moral responsibility. One alternative would be to join the Calvinists and argue for some sort of compatibility of theological determinism and moral responsibility. The nature of moral responsibility deserves more attention than I can devote to it in this thesis, however. But once again, I note how this problem arises based on a conception of God presupposing the possibility of predicating about his nature, where God is thought to be a being that makes decisions in time in the context of reciprocal relationships. Given these metaphysical assumptions, however, it seems the Swinburnian theists are successful in mounting a powerful argument against the coherence of Thomistic conception of divine timelessness, immutability, and the possibility of such a God relating to the world.

It seems that Swinburne and Plantinga successfully show that interpretations of Thomas that takes analogical predication to involve an element of univocity regarding the doctrine of God is bound to fail. If one interprets divine simplicity in terms of properties, it

reduces God to a property. At the very least this doctrine needs to be re-interpreted perhaps in terms of truthmakers like Brower has suggested. This I argued is a step in the direction of an apophatic approach. Furthermore, there are problems with an understanding of God as immutable in the strong sense and timelessness leading to determinism, and difficulty conceptualizing a coherent relationship to creation. It therefore seems quite right to criticize the seeming implication that this leads to a static God without real relations or freedom. One might take the route of Calvinism and admit a form of theological determinism and attempting to argue for a compatibilist view of human freedom, which might be the only option left if one insists on predicating of God in the way I have assumed here. Theological determinism is a controversial view and is not compatible with libertarian free will in humans, but if one wishes to bite the bullet, one may attempt to do so. If not, as I will argue later, one may have to turn towards some form of apophatic conception of God, and thereby embrace that the mystery of the divine nature, from which these difficult questions arise, is ultimately beyond comprehension.

5.2   The Coherence of Coherent Theism

As I showed in chapter four the analytical philosophical school of Swinburnian theism aspire to coherence and conceptual clarity in their doctrine of God, requiring univocal predication of God which in turn makes his nature analyzable in terms of its coherence.[114] I have already looked at some of the ways these thinkers reject the ideas of Thomas Aquinas for being incoherent based on a univocal interpretation of his doctrine of God. Swinburne and Plantinga do not, however, resolve their problems by rejecting univocal predication, but rather try to revise the doctrine of God to fit with univocism and conceptual clarity, allowing for what they see as a coherent conception of God. But at what price? In this part of the chapter, I will give reasons why I do not think the Swinburnian solution is satisfactory. First, and most importantly, I will argue that the concept of God as a necessary existing spirit or unembodied mind conceived in univocal terms radically revises the doctrine of God in such a way as to

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[114] Swinburne does make the case for what he calls analogical predicates of God in some contexts, even though he prefers using ordinary terms in ordinary senses as much as possible. But even Swinburne's account of analogical predication retains a clear resemblance to the original meaning but modifies the semantic and syntactic rules for a given predicate. In my terminology above, this will still be a way of predicating positively about God in a way that is still quite close to ordinary univocism. Since this is still a form of cataphatic predication, I will still refer to this as univocism, for the sake of clarity. See Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism,* 62.

call divine aseity into question. Second, I will argue that such an approach to God assumes a detached rational objectivity by the direct applicability of coherent propositional statements to the divine nature, which manifests itself in a form of unexamined biblicism, and that such an understanding does away with the centrality of Christology for the doctrine of God.

5.2.1   God of Parts or a Partial God?

Consider the concept of God as an eternal necessarily existing being that created the universe. This God also possesses certain attributes like eternity, goodness, omnipotence, and omniscience, but he is not identical with his essence and therefore not immutable in the classical sense of the doctrine. Such a God can therefore conceivably interact with creation in response to actions of his creatures. One criticism to be leveled at God on the Swinburnian model is that God then becomes dependent on his properties, and thus resembles a created being more than the creator, according to the classical understanding. As has been noted above, this is a consequence of the insistence of conceptualizing God in univocal predicates applied to God in their ordinary senses, leading to a revised doctrine of God. If Thomism is interpreted as attempting to predicate about God, one may credit Swinburne with attempting to improve upon the coherence of such an understanding of God, but this comes at the cost of classical conceptions of divine simplicity, immutability, and timelessness which may call into question divine aseity.

