Is God an Abstract Object?

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ABSTRACT

Before Duns Scotus, most philosophers agreed that God is identical with His necessary intrinsic attributes—omnipotence, omniscience, etc. This Identity Thesis was a component of widely held doctrines of divine simplicity, which stated that God exemplifies no metaphysical distinctions, including that between subject and attribute. The Identity Thesis seems to render God an attribute, an abstract object. This paper shows that the Identity Thesis follows from a basic theistic belief and does not render God abstract. It also discusses how one might move from the Identity Thesis to the full doctrine of divine simplicity and shows that the Identity Thesis generates a new ontological argument.

Medieval theologians commonly speculated at length on the relation between God and His essential attributes before proceeding to less abstruse matters.¹ The dominant view prior to 1300 was that God’s relation to His necessary intrinsic attributes is identity—that God is identical with omnipotence, identical with omniscience and so on. This surprising claim was a component of doctrines of divine simplicity held by Augustine, Boethius, Anselm, Aquinas and hosts of lesser lights. For the claim that God is “simple,” in these writers, is shorthand for the claim that He exemplifies no metaphysical distinctions whatsoever, including that between subject and essential attribute. Though abstruse, the claim that God is simple is at the heart of these thinkers’ concepts of God. To cite but one instance, it is because everything he says about God will be affected by the claim that God is simple that Aquinas in his Summae takes up God’s simplicity as soon as he finishes arguing His existence.²

The medievals found divine simplicity important because they explained the concept of God by explicating the concept of a perfect

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being, and they considered simplicity a keynote of perfection. Thus investigating the cluster of issues divine simplicity raises can add to our understanding of the project of "perfect being theology" recently revived by Thomas Morris and others. Moreover, if the doctrine of divine simplicity is in fact a response to some intuitive content of the concept of God, a study of simplicity's roots and fruits will give us a deeper understanding of that concept. Recently a number of analytic philosophers have debated the doctrine of divine simplicity, including Morris, Eleonore Stump, Norman Kretzmann, Alvin Plantinga and William Mann. Mann, Kretzmann and Stump defend doctrines of divine simplicity which include the claim that God is identical with His essential attributes. This claim (hereafter the Identity Thesis) is certainly paradoxical: it seems to render God an attribute, an abstract object. But this paper will motivate the Identity Thesis by showing that it does follow from a basic theistic belief. It will then argue that even though the Identity Thesis entails that God is identical with an attribute, it does not entail that He is an abstract object. Finally, it will discuss how the Identity Thesis might lead theists to the full doctrine of divine simplicity, and show that the Identity Thesis generates its own version of the ontological argument.

I. HOW TO DERIVE THE IDENTITY THESIS

The Identity Thesis follows from the common theistic claim that to qualify for the title "God," someone must be the creator and sustainer of all that is distinct from Himself. Theists believe that

1. necessarily, for any x, if x is God, x creates and maintains in existence whatever is not identical with x.

(1) states a requisite for bearing the title "God." Thus it implies that there are such requisites, i.e. that

2. there is a set S of attributes which is such that necessarily, for any x, if x is God, then for any attribute $\Phi$, if $\Phi \in S$, then $\Phi(x).

By the same token, (1) implies that S has members, or that

3. ($\exists \Phi$) ($\Phi \in S$)

For (1) specifies one of these members. (2) and (3) involve no commitment to any particular ontology of attributes. Nor does (2) entail that the attributes which make God divine are part of the individual essence (if any) of the individual who is God. (2) asserts only that necessarily, whatever individual qualifies for the title "God" has all the attributes in S. Only in this minimal sense do (2) and
(3) entail that God has a nature. So (2) and (3) are metaphysically unproblematic.

(1) is a very basic part of Western theistic belief. Thus to theists, (1) carries strong warrant; theists will have strong reason to reject any proposition inconsistent with (1). Here is one such proposition:

4. There is an attribute which is a member of the set S and which is distinct from God. (In symbols: \((\exists \Phi)((\Phi \in S) \land (\Phi \neq \text{God}))\).)

