

CHAPTER II

Simplicity

Most of the medieval philosophers believed that it could be shown that an absolutely necessary being was totally simple. ‘Simplicity’ is a highly metaphysical notion, and, as it was traditionally understood, it seems to have such utterly counter-intuitive implications as hardly to merit serious discussion. For it appears to require the denial of all distinctions in God; God’s omnipotence is supposed to be the same as his mercy, or his justice; God is identical with each of his actions, and hence each of his actions seems to be identical with each of the others. Perhaps most difficult of all, simplicity, involving as it does the identity of essence and existence in God, seems to involve the view that no descriptive predicates can possibly be true of God—not even the traditional ones such as ‘omniscient’, ‘omnipotent’ or ‘creator’. For all these terms are obviously intended as descriptions of God, however inadequate they might be; but if God’s essence simply is to exist, and ‘exist’ is not a descriptive term at all, then it would appear that no description can be of the essence of God. Kant, as we have already discussed in [Chapter I](#), saw no prospect of proving any link between the notions of absolute necessity and transcendent simplicity; and Hume believed that any attempt to describe a totally simple God was both gratuitous and vacuous. As a result, simplicity has until recently been perhaps the least discussed, as well as one of the most fundamental, of the attributes of God proposed by the classical tradition.¹ This chapter will attempt to chart the course of the debate.

Since the notion of simplicity is intimately related to that of an absolutely necessary being, which in turn is closely bound up with the cosmological arguments for the existence of God, a consideration of how those arguments were supposed to work is a good place to begin to consider what was meant by the claim that God is in all respects simple.

THE HISTORY OF THE PROBLEM

Aquinas

THE BACKGROUND ASSUMPTIONS

Aquinas distinguishes between two kinds of *demonstratio*, or scientific proof.² The first (doubtless highly idealised) consists in an explanation why something must happen as it does. The explanation takes the form of a deduction. The statement that an event happens, or that some particular state of affairs obtains, is shown to follow deductively from statements giving the essences of the various items involved in bringing about that event or state of affairs and from whatever further first principles are required. Since the first principles are *de re* necessarily true, and the deduction is valid, the conclusion is thereby shown to be necessary, and hence to be an instance of scientific knowledge.

To provide this kind of explanation of worldly events, by exhibiting their connection with the essential attributes not merely of worldly causes but also of God, is not possible, Aquinas believed. The essence of God cannot be known in the way required for the explanation to get off the ground.³ What is possible is another kind of *apodeixis* which Aquinas terms *demonstratio quod*, a ‘proof that something is the case’. Since it is a *demonstratio*, it does claim to establish a necessary conclusion, and hence to start with premises which are similarly necessary. But, as Aquinas puts it, ‘when proving something to exist, the middle term is not what the thing is (since we cannot even ask what it is until it has we know it exists), but rather what we are using the name of the thing to mean’ (I, 2, 2, reply 2). That is to say, instead of using an expression giving the real essence of something as a middle term, we have to use a nominal definition instead. The nominal definition of ‘God’ would be something like ‘the ultimate causal explanation of the existence of whatever we experience’.

Two examples to illustrate this. Suppose that we do not know what epilepsy is. That is to say, we do not know in what the illness itself essentially consists. What we do know are the effects it has on sufferers. We can offer a nominal definition of the word ‘epilepsy’ in terms of those symptoms; and using that definition we can correctly prove that a particular patient is suffering from epilepsy. Similarly, for centuries scientists worked with a nominal definition of copper, in terms of its being a metal with a set of observed properties—malleability, conductivity, colour, chemical powers, and so on. It was possible to show that copper was present; what was not possible was an explanation of its properties in terms of its atomic structure. That type of explanation became available only when the essential structure of copper was discovered (for the example, see Harré and Madden 1975:21–5).

A diagnosis of epilepsy, even when correct, amounts to saying no more than that the patient must have whatever it is that produces these symptoms, which we

call 'epilepsy'. The conclusion of the cosmological arguments in Aquinas is similarly modest: that there must exist whatever it is that causally explains the existence of the things we experience, which we call 'God'. It is from this very jejune conclusion that Aquinas deduces the characteristics of the attribute of simplicity. To see how this is supposed to work, it is important to notice the points at which necessity enters into the argument. The argument has the following form:⁴

- i) If anything exists which need-not exist, there must exist an adequate causal explanation for its existence.
- ii) An adequate causal explanation of existence must involve some entity which exists-of-necessity.
- iii) There are things which need-not exist.
- iv) Hence there must exist something which exists-of-necessity.

The 'must' in iv) is the 'must' of logical necessity, since the form of the argument is a valid form. But what of the occurrences of 'must' in i) and ii)? Aquinas would claim that both i) and ii) were evident 'first principles' in the Aristotelian sense; and he takes these principles to express a *de re* necessity. As I have already remarked, i) and ii) are not simply claims about what we would regard as satisfactory explanations, or what we would regard as making the universe *intelligible*. They are to be taken as claims about what is *de re* possible. Things whose non-existence is merely *de re* possible, it is claimed, could not exist at all unless there existed something whose non-existence is *de re* impossible. Similarly, the modal expressions which I have hyphenated distinguish between those things which have existence as (in the broad sense) an accidental attribute, and whatever (in fact just one thing, as he subsequently undertakes to prove) has existence as an essential attribute. The proof therefore depends upon *a*) whether it is correct to speak of existence as being an attribute which can belong to things accidentally or essentially, and *b*) whether it can be shown that i) and ii) express *de re* necessary truths. I have already discussed *a*) in the preceding chapter. To discuss *b*) it will be helpful to spell out somewhat more in detail what Aquinas took to be the implications of saying that something was such that its non-existence was *de re* impossible, since these considerations are also relevant to whether or not i) and ii) can be shown to be true.

The entire discussion hinges on the actuality/potentiality distinction, interpreted in a *de re* sense. I have already argued that *de re* potentialities are actual features of actual things. Thus Socrates's ability to learn a language consists in his having an actual brain of the relevant kind; his ability to speak a language consists (we may suppose) in features of that brain's organisation produced by the learning-process. That it is a real possibility that Socrates should die, or be killed, is an actual feature of the way in which his body is organised, and of the capabilities of those things which can interfere with that organisation. It is at least relatively easy to understand what is meant by the potentialities or

powers of actual things. What is needed is a general account of which features of things entail that the things possess *de re* potentialities; a totally simple being will then be one which has none of those features. Aquinas endeavours to provide just such an account.