If God is a necessarily existing spirit or unembodied mind possessing the traditional theistic attributes, but not in a metaphysically simple way, then he is such a being with these very attributes by sheer necessity. This makes God radically different than the classical God of the Neoplatonic Christian thinkers, including Thomas. For them, the contingency of all created beings entails that there must be something not contingent, and thus not composed of properties distinguishable from itself. Since the nature of contingency entails dependency, and in this context, dependency on properties or attributes, conceiving of God as composed of properties seems to make God contingent on these properties, calling into question divine aseity. The Swinburnian claim that God exists necessarily does nothing to preserve the kind of aseity that the doctrine of simplicity proposes. God on the Swinburnian model remains composed of properties, regardless of whether this is by necessity. Such a God is not the undifferentiated, simple ground of being, but as one composed of properties, he is arguably more like some sort of demiurge or a superman. A God like this is what David Bentley Hart

in somewhat polemical fashion calls "monopolytheism".[115] That is to say, such a God is no different than any of the polytheistic gods in that he in a composite being, made up of (and in that sense dependent on) properties distinguishable from himself. The distinguishing feature from polytheism, then, would be that one believes that there is merely one such powerful, composite entity, as opposed a pantheon. While this criticism to some presupposes that aseity requires complete independence from distinct properties, it does highlight the glaring differences between the classical and Swinburnian understanding of God, particularly the significance of divine aseity, which I will discuss further below. The Swinburnian understanding is therefore no mere small modification on an otherwise classical Christian understandings of God as simple, but a different metaphysical and epistemological framework altogether.

Plantinga deals with the question of aseity in his book *Does God have a Nature.* He suggests that God's control over abstract objects is the important issue, and not his ontological independence from them. This Plantinga illustrates with the example of absolute possibilism, in which God's aseity can be maintained by rejecting that there are logically necessary truths, thus God would be in control of them.[116] [117] But it seems contradictory to claim that God is in control of properties like logical necessities if they exist completely independent of him. If this is the case, then their existence is outside of God's control, which is precisely the issue to be resolved. One is in my view better off arguing that mathematical objects and necessary truths are somehow part of God's nature, at least if one wants to maintain divine aseity. Whereas Swinburne claims that mathematical objects are simply independent of God, [118] rendering the doctrine of divine aseity in need of further revision, Plantinga entertains the idea that these can be part of God's nature, whereas logical necessities would remain independent and outside of God's control.[119] This understanding of aseity concedes that God is not in control of such necessary truths, but they may be part of his nature. Thus, necessary truths are still outside of God's control even though God affirms them. This form of aseity still has to make God compatible with the existence of non-God necessities existing independently. Furthermore, it seems that the issue of ontological

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[115] David Bentley Hart, *The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 127.

[116] Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?*, 125.

[117] Plantinga rejects absolute possibilism, to be sure, but it illustrates for him that the central issue is that of control.

[118] Swinburne, *Coherence of Theism,* 130.

[119] Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?,* 146.

dependence is still relevant, as the consideration of a God that depends on properties distinct from himself still makes God dependent on these properties, even if this is necessarily the case. This then leads to the revision of aseity from the concept of complete independence of anything non-God to a concept of sheer necessary existence. Once again this is driven by a desire for coherence and conceptual clarity when predicating of God, since this is the reason for rejecting Thomistic simplicity in the first place. Since divine aseity is closely tied to the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo,* and the distinction between creator and creation, this distinction is blurred if there are non-God things that exist independently of God. I contend, therefore, that if it is possible to conceive of the doctrine of God in a way that is compatible with a classical understanding of aseity, and simultaneously avoids the problems of divine simplicity that Swinburne and Plantinga have pointed out, this would be preferable. This I believe is possible by rejecting the concept of a comprehensible God. This I will return to.

The question of why God is the way that he is remains an issue for the Swinburnian approach. Even if God exists necessarily, with some revised versions of the traditional divine attributes, it seems that the best answer one can give is that it is simply a brute fact, which seems arbitrary, or accept a form of the ontological argument. Plantinga has defended the ontological argument, and thus accepts that God exists by logical necessity.[120] Swinburne claims that God's necessary existence is simply a brute fact.[121] Swinburne does address the question of the way in which God is necessary, rejecting strict logical necessity. Swinburne rather opts for his option D which he calls ontological necessity. As discussed in the previous chapter, this concept states that something is necessary if the truth of the proposition in question is not dependent on anything. Yet it seems mistaken to take this definition of necessity as distinct from logical necessity in the case of God, since the God that Swinburne proposes exists necessarily. Thus, the statement seems to be ultimately analytic: "God (who by definition exists necessarily) exists necessarily", which is essentially a form of the ontological argument. It seems to me, then, that logical necessity is difficult to avoid if one wants to adhere to Swinburne and Plantinga's view. This raises further questions about the relationship of logical necessity to God's being, which raises further questions about aseity (is God's existence dependent on logical necessities distinct from himself? Do these serve as some ordering principle to which God must conform?), and about the validity of the

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[120] For a summary of Plantinga's argument see William L. Rowe, "Alvin Plantinga on the Ontological Argument." *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 65, no. 2 (2009), 87-92, DOI: 10.1007/s11153-008-9182-9.
[121] Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*, 277.

ontological argument. Perhaps one would be better off reverting to absolute possibilism if one insists on conceiving of God in this way? After all, Plantinga only rejects this option due to its counterintuitive implications, not on its merits. Due to limitations of the thesis, the relationship between logical necessity and God cannot be discussed here in further detail but remains an interesting topic to further my study. For my purpose here it suffices to point out that the questions regarding aseity and logically necessary existence are difficult questions, the answers to which the plausibility of the Swinburnian approach to theism depend. If it is possible to conceive of God in a different manner, such as an apophatic approach, perhaps one might be able to avoid these problems tied to aseity and logical necessity altogether.