The conjunction of (4) and (1) entails that God creates an attribute which is part of His nature. But it seems flatly impossible for God to create part of His nature. If this is impossible, the conjunction of (1) and (4) entails an impossible state of affairs. If so, (1) and (4) cannot both be true: the two propositions are inconsistent, so that (1) entails \(\sim (4)\), i.e. entails that

5. \(\sim (\exists \Phi)((\Phi \in S) \land (\Phi \neq \text{God}))\).

From (5), we may reason this way:

6. \((\Phi) \sim ((\Phi \in S) \land (\Phi \neq \text{God}))\).  
5, quantifier negation.

7. \((\Phi)((\Phi \in S) \supset \sim (\Phi \neq \text{God}))\).  
6, definition of "\(\supset\)".

8. \((\Phi)((\Phi \in S) \supset (\Phi = \text{God}))\).  
7, double negation.

The Identity Thesis consists of (8) plus (3). (1) entails (3) and entails (8) given that God cannot create part of His nature. Thus if God cannot create part of His nature, (1) entails the Identity Thesis. So a theist who wishes to avoid the Identity Thesis will have to reject or reinterpret (1) or (3) or else claim that God can create part of His nature.

II. HOW TO ESCAPE THE IDENTITY THESIS

Rejecting (3) would carry intolerable consequences. It would entail that S is empty, and so that there is no attribute which God must have (or lack) to be God. If we reject (3), then possibly God is evil, or powerless, or covered with pink polka-dots. Thus tinkering with (1) seems preferable. For one thing, arguably ordinary theists do not take (1) as our argument does. Theists are convinced that God is the source of all substances other than He. They rarely if ever consider His relation to non-substance items such as attributes. Perhaps, then, theists would not take (1) to imply that God creates attributes.

I submit however that they would. Theists believe that God has created every creatable actual thing. Adherents to (1) also want to say that every actual thing save God is creatable. These claims, conjoined, establish a presumption in theists’ minds: as soon as they
recognize some category of entity distinct from God, theists want to say that things of this sort are created. I suggest that for this reason, ordinary theists queried about God’s relation to non-substance items would want also to claim that God made them—i.e. to extend (1)’s scope as our argument does—and would give up or qualify this claim only if it proved untenable. Such theists might perhaps argue that if God did not make non-substance items, creation was not truly ex nihilo, because these entities accompanied God from all eternity and became aspects of God’s creation (e.g. by being instantiated).

Still, even if theists would in fact extend (1) to cover attributes, one may still wonder whether they would accept (1) taken as covering even attributes God has essentially. After all, what harm can there be in granting that among all the furniture of reality, there are a few items which God cannot have created, namely His own essential attributes? The answer is “more than one might think.” Theists who reject (1) taken as covering even God’s essential attributes will find themselves deprived of one well-entrenched belief and the strongest version of a second such belief. I will now explain these, suggest that they are in fact well-entrenched, then show how they become part of the cost of abandoning (1).

III. TWO THEIST THESES

It is a common theistic belief that God’s existence is not derived from anything else—that “God made the universe, but nobody made God.” This belief is bound up, for example, with the common theistic belief that God is the real source of the universe. For if something else created God, and then God created the universe, it would seem to most that this other thing was the real source of the universe, and God just an intermediary.

Let us put this belief about God’s existence a bit more formally: it is part of the ordinary theist’s concept of God that no regress of true explanations can go past God’s existence, i.e. that when one has traced some phenomenon back to the fact that God exists, one can go no further. Philosophically sophisticated theists who defend versions of the ontological argument might hold to a slightly different claim. If some ontological argument is sound, then (some may say) God exists because it is His nature to exist. Thus such philosophers would perhaps say that chains of true explanations can go past God’s existing to God’s having His nature, but no further.8