SIMPLICITY AS THE ABSENCE OF *DE RE* POTENTIALITY

Aquinas believes that a being which exists-of-necessity cannot be a material individual; cannot have any intrinsic accidental properties; cannot, therefore, change in any way; and cannot be an individual of any given species or genus. Hence, an absolutely necessary being does not have a nature in any straightforward sense at all. In short, a being which exists-of-necessity cannot be something whose existence actualises a real potentiality, and each of the features in this list entails the possession of such a potentiality.⁵

The first item in the list, that a necessary being cannot be a material individual, he takes to be assured by the fact that any material being can be caused to cease to exist by re-arranging its constituents. This, I think, is not in dispute. The difficulties begin as soon as one tries to spell out more in detail the remaining claims. Apart from doubts about the whole notion of *de re* necessity and potentiality, and the status of principles i) and ii) in the overall argument, this detailed account of simplicity seems to entail such strange conclusions that it might be thought in itself to constitute a *reductio ad absurdum* of the assumptions from which it is derived, even if one had no other grounds for questioning those assumptions. Nevertheless, there is a case to be made for the view that the further conclusions are not as indefensible as they at first sight might appear, and that at least the *reductio* argument against them does not succeed, whatever one might think of the other problems which they present. We shall consider the various consequences of simplicity one at a time, and examine the problems they each present.

a)

The absence of intrinsic accidental properties

Theoretically, the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic accidental properties is clear enough. Those properties are intrinsically accidental the gaining or losing of which involves an accidental change in the subject of the properties. Thus, walking is an intrinsic accidental property of Socrates, as is knowing Greek, or talking Greek. My being taller than my brother is an intrinsic accidental property of both of us, since it depends on the sizes which we both happen to have. Such intrinsic properties are distinct from those involved in what Geach (1969) has termed Cambridge changes, in which something comes to be true of a subject without that subject changing in itself. So, being the last surviving member of one's family is not an intrinsic accidental property. Neither is it an intrinsic

accidental property of Socrates that he is being thought about by Callias, though it is an intrinsic accidental property of Callias that he is thinking of Socrates. Aquinas holds that X's extrinsic properties are relational properties of X to some Y which do not depend on X's possessing any non-relational property.⁶

What is denied of a being which exists-of-necessity is that it has any intrinsic accidental properties, but not that it has extrinsic accidental properties. Comparatively unproblematically, then, it can be accidentally true that God is believed in by Abraham, and forgives Israel her sins, since, although neither of these need be true, neither, according to Aquinas, involves any alteration in God. The relationships between Abraham or Israel and God, such as believing, or being forgiven, depend on actual dispositions in Abraham and Israel which they need not have had, but do not involve any change in God. So there are many things which could be truly predicated of God, without any of them being necessarily true. To hold that God is simple is therefore not to say that whatever can truly be said of God must be a necessary truth. Truths about God are necessary only if their truth conditions consist solely in an intrinsic attribute of God himself.

But this can hardly be a sufficient account. Take for example the truth that God created this universe. Aquinas does not believe that God of necessity created this universe, or indeed that of necessity he created any universe at all. It is a contingent truth that God created this universe. But is not God's decision to do so an intrinsic attribute of God? Aquinas seeks to explain this, too, along the lines suggested by the notion of a Cambridge change, by saying that it is the universe that comes to be, while God does not change at all. Being related to God is, as it happens, a property of this universe, not of some other possible universe, just as thinking of Socrates was, as it happens, a property of Callias not of Socrates.

So it is that when we speak of his relation to creatures we can apply words implying temporal sequence and change, not because of any change in him but because of a change in the creatures; just as we can say that the pillar has changed from being on my left to being on my right, not through any change in the pillar but simply because I have turned round.

(I, 13, 7)

But the parallel does not work. For if God could have created a universe other than the one which as it happens he did create, must this not imply *a*) that God has the potential to do other than in fact he did, and *b*) that he is different from he would otherwise have been had he never created at all? To create is, after all, an activity in God, whereas to be thought about by Plato is not. The logical contingency of 'God created this universe' seems clearly to depend upon a real potentiality in God, which is precisely what simplicity excludes.

One might try to avoid *b*) by arguing that if God has the attribute of simplicity, he is unchangeable, and hence eternal. If God is eternal, then there never was a time before which God decided to create this universe rather than

some other. There never was a time at which God was other than he is, namely, creator of this universe. Though it is possible that things could have been different, in fact this possibility is eternally unactualised: so God never in fact *changes*. Even if this is accepted, point *b*) can still be pressed, by asking whether God would not have been really different had he chosen differently? Aquinas would answer that although of course God would have been different, this is not a real difference, since a real difference is a relationship only between actual things.⁷ Although God would be different had he chosen differently, ‘different’ here does not denote real difference in God, since a real difference involves a real change, and not simply change which is never actual though it might have been.

But the argument is insufficient. Even if we grant that God never was different from the way he is, difficulty *a*) remains. It is not just *logical* possibilities and ‘real’ differences which simplicity is supposed to exclude, but *de re* potentiality. Invoking the idea of eternity leaves this problem quite untouched. God is still eternally able to do other than he does. To meet *a*), Aquinas perhaps takes a rather different line. What simplicity in God excludes is only the *de re* potentiality of *being changed* by something else. That God could have created other than he did, or not have created at all, does not lead to problems about dependency. He is not caused to create. Even though Aquinas believes that there is an explanation for his creating, in terms of the goodness of the created world, this explanation of his choice is not a causal explanation. To be free is to be able to present several objects of choice as good, and hence to be able to explain any given choice in those terms. So God’s choice between good possible universes is not brought about by any external factor,⁸ though it can be explained in terms of the features of whichever universe he chooses to create. Aquinas perhaps believes that free decisions to do this rather than that do not, once the information about the choices is given, involve any further actualisation of a potentiality; he does say that ‘acts of will are not alterations, but operations’, where the word for ‘alterations’, *motus*, suggests a being acted upon, and ‘operations’ does not.⁹ However this may be, Aquinas clearly admits that God could have chosen otherwise than he (eternally) does; and that therefore some things which can be truly said of God are contingent truths *about God*, and not merely about other things which are related to God. What remains puzzling is how Aquinas believes this can be true without God having any intrinsic accidental properties; and the puzzle is not solved simply by saying that these properties are in fact unchangeable.¹⁰ We shall come across a parallel problem about God’s knowledge later.

b)

Simplicity excludes membership of a species or genus

In anti-Platonic vein, Aquinas rejects the view that a species is an actual entity; there actually exists no such thing as Humankind. What is meant by saying that a species exists is that the actual world is such that it is *de re* possible for there to

exist individuals of that species. So, had he been asked now why is it that ‘Dodo’ is a genuine species term, whereas ‘Mermaid’ (we may suppose) is not, he might reply that it is in fact possible, given the way the world is, for there to exist a dodo, and not possible for there to exist a mermaid.¹¹ Genus terms, such as ‘animal’, are similarly potentiality-terms, which we use to refer to the fact that it is possible for there to be species such as Horse, Man, and Dodo. This level of potentiality is yet more removed from individuals, however, in that it is not possible to have an individual which is simply an actual animal without also being an animal of some species. Since ‘nature’ is equivalent, in Aquinas as in Aristotle, to ‘real definition’, and hence to ‘species-of-a-genus’, it follows that ‘nature’ too is a potentiality term. For an individual to ‘have’ a nature is for that real potentiality to be actual in this individual. To be an individual is to be a member of a natural kind.¹²