5.2.2   Speaking of God

Another point of criticism of the classical conception of God is the challenges it poses for the interpretation of the Bible. In the Bible one reads about God acting in the world and changing his mind in response to the actions of creatures which seems difficult to reconcile with strong immutability. But for this objection to get off the ground it is necessary that God be understood as comprehensible entity. Once again, this line of argument therefore assumes a univocal understanding of a comprehensible God. The basic point made by the Swinburnian theists is that an understanding of God that allows for change in God as he relates to the world is more in line with the God described in the Bible. Consider this claim by Richard Swinburne:

> "If God had thus fixed his intentions 'from all eternity' he would be a very lifeless thing; not a person who reacts to men with sympathy or anger, pardon or chastening because he chooses to there and then. Yet, as we saw in Chapter 10, the God of the Old Testament, in which Judaism, Islam, and Christianity have their roots, is a God in continual interaction with men, moved by men as they speak to him, his action being often in no way decided in advance. We should note, further, that if God did not change at all, he would not think now of this, now of that. His thoughts would be one thought which lasted for ever."[122]

A classical understanding of God would have different possible answers to such an objection. One might for example explore this question in relation to God's omnipresent sustaining of the world, God's eternal decree or simply point out that God's nature is ultimately beyond human comprehension. The important point is that Swinburne here assumes that Biblical narratives about God interacting with creatures has implication for the metaphysical

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[122] Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*, 221.

framework to be applied to the doctrine of God. But this seems to be ignoring the complex relationship between metaphysics and biblical hermeneutics. For example, if one take claims about God's actions to be univocal proposition about the divine nature, why not go a step further and argue that God is corporeal? After all, there are biblical texts that describe God as having limbs. I suspect that Swinburne would not regard this as a coherent conception of God. Furthermore, he might point out that there are other texts in the biblical material that speak of God in immaterial terms, for example as a spirit, and he would be right. But this just goes to show the influence of metaphysical presuppositions in biblical hermeneutics. Otherwise, there would be no reason why one description of God is interpreted univocally and the other a metaphor. Such an approach therefore makes metaphysical assumptions prior to reading the Bible, no different than any Christian under the influence of Neoplatonic metaphysics.

Swinburne seems to attempt to take the Biblical claims of the way God acts in creation in time "at face value", framing them as a challenge to those who deny that God experiences successive temporal states or that God undergoes change in relating to the world. However, as I believe to have shown, there is no neutral metaphysical framework that allows the reader to simply extract propositions about God from the Biblical text and apply them to God's inner being in univocal fashion. Thus, if the Swinburnian theist wishes to claim that one can extract claims about God from the Bible and turn them into a metaphysical system without already assuming such a system, one must provide justification for such a claim. This in turn seems to require a neutral, context free interpretive subject, an approach that seems not much better than the young earth creationist attempting to extract objective scientific facts from the opening chapters of Genesis. There simply cannot be any skipping the difficult question of the metaphysical presuppositions that influence biblical hermeneutics, and therefore attempting to interpret biblical statements "at face value" does not constitute an improvement over a hermeneutic influenced by Neoplatonism or Thomism. Rather, one ought to recognize that all make metaphysical assumptions, and Swinburne has not provided reasons to prefer his over those of the Neoplatonists or Thomas. Hence, I see no reason to concede that an understanding of God as undergoing successive temporal states and changing in relation to creation in any way takes the biblical claims about God more seriously, like Swinburne seems to imply. Ultimately this line of argument confuses hermeneutics with metaphysics.

This ethos of doing theology with clear ordinary senses of words and taking Biblical statements about God "at face value" seems to be a significant element of the understanding

of Swinburnian theism. This, coupled with the desire for predicating univocally of God and conceptual clarity when discussing his nature, leads Swinburne to disregard concepts like the *via negativa* of apophatic theology. Concerning predicates of God, Swinburne claims that the apophatic way of negation fails to give an adequate account for what theists have wished to say about God.[123] Here Swinburne makes the crucial assumption that theists indeed want to predicate univocally about God. As I believe to have shown in the chapters above, this is certainly not the case for the Neoplatonic philosophers like Plotinus,[124] the apophatic theologians like Dionysius and Maximus, not even for Thomas (although whether he is successful remains subject of discussion). The theologians mentioned here are not obscure or marginal voices, but rather represent important streams of pre-modern Christian philosophy regarding the nature of God. All these thinkers reject the project of univocally predicating about God, calling into question Swinburne's assumption that theists in general wants to make univocal statements about God. Instead, Swinburne seems to dispose with the idea of divine ineffability, an idea that is well-attested in the theologians discussed above.