Theists also believe that God’s intentions and choices are always entirely free, unconstrained by anything beyond the laws of logic and of His own nature. He is not constrained by any laws or ob-
taining conditions in non-human nature, theists think, because He has established these, and can alter them if He so chooses, or at least could have altered them had He so chosen. Nor according to theism does human action force God’s hand. If God makes choices in response to human action, theists hold, still it was always in His power to prevent the actions to which He responds, if only by preventing the existence of their agents. If this is so, then God always responds only to actions which He permits to occur. In this sense, theists think, God is always ultimately in control, even when He is acting in circumstances we have created (e.g. to remedy the consequences of human evil). We can generate a case in which God seems maximally constrained by human actions by supposing that God is necessarily morally perfect. If He is so, then if there is only one morally proper response to a human action and God must respond to that action, then necessarily, God makes that response. But (theists say) even in this case, God acts freely, just because He (anticipated and) could have prevented the action to which He responds. Thus God is only “constrained” to do that which He freely lets Himself be bound to do. We could express the belief that God’s intentions or choices are not constrained by any entity other than God by saying that no chain of true explanations goes beyond some divine intention or choice—or else beyond God’s having His nature and whatever beliefs He has logically before He creates, which may explain certain of God’s intentions and choices. For if nothing other than God forces God to act as He does, the real explanation of God’s actions always lies within God Himself.

Let “G” denote the state of affairs which includes God’s existing, being God, having all his precreation beliefs, having all the intentions He ever actually has, making all the choices He ever actually makes and performing all the actions He ever performs. Then if we say that one state of affairs G includes is G itself, we might state our first theist thesis, the Ultimacy Assumption, in this way:

necessarily, if exactly one state of affairs G includes is a member of a chain C of states of affairs whose obtaining explains the obtaining of other states of affairs in C (a “regress of explanations”), that state of affairs is the last member of C, and if more than one state of affairs G includes is a member of C, in C only states of affairs G includes explain states of affairs G includes.

But we can more neatly sum up the Ultimacy Assumption as the claim that

UA. necessarily, only states of affairs G includes explain states of affairs G includes.
(UA) has humble roots; it merely sums up the ordinary and sophisticated theistic beliefs we have just exhibited. But it is this same assumption which animates the theologian Paul Tillich when he writes that

The ultimate concern of the believer is concern about that which is really ultimate . . . Only if God is ultimate reality can He be our unconditional concern . . . Faith in anything which has only preliminary reality is idolatrous.¹²

(UA) is deeply entrenched. (UA) entails

9. necessarily, for any x and y, if x is God, and x ≠ y, x in no way really depends on y for its existence or for any attribute essential to being God.

For if (9) is false, then possibly there is something non-identical with God on which He depends for His existence or nature. If there is such a thing, its existing is not included in G and helps to explain the obtaining of a state of affairs G includes. Thus if there is such a thing, one can push a regress of explanations past G. But (UA) entails that no state of affairs G does not include can help to explain a state of affairs G includes. Thus ~(9) entails ~(UA), and so (UA) entails (9), and theists who accept (UA)—as most do—are committed to (9).

Theists thus are committed to (9). But theists might also find (9) somewhat appealing independently. Western theists maintain that to be God, someone must exist, a se, i.e. in some way independent of all other things. Independence is a de­graded attribute, and many theists see it as a perfection, something which helps to make God great. These theists thus will want to ascribe to God the highest degree of independence they find tenable. (9) asserts that God has the highest possible degree of independence. Thus (9) is at least a claim which many theists might want to make were they convinced that it is tenable.

IV. THE COST OF DENYING (1)

Suppose, then, that the theist rejects (1), holding that God has a nature distinct from Himself (namely the conjunctive attribute consisting of all and only the members of S) but does not create it. In this case, it will follow that God's nature exists independent of God, and God depends on it for attributes essential to being God. (If omnipotence did not exist, in whatever sense attributes exist, God could not be omnipotent).¹³ If this is so, (9) is false.¹⁴ Further, in this case, one can explain God's having His nature (in part) by
the existence of that nature independent of God. Doing so would constitute pushing a regress of explanations past G. Thus in this case, (UA) is false.\textsuperscript{15} So to avoid the Identity Thesis by rejecting (1), theists also would have to reject (9) and (UA).

Need theists care very much about rejecting (1), (UA) and (9)? They need not if by qualifying these claims one can obtain theses strong enough to interest theists, adequate to the intuitive backing of unqualified (1), (UA) and (9), and yet compatible with denying the Identity Thesis. The simplest and perhaps the most plausible qualifications of (1), (UA) and (9) would be

1* necessarily, for any x and y, if x is God and x \neq y and \sim(y \in S), x creates y and maintains y in existence.