The most obviously difficult implication of this position is that it seems to imply that God cannot be properly described by any sortal term. God is not a thing of any particular kind. It is clear enough why Aquinas says something like this; he believes that to be of a certain kind (whether a generic or a specific kind) is to be only in a limited way which is just one of the ways in which it is possible to be. For that reason, Aquinas argues, if some member of a kind actually exists, it must be because that real potentiality has been actualised. The consequence is that none of the terms which denote kinds of things can be truly used to describe God. All that can be properly said of God is that he is bare existence. And that seems tantamount to saying that he barely exists; for what could it be to exist, but not to exist in any kind of way? To put the matter in terms of our earlier discussion, Aquinas is in agreement with Kant that to say that something exists is not to add any further ‘determination’ to the concept of a thing; here it seems further to be true that in the case of God there is no determinate concept of God’s nature either. Hence talk about God seems wholly ‘indeterminate’.

Despite this, Aquinas does believe that several other predicates can be properly used of God; God knows, has a will, and hence is personal; God is omnipotent, merciful, just, and good. But this apparent prodigality with real descriptions of God immediately loses its attractiveness when it is pointed out that all these attributes are identical with God’s existence. Problems at once arise: if they are each identical with God’s existence, are they not then identical with each other? But how can such diverse attributes be identical with one another? Moreover, if they are all identical with ‘bare existence’, the multiplication of apparently interesting descriptions seems to be no more than an illusion. The radical indeterminacy remains. Even Aquinas, at least sometimes, is willing to say that ‘we cannot know what God is like, but rather what he is not like’,¹³ a position which derives from his view that none of our terms can adequately represent God at all.

The words we use of God are indeed derived from his causal activities: for just as creatures, according to the variety of ways in which their

perfections are derived, represent God albeit imperfectly, so the human mind knows God in the causal process by which creatures derive from him, and describes him accordingly. Still, these processes do not constitute the sense of the words we apply to God (as if to say ‘God is living’ were simply to say ‘Life comes from God’); rather, we use these words to refer to the origin of all things insofar as life pre-exists in him, although it does so in a way which transcends both our powers of understanding and our way of referring.¹⁴

(I, 13, 2)

To speak of God as ‘transcending our powers of understanding’ is all the more disquieting if all God’s attributes are identical with his simple existence. Although Aquinas is aware of these difficulties, and tries to deal with them, quite how he does so is not always easy to determine. Part of the problem lies in deciding what Aquinas might mean by ‘identical’ or ‘same as’. One, albeit negative, clue, is to be found in a remark he makes in asking whether any words can possibly be used of God. In considering abstract and concrete nouns, such as ‘goodness’, or ‘John’, he says:

Now God is both simple like a form, and subsistent, like a concrete thing, and so we sometimes refer to him by abstract nouns to indicate his simplicity and sometimes by concrete nouns to indicate his subsistence and completeness; though neither way of speaking measures up to his way of being, for in this life we do not know him as he is in himself.

(I, 13, 1)

The natural reply to the question ‘What is it for two forms to be identical?’ (for instance, whiteness and goodness) is to suggest that they are identical if they have the same definition; that is to say, if what it is to be F_1 is the same as what it is to be F_2 . On this view, the property of being the Morning Star is not the same property as being the Evening Star. On the other hand, to ask whether two individuals are identical is normally to ask whether they have the same spatio-temporal location.¹⁵ Now in saying that it is inadequate to think of God either as an abstract entity such as Goodness (since Aquinas is sufficiently anti-Platonist to deny that the Form of the Good itself exists), or as an individual such as John, it seems unavoidable that neither of our normal criteria for identity will be applicable to God. God is not a kind, and hence issues about identity in God cannot be settled by appeal to our criteria for identifying kinds; but neither is God an individual, since to be an individual is to be one of a kind; and so whatever tests for identity we might devise for deciding about individuals will for that very reason be inapplicable to God. Aquinas does indeed say that we cannot avoid speaking of God, however inaccurately, in both ways; and the suggestion perhaps is that each way serves to correct the other. But it does not do so in the way that we might correct something by modifying it. In the case of

God, we say incompatible things, each of them in different ways helpful, while recognising that neither can be properly accurate. It is as though we were to describe light both as a wave-form and as a particle, without having any higher-level theory from which both types of equation could be derived. Waveforms are universal, and particles are individuals; and we have (let us suppose for the sake of the parallel) no direct insight into the fundamental nature of light. To ask, therefore, whether any two attributes of God are identical one with the other is to ask a question which might be answered in two different ways, neither of which is adequate to the reality with which we are trying to deal. Both our notions of identity are strictly inapplicable.

Well, then, are God's mercy and his justice the same attribute or not? An obvious first-shot answer would be to say that they cannot be the same, since they are differently defined. The definition of mercy is in terms of, let us say, forgiveness and generosity; the definition of justice is in terms of giving people what is fair, or what they have a right to. The normal consequence of this, in Aquinas's view, would be that if an individual has both properties, there will be two numerically distinct property-instances, just because they are properties of different kinds. If they are of incompatible kinds, it will not be possible for one and the same individual to have both properties simultaneously. If there were (which he does not believe) a quasi-Platonic immaterial individual identical with Mercy Itself, that individual could not be identical with Justice Itself. Aquinas would fully accept Aristotle's views about the differences between Platonic Forms, if such there were. Moreover, he would fully accept Aristotle's criticism of Plato, that nothing can simultaneously be both a universal and an individual. On the other hand, and supposing that mercy and justice are not impossible properties, it is quite possible that a merciful individual should be the same individual as a just individual; but her mercy would not be the same property as her justice, for all that, any more than being the Evening Star is the same property as being the Morning Star.

But this approach to the question cannot properly be applied to God. In the case of God, both types of answer are strictly inapplicable. God's mercy is not an instance of mercifulness, since instances are individual instances, and neither God nor God's mercy are individuals; yet neither is God's mercy a universal, and thereby a different universal from God's justice.¹⁶ Hence Aquinas tries, as his preliminary remarks suggest he would, to make two claims which are strictly incompatible with one another, and yet which, as it were by making opposite mistakes, serve as mutually corrective:

The perfections which pre-exist in God in a simple and unified way are in creatures received as many and divided. Just as to the different perfections of creatures there corresponds one simple source represented by the different perfections of creatures in many and varied ways, so to the many and varied concepts of our intellect there corresponds something entirely simple, imperfectly understood through these concepts. And so the terms

applied to God, although they refer to just one thing, are not synonymous, because they refer to it through many different concepts.