Swinburne takes the example of stating that God is good having the meaning according to the *via negativa* of "not evil" which he regards as inadequate. This is not an area of disagreement, as ultimately any predicate of the ineffable God's nature is inadequate. But as argued above, an apophatic understanding of God follows from the Neoplatonic metaphysical framework on which it is based and, thus claiming that theists want to predicate univocally about God (a questionable assumption to begin with) does not begin to address the underlying issue. While it is true that the *via negativa* is about predicating negatively of God, this is not to say that God is reducible to what is negated of him. Surely, the apophatic tradition is not content with merely saying that God is "not evil", but rather that his goodness is infinite, and hence undefinable and beyond comprehension. Therefore, it follows from the metaphysical framework of the *via negativa* that one cannot simply predicate what God is. Furthermore, as God acts in history in relation to his people through everything that is made, through the old covenant with Moses and the new covenant as God becomes incarnate, knowledge of God's acts in the world are still knowable to us, even according to an apophatic theology. Thus, according to the apophatic understanding, one may know the goodness (in the

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[123] Ibid, 82.
[124] The label «theist» is debatable whether it is applicable to figures like Plotinus, at the very least it might be being anachronistic. My point in using him as an example is that he lays out an understanding of the divine that is also adopted by Christian thinkers like Dionysius. Thus, in this context Plotinus serves as an example to call Swinburne's claim about theists in general into question.

ordinary sense of the word) of God as it is experienced through creation, while one is still denied the ability to predicate of God's nature. The difference here is then not just one concerning language, but whether God is ineffable. Swinburne' comments about the *via negativa* are therefore misguided, ignoring that this has been the perspective of much of the Christian doctrine of God historically, as seen in the thinkers discussed in chapters 2 and 3, and seems to take for granted Swinburne's own desire to predicate univocally of God.

Another point of apparent divergence from the Neoplatonic Christian approaches to God is the significance of the incarnation. Certainly, there would be broad agreement among all the approaches to the doctrine of God discussed in this thesis regarding the divinity of Christ, as well as the soteriological merits of Christ's life, death, and resurrection. But there seems to be a complete lack of the epistemological and revelatory significance of the incarnation for Swinburne, as evidenced by the fact that cataphatic predicates of God are being made without reference to the mediating work of the God-man. This is in stark contrast to the apophatic thinkers, particularly Maximus. For Maximus, Christology and apophaticism are closely tied together as only by accepting the mystery of the divine nature can one accept the idea of it being joined to a human nature. Furthermore, as God is joined to a human nature the divine nature which is in itself beyond comprehension has been joined to the comprehensible, creating the possibility for cataphatic predicates of the God-man as he is revealed in history. Such Christological implications cannot be dismissed as obscure implication of Neoplatonic influence, but is a strong feature in Johannine Christology, as in the famous prologue to John's gospel where Christ is said to be the one revealing God whom no one has seen (John 1:18). Swinburne is indeed clear that his conception of God is dealing with theism in general, not Christian theism specifically, and so he does not consider the claims of the incarnation.[125] But this just underscores the point that the issue of the incarnation is not significant for Swinburne's doctrine of God. The lack of Christological significance for Swinburne, coheres well with the metaphysical framework he employs, as cataphatic theology is made possible by their insistence on making God graspable and coherent in univocal and propositional form. Granted, this may be an argument from silence, but silence can be suspicious if one were expecting a sound. Not only then does Swinburne's approach require revising of the doctrine of God, but it also detaches it from Christology.

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[125] Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism,* 101.