UA* necessarily, only states of affairs G includes or the existing of S or any member of S explain states of affairs G includes.

9* necessarily, for any x and y, if x is God and x \neq y and \sim(y \in S), x in no way really depends on y for its existence or for any attribute essential to being God.

Again, if theists find these or other such qualified claims acceptable, they can avoid the Identity Thesis with impunity by denying (1), (UA) and (9). But (UA*) really preserves nothing of (UA). (UA) states that G is never further explicable. Given (UA*), G is always further explicable, by the existence or nature of members of S. Thus (UA*) is not at all adequate to the intuitive basis of (UA). Theists want all explanations to trace back to God, rather than through God to some more ultimate context; again, as Tillich asserted, to be what theists call God involves being the truly ultimate reality. We have seen that the intuitions about God’s ultimacy which (UA) formulates are very widespread among theists. For theists who share these intuitions, there is no substitute for (UA). This creates a problem for the attempt to find substitutes for (1) and (9). For we have already seen, in this section’s first paragraph, that

10. \sim(1) \supset \sim(UA).

But (10) entails that

11. (UA) \supset (1).

We have seen that (UA) also entails (9). So it seems that no substitute for (UA) will be acceptable to any theist who initially finds (UA) appealing, and (UA) entails both (1) and (9). Recurring to the arguments at the end of section one, then, it appears that for any theist who accepts (UA)—and most do—the only way to avoid the Identity Thesis is to claim that God can create part of His nature.
V. WHY GOD CANNOT CREATE HIS NATURE

Again, this seems simply impossible. But as Thomas Morris has recently maintained precisely that God creates His entire nature, I must argue against this explicitly rather than just appeal to intuition.\(^1\) I therefore offer three arguments. In each of them, expressions such as "before," "then," "already" and "until" occur essentially. But we need not read these expressions temporally. We can equally well take them to indicate non-temporal asymmetric relations of causal or conceptual presupposition and dependence.

First, it is plausible that ability to create as God creates is one of the prerogatives of possessing the divine nature—i.e. that it is because He is God that God can create. If so, God must exemplify His nature if He is to be able to create His nature. But if God exemplifies His nature, His nature exists, and if God’s nature already exists, it cannot then be created. So we cannot say that God’s nature is among the things God creates.

Second, if some person Herman creates the divine nature, then the divine nature does not exist until Herman creates it. But if the divine nature’s existing presupposes that Herman exists, Herman must exist, complete with his nature, in order that then the divine nature may exist. Thus Herman’s nature must exist before the divine nature does. If it does, Herman’s nature ≠ the divine nature. But if this is so, Herman ≠ God.

Third, God cannot exist until the divine nature exists, since being God = exemplifying the divine nature. Hence if Herman creates the divine nature, Herman exists before God does, and so Herman ≠ God. That is, if the divine nature does not exist unless Herman creates it, and God cannot exist unless the divine nature exists, then God cannot exist unless Herman creates the divine nature. Thus God’s existing presupposes Herman’s existing, as a causal condition of God’s existing. But then if God = Herman, God is a causal condition of His own existing: God causes Himself to exist. This is impossible.

VI. AN UNMENTIONED POSSIBILITY?

Now my second and third arguments may seem to overlook a possibility. For one may wonder whether it could be that Herman first exists (reading "first" either logically or temporally), then creates the divine nature, then assumes the divine nature—whether, that is, Herman could make himself God. On this alternative, Herman and God are the same individual, and so since Herman creates the divine nature, God creates the divine nature. Thus not even the
divine nature is both distinct from God and not created by God; (4) then is compatible with (1)-(3).