(I, 13, 4)

Aquinas is not saying that the concepts we use for God's attributes refer to the same individual reality in God; for there is no 'individual' reality in God, and 'something entirely simple' certainly does not mean a numerically one, individual, thing. Not that we have any better expression to use than 'signify just one thing'; it is simply that 'one' gives, and inevitably gives, quite the wrong impression. Moreover, it is no use denying that the different perfections of creatures are really different, so that it is beyond our conceptual grasp to explain the 'simple and unified way' in which these perfections pre-exist in God. We can do no better than use different words, for Aquinas holds that it is true to say that God is just, and that God is merciful; and he believes we need to say both. It is just inevitably the case that in so saying, we think of it as though God had both attributes; and the 'both' is incorrect.

At the very least, then, it seems to me a mistake to try to explain this passage by invoking any of our more ordinary notions of 'same X as'. The root of the problem, as Aquinas sees it, is that we cannot formulate an adequate notion of identity for use in talking about God.¹⁷ The model which he does offer, however, of a 'simple source represented in many different ways' depends on his overall view that created things are inherently limited expressions of an actuality which is not limited. At least part of the reason why, in Aquinas's view, even true descriptions of God are so inadequate is that, precisely in having different senses, they necessarily fail to exhibit the fact that justice, mercy and existence in God are all somehow 'one' attribute.

Perhaps the following analogy might help. Consider the relationship between a loving disposition towards some person, and the actions in which that disposition finds expression. Some we might correctly describe as forgiving, others as helpful, others as severe, others as sensitive, or as critical, or practical. Moreover, some situations are such they allow someone to give a fuller expression to being loving than it is possible to achieve in others. Now, the descriptions of these various loving actions refer to genuinely different characteristics which those actions have; to be severe is not the same as to be forgiving, to be practical is not the same as to be sensitive, and so on. If one then asks whether the action-producing virtues are all identical in the loving person, the answer might reasonably be both yes and no: no, because they are different dispositions, defined in different ways; and yes, because they are expressions of one fundamental disposition, which is not itself exhaustively definable. There is no end to the list, 'To be loving is to be severe when..., and sensitive when..., etc'. To discuss whether each of these dispositions is identical with being loving, or identical with one another, is in a way to ask the wrong question. 'Express' rather than 'being identical with' is the category which is needed; and the mode

of expression depends on the circumstances, and on what is possible in those circumstances.

Analogies are, it must be emphasised, no more than that. One might, for instance, very reasonably say that each of these dispositions is a part of what it is to be loving, and that there is nothing more to being loving than having all these dispositions. Being loving is not one disposition at all, but involves several, distinct, dispositions. Moreover, even in expounding the analogy, I used terms like ‘one’ disposition, which, as has already been said, is misleading. Nevertheless, I suggest that to speak of a fundamental attribute being expressed differently according to circumstances at least puts the problems in the right places. The differences are in the actions in which the attribute is expressed, and are genuine; the relationship of fundamental attribute to the actions expressing that attribute is that between a disposition and the behaviour-patterns which are limited by various external situations. Moreover, whether the person has the disposition or not does not depend on whether it is expressed. A final advantage of this model is that the weight of the analogy rests on the notion of ‘expression’ and ‘fundamental attribute’, and thus correctly locates the points at which Aquinas would find the nature of God and his relationship to creation least open to our scrutiny.

That being said, however, Aquinas’s general approach to philosophical theology requires that some attempt be made to show that even fundamentally inscrutable aspects of God must at least not be contradictory. He adopts various manoeuvres to this end. One we have already seen: we derive our distinct concepts of God’s attributes from the different effects we ascribe to God, since the effects themselves are really different. But the ground in God which is expressed in these different ways is one, and it is this one ground which is the common referent of all the attribute-words we apply to God. He further claims that though we can show that there exists such a ground, we cannot know what that ground in itself essentially is. The second move which he makes is much more difficult to understand. It derives from his general Aristotelian principle that effects must somehow resemble their causes, since causes must already actually be what the effect potentially is. The obviousness of Aquinas’s customary example—that to produce heat in something else, a thing has itself to be hot already—hardly disguises the fact that the similarity in question is far from clear. It is not even so obvious that an electric wire has to be as hot as the fire which it causes to heat up; and, as Anthony Kenny (1979) crisply pointed out, a cattle breeder does not have to be fat in order to fatten cattle. This kind of problem can be minimised, however, if causal statements are expressed in those terms which indicate the kind of explanation which they are intended to provide. Aristotle had already noted that even if it is true that the builder produces health, it is not *qua* builder that he does so, but because, as it happens, he is also a doctor. Now Aquinas does say that the respect in which God most properly accounts for his effects is that those effects *exist* (I, 8, 1). Such a solution, though it does go some way to making things clearer, is still only of limited value. To say that God explains his

merciful effects in creation in respect of their existence, and to offer the same explanation of his just effects, is to offer little or no explanation at all. Aquinas would doubtless wish to say that the different effects differ because of differences in the worldly circumstances in which God's action is experienced. But even if one accepts that, what still remains difficult is that the one ground resembles all these effects simply in virtue of their existence, and that is 'bare' resemblance indeed. This is perhaps a criticism that Aquinas would accept as unavoidable. He does not think it is possible to appeal to anything in God as an *explanation*,¹⁸ since for him explanations require prior knowledge of the essence of the explanans, knowledge which is not available where the explanans is God. So the key notions of 'expression' and 'fundamental attribute' turn out not to be explanatory at all.

So the best Aquinas can do is to argue that, since he has already, as he believes, proved that there is such a ground, we know that it must be such as to be capable of being expressed in just these different ways. Since we correctly ascribe various attributes to a simple God, our attributions to God must, *a fortiori*, be consistent. But, just as our explanations appeal to the relevant kinds of features in a causal agent, so our normal test for consistency involves appeal to kinds of attributes which are, or are not, compatible. Still, if God is entirely simple, he has no attributes of a particular kind, generic or specific; and to say that God explains the existence of things because he is himself unlimited existence is completely vague once it is remembered that existence is not a kind of thing at all. Aquinas does not believe that the divine simplicity makes God completely indescribable; but he does believe that it places severe restrictions on our ability to grasp the sense of the descriptions which might justifiably be offered.

c)

The identity of essence and existence in God .