My contention is therefore that Swinburne and Plantinga are correct that a univocal-analogical interpretation of Thomism, conceiving of God as possessing properties that are identical to one another, indeed renders the concept of God a logically incoherent and fatalistic concept. However, it must be kept in mind that Thomas himself can be interpreted in a Neoplatonic and apophatic direction, as Eric Perl does. It thus remains a question for the historical theologian to determine whether this criticism applies to Thomas himself or just certain interpretations of his thought. While the problems raised by Swinburne and Plantinga are significant, the solutions they provide constitute a revision of the classical doctrine of God with its own challenges, particularly regarding the doctrine of divine aseity. While there have been attempts at upholding this doctrine, they have been attempts to either focus on God's control over abstract objects distinct from him, or by emphasizing that God simply exists necessarily. Yet even then God has properties distinct from himself and logical necessities remain outside of his control. These approaches therefore essentially argue for the compatibility of God's aseity and dependence on properties that are distinct from God. While all these approaches to the doctrine of God refer to God with the same proper name and ascribe to God traditional divine attributes, the Swinburnian approach results in a completely different doctrine of God because of the denial of traditional divine simplicity and aseity. Atemporality thus becomes temporality, metaphysical simplicity becomes complexity and immutability becomes consistency of character. My fundamental point is that the revision of the classical doctrine of God is born out of a desire for univocism, conceptual clarity and coherence when speaking of God. Thus, by attempting to make univocal positive predicates of God, they revise the doctrine of God in such a way that aseity is called into question, or at the very least in need of significant revision. This revision of the doctrine of God is therefore quite comprehensive and raises the question of whether a classical understanding of God can be conceptualized in a way that does not fall prey to the demands of univocism. This, I believe, is precisely what can be accomplished by returning to a more consistent application of apophatic theology.

5.3   The Mystery of Apophaticism

I titled this chapter "The Coherence of Mystery", a play on the title of Swinburne's book *The Coherence of Theism*. This is obviously paradoxical, as the very nature of mystery is perhaps the lack of clear coherence and understanding. But it is also a fitting title as this paradox gets at the main point of my thesis namely that by rejecting univocal predication of God, and

embracing God as beyond being and ineffable, apophaticism can rationally argue for this as the limit of human knowledge of God as the point at which one encounters the mystery of the divine. According to apophatic theology, reason allows for intelligibility to a certain point, but no further. In my discussion above I highlighted several issues related to the doctrine of God centered around the insufficiency of the univocal-analogical Thomistic conception of God, and the solutions attempted by Swinburne and Plantinga. My contention is that the problems with the doctrine of God in Thomas, as well as the unsatisfactory revision of Swinburne and Plantinga, do not arise unless one assumes that one can predicate of God in the first place. I identify the following major areas of disagreement that I will discuss towards the end of this chapter: predicating of God and aseity, and God's relationship to the world in light of immutability and timelessness.

5.3.1   *Being and Beyond*

One of the central points in this discussion is the problem of divine simplicity. For Plantinga it is an incoherent attempt at maintaining divine aseity by identifying God with his properties, whereas for Thomas and the Neoplatonic thinkers it establishes the distinction between creator and creation, maintaining divine aseity by conceiving of God as the ultimate ground of contingency and being, in short, everything non-God. As I have argued, attempting to understand Thomistic analogical predication as including a univocal element is ruled out. But the revision of the conception of God, particularly with respect to aseity, by Swinburne and Plantinga in attempting to articulate a more coherent conception of God is significant, and to be avoided if possible.

When commenting on language concerning God used in an analogical sense, Plantinga points out that indeed this might be a possibility for defending the doctrine of divine simplicity. [126] However, he claims that this might also hinder the articulation of the doctrine, since whatever linguistic limitations there are for predicating analogically about God will also apply to the articulation of simplicity, rendering the articulation susceptible to the same problem that it is attempting to solve.[127] Plantinga also argues that the doctrine of simplicity reduces God to a property.[128] But as I mentioned above, this doctrine can be stated both cataphatically as well as apophatically, and Plantinga's objections seem to only apply to the

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[126] Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?*, 58.
[127] Ibid.
[128] See my discussion on Plantinga in chapter 4.

cataphatic, as this is the articulation that claims that God is identical with his essence. If one articulates the doctrine of simplicity in apophatic terms one is left only with negating that God is composed of parts and in that sense is not like (created) beings. This would include corporeal parts as well as metaphysical parts. Thus, by negating that God has limbs or a physical body, as well as metaphysical parts like properties, but not predicating about the way in which God is related to properties like goodness, power, etc., one is not stating anything about God's relationship to properties at all. The result then is not an esoteric articulation of simplicity in terms of identifying God with his properties, since on apophaticism there is no access to God's nature. Rather one is left with the negation of all derivativeness and parts, in this way not making any positive predication of God, only denouncing any and every attempt to identify God with anything finite. God, then, is such that "si comprehendis, non est Deus" ("If you can comprehend him, he is not God") (Sermon 117:5), as Augustine famously put it.[129]

An apophatic approach to the doctrine of God rejects the very attempt to predicate about God's nature in the first place. Thus, any objection to simplicity based on predicates about God's nature and the coherence thereof does not apply. In this way, if one rejects the presuppositions of univocism and the desire for conceptual clarity regarding the nature of God, the objection of Plantinga does not even get off the ground. By the *via negativa*, then, one is merely denying that God is in any way composite, definable, contingent on other things since God is ultimately incomprehensible, ultimately leading to the complete silence in the face of God. Simply put, God is not a being in the Neoplatonic sense and is thus ineffable.