VII. THE PUTATIVE POSSIBILITY REJECTED

Still, on this account, though the one individual (henceforth GOD) who is both Herman and God creates the divine nature, GOD creates qua Herman, not qua God. For as noted above, to be God = to exemplify the divine nature. Thus we mean by "God" GOD qua bearing the divine nature. So GOD cannot create the divine nature qua God, for qua God, GOD presupposes that nature's existence. But if GOD creates the divine nature qua Herman, not qua God, then Herman has an attribute God lacks, that of being that qua which GOD creates. To this extent, Herman retains a kind of distinction from God. If we speak of them as distinct, we take Herman and God as "thin individuals" or "qua-objects" which individually bear only some attributes of GOD, and we view GOD as a bundle of such thin individuals. So viewed, God and Herman are aspects or "guises" of the same individual, and it is not strictly the case that God = Herman. Instead, the relation between God and Herman is a "sameness" that falls short of strict identity. For God and Herman are "the same individual" only in that both are aspects or "guises" of the same being, GOD: in the vocabulary of H.-N. Castañeda's "Guise Theory," they are not identical but "con-substantiated."¹⁷ In the case at hand, only because Herman and God are consubstantiated rather than identical can Herman create the divine nature. But if Herman is distinct from God yet not created by God, (1) is false, and per (11) it follows that (UA) is false. Further, if Herman is distinct from God and causes Herman's being God, (9) is false.

Now one could of course try to restrict (1), (9) and (UA) to obtain principles plausible to theists yet compatible with Herman's having his sort of distinctness from God. The simplest and so perhaps most plausible such restrictions would be that

1** necessarily, for any x and y, if y is God and x ≠ y, y creates x and maintains x in existence, unless x = Herman.

UA** necessarily, only states of affairs G includes or such states of affairs as that Herman = Herman explain states of affairs G includes.

9** necessarily, for any x and y, if y is God and x ≠ y, y in no way really depends on x for its existence or for any attribute essential to being God, unless x = Herman.

But I am not sure that these principles really express the theistic intuitions that warrant (1), (9) and (UA). Theists believe that
is because He is God that GOD creates and sustains all else. Given 
(1**), though, that GOD creates and sustains all else is true because 
GOD is Herman; only Herman is really, strictly the source of ab-
solutely everything other than itself. Again, theists believe that it 
is because He is God that GOD exists a se. But given (9**), this 
is true because GOD is Herman; only Herman is really, strictly 
without all cause. Lastly, theists hold that it is because He is God 
that GOD provides the ultimate context within which all else must 
be explained. But given (UA**), GOD provides this context only 
because He is Herman; given (UA**), G is always further explicable. 
I suspect that like defects would attend any other restrictions of (1), 
(9) and (UA) to allow x = Herman and Herman = Herman as 
exceptions. But then such restrictions would likely not be accep-
table to theists.

VIII. PERFECTION AND BECOMING GOD

Given a principle Morris accepts, one can argue that Herman can-
not make himself God. If he cannot, what section V suggests is 
not possible. To set up this argument, let us consider the claim 
that x is greater than y with respect to Φ. 18 This claim is perfectly 
respectable; there is nothing philosophically difficult about the truth 
that with respect to being a running back, Marcus Allen is greater 
than I am. But if such claims are licit, then we can say enough 
about perfect beings to make the plausible claim that 

12. if x is a perfect being, then for all y and all attributes F, if 
x has F and y has F and F is a respect of comparison for a 
relative-greatness relation, then x is at least as great as y with 
respect to F.

Note that (12) does not entail that x can be compared in greatness 
with y in any respect. It entails only that if it can, then in at least 
one respect, y does not surpass x. (12) is all the knowledge about 
perfect beings we need at present.

Assume (as all perfect being theologians do) that necessarily, 
someone is God if that person is a perfect being. To become God, 
an individual must be a person. For as God is a person and per-
sonhood is surely an essential property of whatever has it, an in-
dividual could preserve its identity despite becoming God only if 
that individual were a person. Thus Herman too is a person. As 
he is, there are respects in which one can compare the perfection 
of Herman and God. Now Herman cannot start out in all com-
parable respects as perfect as or more perfect than God. For if he 
did, Herman would already be a perfect being, and so already be
God. Hence before Herman is God (reading “before” either logically or temporarily), Herman is in some respect less perfect than God. In a recent article, Morris accepts that

if there is a singular divine font of existence, necessarily a creative source of all else . . . then an ancient and deeply intuitive principle that no effect can exceed its ultimate cause in metaphysical status together with the objectivity of value structures . . . will yield . . . that God is a greatest possible being.19

Morris’ argument is this:

13. Necessarily, God = the ultimate source of all that is other than Himself.
14. Necessarily, nothing is greater than that which is the ultimate source of all else.
15. Therefore necessarily, nothing is greater than God.