Aquinas frequently and unhesitatingly speaks of the essence of God. Such talk is liable to mislead, since the normal sense of essence, in Aquinas as in Aristotle, is an answer to the question 'What is X?'; the term 'essence' refers to the *de re* potentiality for there to be an individual of the kind specified in the essence, and essences in the full sense are species of a genus. None of these things is true of the essence of God. It is not an answer to the question 'What is it to be God?', since Aquinas holds that we do not know the answer to that question; it does not refer to any potentiality; and it cannot be defined in terms of genus and species. Perhaps his view of the matter involves an extended use of the term 'essence', just as to speak of existence as an accident of existing created things involves a broader, non-Aristotelian, sense of 'accident'. To say that existence is essential to God then amounts to saying no more than that God exists *de re* necessarily, without giving any account of what it is for something to exist *de re* necessarily. This leaves us with a notion of a necessary being which, as Kant says, 'is very

far from sufficing to show whether I am still thinking anything in the concept of the unconditionally necessary, or rather nothing at all.’ Or, as Christopher Hughes (1989:57) puts it, ‘a subsistent individual constituted of existence, and nothing but existence is too thin to be possible’.

d)

Summary of classical definition of simplicity

Simplicity excludes *de re* potentiality, and hence is not an attribute of any being B if any of the following conditions are met:

- i) B can be caused to undergo some intrinsic accidental change.¹⁹
- ii) B consists of material which could constitute some X which is not identical with B.²⁰
- iii) B is a member of a kind.

The consequences of saying that there is a being which is potential in none of these ways are highly important: such a being is non-material, unchangeable, hence eternal, transcendent (that is to say, not such that it can be described adequately in any of the Aristotelian categories),²¹ and since the reasons for supposing that there is such a being would be causal reasons, it might be thought reasonable to suppose that such a being is the causal explanation of everything else that there is. The notion of simplicity is quite central to Aquinas’s attempts to identify the being whose existence he takes to be established by the Five Ways with the God of traditional Christian belief.

Everything therefore depends on whether i)—iii) can each be said to be a sufficient condition of the presence in something of a *de re* potentiality. In this connection, i) and ii) are uncontroversial. The main problems arise with iii), and with the very strong conclusions which Aquinas draws from it. For it is his contention that whatever is a member of a kind is such that, unless it is being caused to exist, it would simply cease to exist altogether. Why should one believe this at all? What feature of the members of kinds involves this totally radical existential instability?²²

So put, the question might seem to Aquinas to be not too well phrased. Because he believes that in the strictest sense every *kind* of thing, if by that is meant an essence specifiable in terms of genus and species, is such that there need be no things of that kind, it simply seems obvious to him that if any member of that kind exists, it must be being caused to exist, since it actualises the potentiality expressed by the kind-term. There is no *further* feature of such things which explains their instability. Similarly, the only thing which exists of necessity is precisely one whose essence is not to be a kind of thing. In which case it follows that it is simply not possible to spell out what it is that renders some things contingent by nature, and God not. There just is no attribute F, other than the negative ‘attribute’ of not being a member of a kind, such that God has

it, and all other things do not have it, which will function in an explanatory way to distinguish between the necessarily and the contingently existing. Nevertheless, he would claim, any structured thing—where ‘structured’ means ‘being of some specifiable kind’—cannot exist without being caused to exist. As we have already seen in the previous chapter, it was just this claim that Kant sees no reason to accept, since Kant thinks that even the structured universe might well be unconditionally necessary, for all we know to the contrary.

So there are at least two major problems with Aquinas’s view:

- a) It is not obvious that kind-terms do refer to real potentialities in the world, whose actualisation requires a cause.
- b) Even if a) is conceded, it still does not follow that *at every moment* beings which actualise that potentiality need a sustaining cause in order to exist. Once in existence, why can’t they remain so of themselves, so to speak?

Hume

Hume’s attack on the notion of simplicity begins with the difficulty of giving any coherent description of something which is simple in the traditional sense.

The down-to-earth Cleanthes has attacked Demea’s denial that the Deity resembles ourselves, claiming that Demea retreats into a kind of unintelligible ‘mysticism’ of the ineffable. The following passage is Demea’s reply, spelling out his traditionalist position, and protesting that ‘mystic’ need not be a term of abuse. To be a ‘mystic’ is better than crudely depicting God in all-too-human terms:

What is the soul of man? A composition of various faculties, passions, sentiments, ideas; united indeed into one self or person, but still distinct from each other. When it reasons, the ideas, which are the parts of its discourse, arrange themselves in a certain form or order; which is not preserved entire for a moment, but immediately, gives place to another arrangement. New opinions, new passions, new affections, new feelings arise, which continually diversify the mental scene, and produce in it the greatest variety, and the most rapid succession imaginable.

How is this compatible, with that perfect immutability and simplicity which all true Theists ascribe to the Deity? By the same act, say they, he sees past, present, and future: His love and his hatred, his mercy and his justice, are one individual operation; He is entire in every point of space; and complete in every instant of duration. No succession, no change, no acquisition, no diminution. What he is implies not in it any shadow of distinction or diversity. And what he is, this moment, he ever has been, and ever will be, without any new judgement, sentiment or operation. He stands fixed in one simple, perfect state; nor can you ever say, with any propriety, that this act of his is different from that other, or that this

judgment or idea has been lately formed, and will give place, by succession, to any different judgment or idea.

(Dialogues, IV)

Demea's account is a pretty fair summary of Aquinas's view. Cleanthes is quite unconvinced. He takes this defence as providing yet further evidence that Demea's position is unintelligible. Indeed, it is worse than that:

I can readily allow that those who maintain the perfect simplicity of the Supreme Being, to the extent in which you have explained it, are complete MYSTICS, and chargeable with all the consequences which I have drawn from their opinion. They are, in a word, ATHEISTS without knowing it. A mind...that is wholly simple, and totally immutable; is a mind, which has no thought, no reason, no will, no sentiment, no love, no hatred; or, in a word, is no mind at all. It is an abuse of terms to give it that appellation, and we may as well speak of limited extension without figure, or of number without composition.

(Ibid.)

In short, for God to be simple, as traditionally defined, would entail that God has no attributes at all, since all these attributes are differently, and hence distinctly, defined. Moreover, all the attributes which theists might regard as most important in a Deity presuppose that of being a Mind, since without that, to claim that something possesses attributes like justice, mercy, love, freedom, reason and knowledge simply make no sense; but God cannot be simple and have a mind in any intelligible sense of that term.

Hume's criticisms are two-pronged. For no sooner has Cleanthes accused mystics of being implicit atheists, than Philo (doubtless here speaking for Hume himself) criticises the anthropomorphism into which Cleanthes himself must retreat. Philo waives, for the moment, his own views about the inadequacy of causal arguments and objects in the following way:

- i) God has a mind like ours.
- ii) The regularity of the operations of our minds needs an explanation in terms of God the all-wise designer (according to Cleanthes).
- iii) But by parallel argument, the regularity of God's mind must also require a causal explanation.
- iv) In both cases, the 'explanation' will simply be an appeal to an occult property of 'rationality'.
- v) But *either* this is no explanation at all
or this, and no further, explanation will suffice in our case too, without bringing God in at all.