5.3.2 *Being and Aseity*

This leads to the question of divine aseity. For Swinburne and Plantinga, having rejected simplicity in favor of a perceived coherent univocal conception they are left with a God who exists necessarily in precisely the way that he does. In this sense, God's nature is not simple, but composed of certain properties that exist necessarily as God's nature. But this leads the revision the doctrine of aseity to make it compatible with God's being made up of properties that are not identical with himself. As I have argued above, such an implication causes difficulties for divine aseity and is therefore preferably avoided. If God is beyond being, then

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[129] Quoted from Jean Grondin, "Augstine's 'Si comprehendis, non est Deus': "To What Extent is God Incomprensible?" *Analytica Hermeneutica* 9 (2017).

he cannot be spoken of, he is ineffable and incomprehensible. How then does God relate to properties according to a Neoplatonic Christian conception? It may be helpful to be reminded that from the metaphysical perspective of the Neoplatonic thinkers, being does not merely encompass physical entities, but also the forms. Forms (or properties) like goodness, justice, mathematical truths, etc. are standards by which individual instantiations in the created world are measured and determined to be what they are, as the former are grasped by the intellect and the latter by the senses. By their very nature as definable, the forms are limited and contingent, and therefore dependent on the unification of the forms which Plotinus calls The One but in the context of Christian theology is referred to as God. In this sense, God is the origin of all definability, distinguishability, and contingency, or to put it in one word, being, including properties or forms. The origin of these can be neither definable, distinguishable nor contingent and must therefore be beyond being and intelligibility. Thus, if one is willing to follow *via negativa* one can indeed argue that there are real properties, or forms, and simultaneously believe in a simple God, in the sense that one negates that God is composed of parts and is thus independent of things that are non-God. This is not to say that one knows what God is like, but rather to deny any likeness to beings in terms of compositeness or dependency. One may raise the question of whether, for example, mathematical truths are created by God or internal to his nature. But this objection misses the point by assuming that one can predicate of the divine nature and comprehend its constituents. What can be known are beings not The One beyond being. Thus, on apophaticism one can maintain divine aseity, in the sense that God is not dependent on anything non-God because of divine ineffability, and still believe that there are such things as forms or properties. This requires, though, that God cannot be comprehended, thus rendering any objection based on the nature of God irrelevant.

How then does one predicate of God? First, Christian apophasis is the process of denying the intelligibility of God and that he is in any way like created beings. God, then, is not contingent, not metaphysically complex, not evil etc. As such, the underlying principle is to reject any identification of God with what is created, keeping in mind that the divine nature itself remains ineffable as even negations cannot suffice to comprehend God. What then about positive predicates? Certainly, one would not wish to deprive oneself of the ability to say that God is good. One approach would be to identify being with good, and so to say that God is good would be a reference to creation as contingent. This is well in line with the Neoplatonic tradition. But what about other claims, like God becoming incarnate? Above I mentioned

Brower's argument that simplicity should be conceived not in terms of properties, but in terms of truthmakers as a step in the direction of apophaticism. This does not require one to specify what God's nature is like. Predicating of God in terms of truthmakers is therefore to say that, whatever God is like, his simple nature is the truthmaker for a given predicate. This may get around Plantinga's objection, but from the perspective of apophatic theology it is underdeveloped because it requires some principle(s) by which one can distinguish which predicates are appropriate for God. The answer to this is can for the apophatic theologian be found in the incarnation. For Maximus, as discussed in chapter 2, an incarnational epistemology allows for predicating about the God-man as the one in whom the ineffable God is reveled in comprehensible human form. The Christian scriptures thereby testify to God as revealed in salvation history making it possible to predicate about God in this way. It needs to always be kept in mind that one is not in this way contradicting oneself by claiming to have knowledge of the divine nature. God remains ineffable, but through the incarnation, God can be comprehended as revealed in human flesh, not as propositional knowledge of the One beyond being.

Apophatic theology, by rejecting the possibility of predicating about God's nature can therefore preserve the doctrine of divine aseity by upholding divine ineffability and dispensing with univocism. At the same time, there are plausible alternatives for predicating cataphatically of God as revealed in history, but not of God's nature which remains ineffable. Thus, it becomes apparent that the central problem in question seems to be the insistence on univocism as the driving force behind the revision of aseity by the Swinburnian theists.