If Herman makes himself God, Herman is the ultimate source of God, who is the ultimate source of all else. Hence Herman is the ultimate source of all else. Then if (14) or a like claim is true, if Herman is less great than God, Herman cannot attain the higher perfection of being God: if Herman is not strictly identical with God, Herman is less perfect than God, and per (14) cannot become God. In fact, if Herman is the ultimate source of all else, then by (14) a greater perfection than Herman’s is not possible—and so Herman is already the greatest possible being and so already God. One can say the same of any other being one might suppose to make itself God. Hence nothing can make itself God. If so, then it again appears that there is no saving the claim that God creates His own nature, for Morris or for anyone else who finds appealing any principle relevantly like (14).

IX. ULTIMACY, DIVINE CONTROL AND THE IDENTITY THEESIS

If there is no way to maintain that God can create His own nature (or part of it), we have no way to avoid the Identity Thesis, per the earlier argument. So if the foregoing arguments have been plausible, it appears that (UA) is the deepest root of the Identity Thesis: for (1) yields the Identity Thesis, and (UA) entails (1), but as far as I can see, (1) does not entail (UA). In his recent Does God Have a Nature?, Alvin Plantinga argues that the “aseity-sovereignty intuition” is the root of the Identity Thesis.20 This “intuition” is that everything is “up to God and within his control.”21 (UA) is distinct from the “aseity-sovereignty intuition.” That God is in control of everything entails that G is a member of every regress of
explanations, with the possible exception of chains which terminate in free actions of creatures.22 But (UA) does not entail that G figures in every or in any chain of explanations. That (UA) is distinct from the “aseity-sovereignty intuition” is as it should be, for ultimacy and any degree of control are logically distinct. It is conceivable that something be ultimate in (UA)’s sense but control nothing; this is the case with Plato’s Form of the Good and Plotinus’ One, two beings on which early and medieval Christian perfect being theologians modelled their simple God in some respects.

Plantinga’s claim that the “aseity-sovereignty intuition” is the root of the Identity Thesis is integral to his case against the Identity Thesis. For having argued this, he then tries to strip the Identity Thesis of its motivation by showing that if indulged, this intuition will take us past the Identity Thesis to Cartesian “universal possibilism,” the untenable thesis that there are no necessary truths and every proposition is possible.23 To back his view of the Identity Thesis’ motivation, Plantinga quotes some of Aquinas’ arguments for it and for related claims:

The essence of an object is either the thing itself or related to the thing in some way as its cause . . . But nothing can in any way be the cause of God since . . . He is the first being (SCG I, 21, 5). anything that exists either is itself existence or is a being by participation. Now God . . . exists. If then He is not Himself existence . . . he will be a being only by participation. And so He will not be the first being (ST Ia 3, 4). each good thing that is not its goodness is called good by participation. But that which is named by participation has something prior to it from which it receives the character of goodness. This cannot proceed to infinity . . . We must therefore reach some first good, that is not by participation good . . . but is good through its own essence. This is God (SCG I, 38).24

The first two arguments turn on God’s being the “first being.” That is first which has nothing prior to it; to say that God is the first being, then, is to say that He is ultimate, rather than to make a claim about His control of other things. So even if in fact what is first in Aquinas’ sense also controls other things, the control is not what concerns these arguments. The third argument is that there is a first good, which is God. Once again, its key claim is that God is first; the argument makes no claim at all that the first good controls other goods. So Plantinga’s texts support the claim that (UA) is behind the Identity Thesis rather than the claim that the Identity Thesis rests on the “aseity-sovereignty intuition.” If so, Plantinga’s argument that the “aseity-sovereignty intuition” leads to universal possibilism does not in any way detract from the Identity Thesis’ motivation.
X. IS GOD ABSTRACT?