A useless explanation might just as well be brought in early as late in the argument. Cleanthes will be unwilling to deny iv) as it applies to God; if he persists in rejecting Demea's 'mysticism' he cannot deny i); Cleanthes is already committed to ii), and hence, given i), to iii). Cleanthes blusters, and tries to deny iv) by claiming simple ignorance of explanations in the case of God, a view which Philo dismisses out of hand as a simple evasion.

The dilemma is thereby posed. If simplicity is taken seriously, it is impossible to say anything whatsoever about God, and this is tantamount in practice to atheism; if it is not, then God provides no end to the need for causal explanation if there is such a need at all.

Though the argument is put in terms of attributes which Hume would accept as being genuine attributes, it could be adapted, I think, to take in the case of existence, which Hume does not believe to be an attribute in the proper sense at all. Consider:

- i*) God exists, as we do.
- ii*) Our existence stands in need of explanation.
- iii*) By parallel argument, so also does God's existence.
- iv*) In both cases, the 'explanation' will take the form of an appeal to the occult property of 'necessity'.
- v*) But *either* that is no explanation at all
or it might as well be invoked at the outset.

The theist, it might be said, would be unwise to deny i*) under threat of being an implicit atheist; and will be unwilling to deny ii*) and hence cannot escape iii*). But any cosmological argument to explain the existence of empirical things will invoke some notion of necessity, as iv*) states. Hence the unpalatable v*) remains. It might further be argued that if the theist attempts to deny i*) by appealing at *that* point to *de re* necessary existence, which distinguishes God's existence from ours, the first limb of v*) seems all the more pressing. If God's existence is so different, is it proper to describe it as 'existence' at all, and is not this once more a case of an 'abuse of terms', unless we can spell out in what respects necessary and contingent existence resemble one another? But, Hume pointedly remarks, 'when you go one step beyond the mundane system, you only excite an inquisitive humour, which it is impossible ever to satisfy.'

The force of the arguments (both Hume's, and the one I have reconstructed on Hume's behalf) rests on i) and iv) in each case. These premises therefore need more careful assessment. In support of i), Hume's suggestion is that the only way to deny it involves a relapse into such a version of 'mysticism' as to be altogether vacuous. It is to use terms like 'mind' or 'exists' in a fashion which deprives them of all the criteria by which we normally give meaning to those terms. Just as we cannot imagine a mind in which there is no reasoning, no set of changing ideas, no new opinions, so neither (Hume might say) can we imagine

an existence which is not existence-as-an-X, where X is some readily comprehensible term like 'human being' or 'geranium' or 'instance of whiteness'. To say in the one case that what is central to being a mind (as distinct from our *concept* of what it is to be a mind) is distinct from the operations which some minds might perform is to appeal to an 'occult property', which is quite incapable of explaining the connection between the activities of the minds with which we are acquainted. Similarly, to say that what is central to existence itself (as contrasted with the finitely existing things with which we are acquainted) is distinct from any way of existing as-an-X is to invoke an occult notion which has no explanatory power at all. At least at the outset, this latter objection is quite separate, as Hume claims it is, from any further problems one might have with causal explanations generally, or with the particular problems about whether existence is properly considered as an attribute at all.

Hume's criticisms, then, come to this: he objects to using 'occult powers' as explanations, quite in general. 'Rationality' is one such alleged explanation of the regular workings of our minds; and (I suggest) 'necessary existence' is another pseudo-explanation of the existence of things. In either case, Hume might say, appeal to such powers might as well be made at the outset, without having to go all the way back to God. Our minds behave as they do, and things exist as they do, because of the way they are. If the theist attempts to avoid this, by saying that it is only these powers *as possessed by God* which will provide an adequate explanation, Hume will retort that if the divine version of these powers were so different from earthly versions as to avoid the need for further explanation, then the powers would be even more 'occult' than they are in the earthly cases. God's self-explaining mind, and his self-explaining existence would have to be so different from ours as to be beyond all our powers of expression. That, he argues, is a position which is tantamount to atheism. God fails as an explanation for the properties of the world, and for the existence of the world because no coherent sense of 'explanation' is available. Aquinas believes that he can give some sense both to the terms used of God, and to the sense of 'explanation' in which God explains the existence of the universe.

In short, the crucial point to emerge from Hume's criticisms of divine simplicity is that the meaningfulness of any of the terms which might be used to speak of a simple God will depend upon the explanatory framework within which those terms are employed. To the extent that we have a genuine explanation, the sense of the terms involved can then be examined. But if, as Hume claims, there is no genuine explanation at all, the diagnosis of the failure will be that the allegedly explanatory terms in fact carried no coherent sense. If this is a correct reading of Hume, his position will to this extent be not unlike that of Aquinas, who also maintains that the justification for saying that terms used of God have a sense will in the end depend on whether these terms can function in an adequate explanation of the things we experience and call by our ordinary names. Aquinas believed that he can spell out what is meant by 'adequate explanation', and can therefore give at least some sense to the terms which that

explanation will contain. Hume does not believe that either of these claims can be defended.

Kant

Kant does not directly deal with the attribute of simplicity as it was classically conceived. But he deals at great (indeed repetitive) length with the concept of absolute necessity which, as we have seen, Aquinas links very closely to the notion of God's simplicity. And he offers a notion of the *ens realissimum* ('the supremely real being') which is not unlike that defended by Aquinas. The concept of an *ens realissimum*, says Kant, involves all the following claims:

- i) It is the sufficient condition of the existence of everything else.
- ii) It contains all reality.
- iii) It is absolute unity.

Hence, says Kant, it is reasonable to suppose that it is the source of all created possibility (A587). The difficulty, as Kant sees it, is to demonstrate that the combination of these three concepts corresponds to an objective possibility. Moreover, he remarks, while it may be granted that i)—iii) would indeed provide a sufficient ground for all possibilities, what proof do we have that ii) and iii) are necessary conditions for something to be the unconditioned ground of all possibilities (A588)? Why should we think that if i) is true of something, ii) and iii) must also be true of it? Why should we assume that the ultimate reality is also the highest reality (A590)?

His answer is that there is no good reason why we should make that assumption:

The transcendental object lying at the basis of appearances (and with it the reason why our sensibility is subject to certain supreme conditions rather than to others) is and remains to us inscrutable. The thing itself is given, but we have no insight into its nature.