5.3.3 *Immanence and Creation*

Another issue raised by thinkers in the Swinburnian tradition is God's relationship to creation. This problem arises if one takes Thomistic analogical predication to involve an element of univocity, as the possibility of God's relationship to creation, divine freedom, and theological determinism become problematic. According to a Neoplatonic conception, God is omnipresent by virtue of his continuous sustaining of all creation. This provides a framework for understanding God's interaction with the world, as any moment at which God's sustaining presence were hypothetically to cease creation would also cease to exist. The question is whether this is consistent with God's being absolutely immutable and simple. But this again presupposes the ability to know God's nature. On an apophatic conception of God,

predicating immutability of God is to deny that he is like creation in that he changes, rather than a positive predicate. One may object that one nevertheless has denied that God is changing in relation to creation, which seems incompatible. However, this overlooks the main point of apophasis, namely that the God as One beyond being is ineffable and therefore his nature remains a mystery, not arbitrarily, but because of the metaphysics of being presupposed by this doctrine of God. Ultimately, this is a form of the problem of divine transcendence and immanence and as I argued in chapter 2. On the Neoplatonic understanding, God is immanent in all the forms as reflections of God, while simultaneously transcending them by virtue of being the unification of all forms as the ground of being. God's transcendence and immanence is therefore not a tension to be resolved but a mutually dependent concept. Nevertheless, the metaphysics of apophatic theology does not allow for comprehension of the divine nature, so the problem of said nature leading to determinism does not arise.

The point made above would also apply to divine timelessness, as this once again is not a claim to have insight into the divine nature, but a denial that God is like creation in that God undergoes temporal states. Swinburne has questioned the interrelatedness of immutability and timelessness, claiming that it is coherent to conceive of an immutable being that simply undergoes temporal states without any form of internal change.[130] It seems that this objection is not correct, as the passing of time would include at minimum a change in terms of the time at which the immutable object exists. One might object that this is merely external change, but this seems to assume that God is not immutable in the first place, and thus begs the question. The very point of the doctrine of the simple, immutable, and timeless God is that there are no aspects of God that are non-God, that "all that is in God is God".[131] Therefore, the metaphysics of simplicity does not allow for any form of change that is not a change in God himself, even in relation to time. It seems then that timelessness, immutability and simplicity are interrelated. Yet, if God is ultimately beyond comprehension, then predicates of timelessness, immutability and simplicity are negations that deny God's likeness to creation and are not to be understood as positive predicates. The apophatic approach does not allow for the possibility of the type of knowledge that is required to raise an objection based on insight into the divine nature and thus does not run into the problems of univocal-analogical Thomism. What can be known are beings, not the One beyond being. Once again,

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[130] Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism,* 226.
[131] Dolezal, *All That is in God,* 137.

by rejecting univocism and insisting on God as an ineffable mystery, an apophatic approach to the doctrine of God does not allow for the presuppositions underlying the objections raised, and thus avoids the revision of aseity.

5.3.4   *Too Easy a Solution?*

I have argued that apophaticism avoids the problem of predicating about God that arises on the basis of a desire to comprehend the divine nature. Thus, the problems raised by Swinburne and Plantinga do not apply. At the same it time avoids predicating about the makeup of the divine nature that leads to incoherence or the revision of aseity. I suggest, therefore, that an apophatic understanding, by accepting the mystery of God as beyond being, is a better approach to the doctrine of God. But there is one glaring question: is it simply too convenient to argue that the problems that have been pointed out by Swinburne and Plantinga do not apply? Is apophatic theology simply a refusal to answer the difficult questions of theology and attribute it to mystery? As I have argued, the understanding of God as ineffable follows from the Neoplatonic metaphysics of being. God, as the origin of being cannot be comprehended, not in a quantitative sense as if there were too many difficult questions to answer, but qualitatively. As the origin of being, limitation, definition and comprehensibility, God is the One beyond being as the infinite fountain of all being, himself therefore incomprehensible. In other words, God is qualitatively different from beings. I believe therefore that this charge is unfounded. Apophatic theology is not a mere ad hoc explanation to avoid difficulties. Rather, divine ineffability arises out of the very basis for such theology. Even if one may have a desire for conceptual clarity, univocity, and the ability to predicate about God, this runs into the very problems with Swinburnian theism and the analogical-unvocal conception of Thomism that I have discussed above. That is perhaps why, historically speaking, God has indeed been conceived as ineffable by a great many of Christian thinkers including Gregory of Nyssa, Dionysius, Maximus, Augustine and even Thomas. The foundation of apophaticism is the distinction between creation and its creator, where the creator of all finite things cannot himself be finite. And what is not finite, is therefore not definable as this would imply the ability to set boundaries to identify it. This means God's nature is metaphysically and epistemologically out of reach on apophaticism. What is accessible are the divine reflections in beings, the Son of God incarnate, and his acts in salvation history through Scripture.