Plantinga objects to the Identity Thesis that

if God is identical with each of his (essential) properties, then since each of his properties is a property, he is a property . . . he isn’t a person but a mere abstract object; he has no knowledge, awareness, power, love or life.25

If traditional theistic beliefs entail the Identity Thesis, and this entails that God is not a person, and traditional theists also believe that God is a person, traditional theism is inconsistent. To Plantinga, that God is a person is non-negotiable for theists, it is obvious (why?) that a property cannot be a person, the Identity Thesis identifies God with a property, so this thesis does entail that God is not a person, and so the Identity Thesis must go. But Plantinga’s move from God’s identity with a property to God’s not being a person is a bit fast.

If an identity-statement ‘‘A = B’’ is true, then where one could have thought there to be two subjects of predication, A and B, there is only one. This one has all properties A really has and all properties B really has, but may have only a proper subset of the attributes A has been thought to have and a proper subset of the attributes B has been thought to have. Still, for all that has been said so far, which of the attributes A and B have been thought to have this one thing has remains to be determined. If God = God’s nature, God has some subset of the attributes God is usually thought to have and some subset of the attributes His nature is usually thought to have. Plantinga assumes that if God = God’s nature, God has all the attributes usually associated with God’s nature and no attributes previously associated with the title ‘‘God’’ which are incompatible with attributes usually associated with God’s nature. But why assume this? Plantinga gives no reason. A God who is identical with His nature may have only some abstract-entity features. He may even have none: the claim God = God’s nature could inform us that that which is identical with God’s nature exemplifies no attributes previously associated with God’s nature. So that God = God’s nature just does not entail that God has only abstract-entity features, nor therefore that He is abstract. Even if the Identity Thesis is true, it does not follow that God is any sort of abstract object.

Further, the claim that God has abstract-entity features is independently plausible. Many theists claim that God exists necessarily and is present in space without precluding the presence in the same place of material things; some also assert that God is timeless and immutable. Many philosophers would say that only abstract entities
(and not all of them) have these features. So far from demonstrating an incoherence in the concept of God, the Identity Thesis could help to explain why God has features which no other apparently concrete being seems able to have.

XI. THE WAY TO DIVINE SIMPLICITY

As noted earlier, the Identity Thesis is a substantial part of the medieval doctrine of divine simplicity. Because the full doctrine is that God exemplifies no metaphysical distinctions, just what a given medieval writer claims that God’s simplicity excludes depends on just what metaphysical distinctions that writer recognizes. But Aquinas’ list of what a simple God cannot exemplify includes most distinctions other medieval writers consider. Aquinas holds that because He is simple,

i. God has no material parts.
ii. God is not distinct from His essential attributes.
iii. God’s essential attributes are not distinct from one another.
iv. God does not have attributes which are distinct from one another as contingent and necessary intrinsic attributes are.
v. God is not distinct from His existence.

Let us ask how many of (i)-(v) theists will actually affirm. Almost all theists will grant (i), for almost all theists have held that God is immaterial. (ii) asserts the Identity Thesis, which we have seen to follow from deeply-entrenched theistic beliefs. (ii) clearly entails (iii), for if all God’s essential attributes are identical with the same thing (God), they are all identical with one another. As to (v), Aquinas’ requirement for identity with one’s own existence seems to be existing necessarily and being absolutely uncaused. (UA) entails that God is absolutely uncaused. We will see below that the Identity Thesis gives good reason to say that God exists necessarily if at all. So if the argument of this paper is sound, theists should grant (i)-(iii) and (v). Basic theistic beliefs, then, give theists reason to believe a substantial part of what Aquinas meant by calling God simple.