Why? Because the only way we have of recognising whether a concept is a concept of what is really possible is by demonstrating that the object of that concept can be an object of experience. But this cannot be done in the case of an *ens realissimum*. At most we could show that the concept of such a being involves no contradiction; but that is quite insufficient to show that it is the concept of something really possible.

In some ways, Kant approaches the matter from the opposite direction to that taken by Aquinas. Whereas Aquinas tries to determine what simplicity is by excluding *de re* potentialities, Kant considers attempts to define it by determining the concept of *de re* necessity. Would he have found Aquinas's approach any more likely to succeed? Clearly, in a formal sense what is in no

way *de re* potential will be equivalent to what is *de re* necessary. So the question then is, would Kant accept Aquinas's general view that, although we have no direct grasp of what it is to exist *de re* necessarily (which is Kant's point too), nevertheless we do have a grasp of what it is to be *de re* potential, since empirical things, though 'less knowable in themselves, are more knowable to us.' We could then use this knowledge at least to arrive at a notion of what 'God is not', as Aquinas puts it.

But this Kant would not accept. He argues firstly that there is no *a priori* way of knowing that a concept is a concept of something which could exist: this is implied by his willingness to distinguish between the necessity of judgments and the necessity of things (A593). We can establish *a priori* that of necessity triangles have three angles, but this says nothing about whether triangles exist-of-necessity. Nor does it establish more than what Kant terms 'internal possibility' (A597); he comments

For though, in my concept, nothing may be lacking of the possible real content of a thing, something is still lacking in its relation to my whole state of thought, namely, that knowledge of this object is also possible *a posteriori*. And here we find the source of our present difficulty. Were we dealing with an object of the senses, we could not confound the existence of the thing with the mere concept of it. For through the concept the object is thought only as conforming to the *universal conditions* of possible empirical knowledge in general, whereas through its existence it is thought as belonging to the context of experience as a whole.

(A600)

The first occurrence of 'possible' in this passage must be to 'internal' possibility, the criterion for which is simple non-contradiction. 'Possible *a posteriori*' will then refer to *de re* possibility. Whether something *de re* can exist cannot be discovered merely by showing that our concept of it contains no contradiction. It can be discovered only by experiencing that the thing is *de re* actual. That the concept of X contains no contradiction is a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition of X's being *de re* possible. One might, indeed, strengthen Kant's case, by saying that the non-contradictoriness of the concept is not even a necessary condition. Our concepts, as they happen to be, need not reflect the natures of things accurately at all; and the conceptually contradictory might be *de re* possible for all we know to the contrary. Of course, were we to discover that it is possible to produce, say, a winged horse, we would thereby revise the concept 'horse'; but such revision would follow, not precede, the discovery. Well, then, how could we discover whether it is possible that the universe is contingent? Kant claims that, for all we know, it exists *de re* necessarily.

It by no means follows that the concept of a limited being which does not have the highest reality is for that reason incompatible with absolute

necessity. For although I do not find in its concept that unconditioned which is involved in the totality of conditions, we are not justified in concluding that its existence must for this reason be conditioned.²³

(A588)

I take it that Kant believes that the conditionedness of many individual material things is given to us in experience, since we of necessity relate them by cause and effect. What he is here denying is that the *mere* fact that something is conceived of as limited precludes our conceiving of it as unconditioned. Thus one might ask whether the universe might not be unconditioned, and have no criterion on which to answer that question. Aquinas would argue that the fact that something is limited shows that it has existence in a limited way, and for that very reason shows that it need not exist, since the idea of limitation involves *de re* potentiality. It is for that reason that, in his view, we are justified in extending the principle of causation beyond the realm of possible experience. Kant believes this is illegitimate, precisely because he sees no conceptual connection between being limited and being *de re* contingent. ‘On the contrary, we are entirely free to hold that any limited beings whatsoever, notwithstanding their being limited, may also be unconditionally necessary, although we cannot infer their necessity from the universal concepts we have of them’ (A588). And, of course, we cannot, other than by an invalid use of the ontological argument, try to argue that the *ens realissimum* is unconditionally necessary.

In short, Kant’s most basic problem with the notion of a totally simple and unconditioned being which is the sufficient condition for everything else is not directly with its simplicity; it is that there is no justification in our experience for linking the ideas of simplicity and being absolutely unconditioned. Of course he objects to ‘existence’ being part of the definition of anything, and would therefore object even more strongly to ‘existence’ being a complete definition of anything. But that objection is not really central; the basic point is that not even necessary existence can be the definition of anything. Existing-of-necessity is not an empirical feature of anything, nor can it be deduced from the concept of anything which we can experience. Aquinas’s efforts to arrive at the divine simplicity through negation of *de re* conditionedness is therefore doomed to failure, unless one can demonstrate the link between the mere fact of being limited and being *de re* capable of non-existence.

SOME ANSWERS

The core of the doctrine of simplicity is the identity of essence and existence. But this core doctrine, at least in its classical formulation, involves two distinguishable claims. The first is that the non-existence of something in which existence and essence are identical is *de re* impossible; and the second is that something in which essence and existence are identical is not a member of any

kind, that is to say, has no internal structure at all. It will be convenient to take these two points separately.

Simplicity and necessary existence

In one of the most recent studies of the nature and logic of God's existence, Barry Miller (1992) undertakes the ambitious task of showing not merely that the concept of a necessarily existent being is coherent, but in addition that it is logically contradictory to assert the existence of the universe while denying the existence of a necessarily existent being. To establish the point about coherence, he argues that there is no conclusive objection to the view that existence is genuinely an attribute of things; and he takes it as evident that, since some things need not exist, they do not exist of necessity. That is to say, their existence and their essence are distinct. He then argues that there is a logical contradiction involved in saying both that we can understand 'Fido exists' because we have a *prior* understanding of 'Fido' and '—exists', and that Fido is conceivable only as existing (or having existed). He then argues that the contradiction can be removed only on the assumption that Fido's existence is caused.²⁴

I have considerable sympathy with this argument. If I hesitate to endorse it entirely, it is because I am less confident than Miller that one can make the jump from logic to ontology in the way in which Miller does. But the general strategy seems to me sound. If it is possible to distinguish between something's capacity for existence and its existence, then it is not the case that it exists simply in virtue of the fact of its existence.