5.4   Final Reflections

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At one level, the differences in the doctrine of God seem largely not to be solvable at the level of coherence of their conceptions of God. As Gregory Rocca pointed out in his article on Aquinas and God-talk, predicating about God is a derivative matter from the doctrine of God that one establishes in the first place.[132] One may debate the priority of the metaphysics of infinity in terms of simplicity, timelessness, and immutability versus conceptual clarity and coherence of the divine. But solving this question may not get us any closer to answer the question of what understanding of God is preferable. Any answer seems to be necessarily question-begging, as the presuppositions with which one approaches this question, largely determine the outcome. If one assumes the need for conceptual clarity and coherence when addressing the question of what God's nature is like, one will make the necessary doctrinal changes to get the job done. That is precisely what the Swinburnian theists have done. However, if one takes apophatic approach, one will have a framework for the ineffable and mysterious, and so the problems that arise when trying to predicate of God's nature do not arise. The same goes for Thomism, as analogical predication is the way that Thomas can maintain the distinction between the creator and creation and divine ineffability, while still allow for knowledge of the divine essence in the beatific vision.[133] However, as I have argued, a univocal-analogical interpretation of Thomas does encounter some problems in terms of coherence. As David Bentley Hart pointed out, the God of Swinburne and Plantinga may resemble a single polytheistic god more than the ultimate reality as the ground of existence from the Neoplatonic perspective so that this understanding of God can fittingly be called monopolytheism. However, this polemic only works if one already agrees with Hart's metaphysical assumptions. This highlights a crucial point, namely that metaphysical assumptions underlying the different doctrines of God seem to be the point of divergence. If one assumes that God as the ultimate reality is basically intelligible one will have to adopt a conception of God that must be univocal to be analyzable in terms of coherence. Likewise, if one assumes that God as the ultimate reality is basically unintelligible, one ends up with something like apophaticism. Up to this point, I have been discussing the doctrine of God from the perspective of Christian theology (as this is the main topic of this thesis). As such, the history of theology, understanding of revelation, etc. plays a role in how one judges the matter. If one takes a step back, in the end it seems that part of this is down to a question of the basic orientation towards epistemology. Is God as the ultimate ground of being

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[132] Rocca, *Aquinas on God-Talk,* 650-653.
[133] See my discussion in chapter 3 on Gregory Rocca and Eric Perl and their interpretation of Thomas.

comprehensible such that everything can conceivably be an object of human knowledge, or not? Perhaps the very point that this issue does not allow itself to be completely resolved, but at the most basic level of one's orientation towards knowledge, is itself an indication that the orientation towards mystery might have a leg up.

6   Conclusion

In this thesis I have discussed three approaches to the doctrine of God and considered the question of how to conceive of God given divine aseity, and the question of how to predicate of God in order to maintain aseity. I have argued Thomas' doctrine of God becomes problematic if it is conceived in terms of properties, assuming that analogical predicates involve an element of univocity. The criticism that the simple God without accidents is rendered a property, and that God's relationship to creation becomes an illusion seem to be difficult to escape given these commitments. The Swinburnian approach to theism wishes to conceive of God in univocal and conceptually clear terms in a way that avoids the problems of God as conceived in Thomas. In doing this they conceive of God as existing necessarily as a spirit consisting of properties distinct from himself. This in turn calls into question the doctrine of aseity rendering it at least in need of significant revision. Since these revisions are driven by the desire for univocal predicates, it raises the question of whether one may conceive of God in a different way to avoid these problems altogether. This, I have suggested, can be accomplished by an apophatic approach to the doctrine of God. In this way, God's nature is beyond comprehension, and thus the problems regarding the coherence of God's nature that arise on univocal-analogical Thomism do not arise, as what is in question is not comprehensible in the first place. Simultaneously by virtue of the conception of God as beyond being, the distinction between the creator and creation shapes apophatic theology with its fullest force, preserving divine aseity. Predicating of God as revealed in history is still possible, making it possible to predicate about the God-man as revealed in Scripture and the incarnation. Yet, this does not negate the ineffable mystery of the divine nature. I conclude, therefore, that an apophatic approach to the doctrine of God can account for divine aseity and predicates of God in a way that is compatible with aseity, and thus preferable to the other options discussed in this thesis.

Ultimately, apophaticism is an invitation to accept created existence as limited in its epistemological scope. It means that what can be known are beings, not the One beyond being. As such God is ultimately mysterious and hidden, yet revealed in the incarnation, creating a dialectic where God is both revealed and hidden. Ultimately, apophasis leads to the understanding of God as a mystery beyond comprehension, yet always present as the source of being, yet hidden as the One beyond being, yet revealed in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

As such, apophaticism is an invitation to worship and contemplate the paradoxical mystery of the hidden and revealed God, as beautifully expressed by Augustine:

> *"You are the most hidden from us and yet the most present among us, the most beautiful and the most strong, ever enduring and yet we cannot comprehend you."* (Confessions 1.4).[134]

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[134] Quoted from R.S. Pine-Coffin (translator), *Saint Augustine Confessions* (London: Penguin Books Ltd.: 1961).

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