So let me come at the problem from a different angle, to reach somewhat the same place. I have already argued that to exist just is to be capable of entering into causal relationships. Taken in that way, existence is a property of all existing things, but, as Anthony Kenny points out (1979:95), the property is so vague, so 'thin', as to be largely uninteresting. Not completely uninteresting, though, since it does serve to distinguish some things from others—for instance, it distinguishes between the Eiffel Tower and the Number Two.²⁵ Be that as it may, 'being such as to be able to cease to exist' and 'being such as to be unable to cease to exist' are by no means uninteresting properties, even if 'exists' itself fails to excite. And they are interesting precisely because they lead directly to a discussion of what something which has either of those properties would be like. To be able not to exist is a property which, as we might expect, is different in different cases. We know, and can spell out, what it is for my pain to cease to exist, or for my friendship with Jemima to cease to exist, or for me to cease to exist, or for an atom to cease to exist. We have to give somewhat different accounts in each case, and hence different accounts of what it is about these various existing qualities, or relationships, or substances, which makes their non-existence *de re* possible. What is not by any means so clear is whether we can give a *complete* list of the various ways in which existing things are able not to exist. In particular, we are at the very least unclear whether the energy/matter in

the universe has this ability or not, and, if it does, what it is for it to have this ability. I take this to be the central point that Kant makes in his discussion of the notion of an *ens necessarium*. He rightly sees that the question cannot be answered in the terms which are provided by our everyday experience and the scientific accounts of that experience which we can develop.²⁶ The interesting question is whether there is any other account which is possible, and whether such an account in any way forces itself upon our attention.

Necessary existence and transcendence²⁷

Aquinas maintained that there is a close connection between being an individual, being a member of a kind, and being capable of non-existence.²⁸ The link between the first two is Aristotelian, in that it was taken as clear that a substance is a 'this-such'—an individual of a kind. Since there is no kind of thing to which God belongs, God is not an individual either. To be an individual is to be *an* individual, one among possibly many individuals. But it is the second link which is more controversial. Were it to be shown that to be a member of a kind is to be capable of non-existence, a major step would have been taken towards showing that all empirical entities are capable of nonexistence. For to be a member of a kind is to have some structural features which are essential features; and even the universe itself, or the energy in which it consists, is essentially structured. Were this not the case, the most fundamental laws of physics, including the Law of the Conservation of Energy, simply would not hold at all. They hold good in the nature of things. Everything in the universe, and the universe itself, is a thing of a kind whose essential properties account for the truth of the causal laws according to which it behaves. Once again, it has to be emphasised that whether the universe is capable of non-existence is not a question which can be resolved by appeal to the fact that there is no logical contradiction involved in supposing that the universe might not exist; nor is to be resolved by supposing that we can imagine that it does not, if indeed we can. The issue is whether it embodies such a *de re* possibility or not; and that is an empirical and not simply a conceptual or psychological matter, as I have argued in [Chapter I](#).²⁹

In contrast to Miller's appeal to logic at this point, the question is why should membership of a kind involve such a *de re* possibility? I suspect that Aquinas simply takes it as evident that kind-terms denote real possibilities, and that to be a member of a kind is therefore for that possibility to have been caused to be actual. He also takes it as evident that no possibility is actualised except by the action of a moving cause. But that assumption might simply be denied altogether, or at least it might be denied that it is evident, as Kant does by implication.

Perhaps an argument might be made along the following lines, in three main stages. The first step is this. To be a member of a kind is to satisfy the description by which that kind is defined. Since kind-terms are universals it is logically possible for there to be indefinitely many individuals which satisfy that description, and equally, that it is logically possible for there to be none. There is

no logical necessity for there to be any individual satisfying any given predicate, and in any case logic is not a good guide to what is causally possible. Still, in general there is reason to believe that natural kind-terms describe not merely logically possible individuals, but causally possible individuals. Perhaps one can conclude that natural kind-terms are likely to describe *de re* possibilities, and where they do not there is still room for science to progress. If this is so, then the causal laws which are true of our universe describe what is causally possible. And this causal possibility is not merely logically, but also ontologically prior to the existence of this individual universe in which that set of possibilities is actualised.

The second step goes like this. Unlike purely logical possibilities, *de re* possibilities must be grounded in something actual. For a *de re* possibility to exist just is for something to have the causal power to produce an individual instance of the kind in question. And if the *de re* possibility of this universe existing is ontologically prior to the existing universe, then that possibility must be grounded in something which is causally able to produce such a universe. Did such a ground not exist, then the universe would not be *de re* possible at all, and therefore could not exist.

The third step is to notice that, if the preceding steps are right, no existing thing is *de re* possible at all unless there exists something which is *de re* necessary; that is to say, something which is not a member of any kind, and hence is not an individual realisation of a prior *de re* possibility. Hence there must exist a being which is altogether simple and unstructured, or nothing else *de re* could exist.

The key moves in this argument are the two assertions that existing in a structured way is an actualisation of a *de re* possibility; and that the ground of such a possibility must lie in something actual. It is of course a matter of dispute whether these assertions are true, and, if they are, how we could know that they are. As with Aristotelian first principles, there is no further known truth from which these assertions can be logically derived. There is inductive evidence for both of them; but if it is questioned whether inductive evidence can produce *knowledge*, the question then becomes one about our criteria for applying the honorific term 'knowledge' quite generally. The very nature of that question is far from clear, at least to me. What I think is clear is that the success or failure of anything like the classical doctrine of simplicity, and indeed of the classical proofs for the existence of God, depends on some argument of the kind I have just sketched.

Describing the transcendent

Supposing that God exists *de re* necessarily, and hence is simple in the sense elaborated in the preceding discussion, it is plain that attempts to describe God must either fail completely, or at best be very inadequate. Our language is developed precisely to deal with individuals and kinds of thing; with John or

Jemima, with humans, colours, atoms and energy. It is under strain when we try to describe even this-worldly items which we are not equipped directly to experience, such as quarks, or Black Holes, or the n -dimensional universe. To grasp the significance even of the mathematical formulae with which we try to capture the behaviour of such things, we have to interpret them using metaphor and other similar devices, in an attempt to 'read' what we think we have discovered. We have to construct models to aid our understanding, and these models function for us only because they are constructed using the ordinary items of which we do have direct experience.³⁰

Our language is surely even less well adapted to attempt to describe a being which is not an individual, nor classifiable under any univocal kind-term. We shall be much more clear in saying what such a being is not than in giving positive descriptions of what it is like. Since I have already discussed this point at some length elsewhere (G.J.Hughes 1987), I shall content myself here with saying that we need to be sufficiently modest to recognise that the deficiencies in our knowledge of God derive not from any incoherence in God, but from our own limited experience, and sense-bound cognitive apparatus. In particular, though, I think we should be wary of the view that to hold that God is simple makes it impossible for us to say anything useful about God in human terms. It is sometimes argued that unless God is at least in some respects much more like us, then we will be inevitably deprived of the rich metaphorical tradition which characterises the language of all religions. There is no need to suppose that a strong doctrine of God's transcendence has as an inevitable consequence that we must *think* of God in remote, impersonal terms which are religiously quite unhelpful. On the contrary, it seems to me that such terms are quite unavoidable, and not necessarily useless or uninformative, provided that they are not taken for more than they are.