(iv), though, is more difficult. One can try to back it as follows. Some abstract entities have contingent components, e.g. the set of all ducks. Other abstract entities by their very natures depend on contingent beings—if duckhood is an Aristotelian universal, for instance, then duckhood exists only because there are ducks. But no members of S have contingent components or depend intrinsically on contingent beings. Arguably, one attribute abstract entities with no contingent members or cases have is an inability to bear real intrinsic contingent attributes. For if an abstract entity has no such
member or case, it is difficult to see just why it would have any such attribute. Hence if God = each member of S, perhaps God cannot bear real intrinsic contingent attributes. If He cannot, then He does not have attributes distinct as contingent and necessary intrinsic attributes are—that is, (iv) applies to Him. One could argue more forcefully that God cannot bear real intrinsic contingent attributes by showing that the reason no member of S can bear them lies in an attribute of S’s members which it is plausible to ascribe to God on the basis of the Identity Thesis. But this would be a tall order. And it is hard to imagine how God could avoid having real contingent attributes if He is essentially omniscient and the world is as it is contingently. For if God is omniscient, God knows all that is actually true. If God is essentially omniscient, then if the world were different in certain respects than it actually is, God would know this. So if the world is contingently as it is, it seems, God’s intrinsic state of knowledge is contingently as it is. My claim here is not that if the facts known vary between possible worlds, God is only contingently omniscient. It is rather that God is omniscient because He knows everything, so that if God is essentially omniscient, the intrinsic cognitive state in virtue of which He is omniscient varies between possible worlds. If in world W God knows that P, God is omniscient in W because He knows (inter alia) P in W, and if in W* God is omniscient because He knows (inter alia) ~P, God’s intrinsic cognitive state differs from W to W*, and so God is in His W-state or His W*-state only contingently. If this argument is plausible, it remains unclear that (iv) can apply to God.

XII. THE IDENTITY THESIS AND AN ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

Regardless of what attributes a God identical with His nature will have and of whether one opts for full divine simplicity, the Identity Thesis yields a way to argue for God’s existence:

16. If possibly God exists, possibly God’s nature is exemplified. (premise)
17. If possibly God’s nature is exemplified, God’s nature exists. (premise)
18. If possibly God exists, God’s nature exists. (16-17, hyp. syll.)
19. Possibly God exists. (premise)
20. God’s nature exists. (18, 19, MP)
21. God = His nature. (premise, Identity Thesis)
22. God exists. (20, 21, ID)

This ontological argument has three noteworthy strengths. First, it is clearly valid. Second, it depends on no theses of modal logic. Third, apart from (19), which is a problem for any ontological argu-
moment, its premisses are extremely plausible. As we are committed to no particular ontology of natures, (16) looks like a conceptual truth. (17) depends only on a plausible ontological thesis, that only actually existing entities have attributes. It could be held that its being possible that God's nature be exemplified entails only that a possible but non-actual object, God's nature, has in some other possible world the property of being exemplified. But if it is possible that God's nature be exemplified and if only actual entities have attributes, then this is not a permissible reading of the case. Instead, we must say that God's nature exists to bear the attribute of being possibly exemplified. (21), the Identity Thesis, follows from (1), and (1) is surely true, reflecting as it does the way traditional theists actually do use the term "God." So if one can warrant the claim that possibly God exists, (16)-(22) will constitute a persuasive non-modal ontological argument for God's existence.\(^{30}\)

If S5 is the logic of "broadly logical" modality, further, the argument just completed is good reason to say that God exists necessarily if at all. (16) and (17) warrant not just (18) but a more general claim, that

23. For any world \(W\), if in \(W\) it is possible that God exists, God's nature exists in \(W\).

(23) and the Identity Thesis entail that

24. For any world \(W\), if in \(W\) it is possible that God exists, God exists in \(W\).

S5 licenses the claim that

25. Whatever is possible in one world is possible in all.

(19) entails that God is possible in one world. So the conjunction of (19), (24) and (25) entails that God exists necessarily. It appears, then, that the Identity Thesis can help one to obtain even this stronger conclusion.\(^{31}\)

**Notes**

1Well into the 1300s, it was accepted practice for a theologian's first major work to be a commentary on Peter Lombard's *Sentences*, a standard theological textbook. God's relation to his attributes was often discussed in the second chapter ("distinction") of such commentaries.

2In *Summa Theologiae* (*ST*) Ia, q. 2 treats God's existence, q. 3 His simplicity. In *Summa Contra Gentiles* I, c. 13 argues God's existence, cc. 15-17 work up the claim that God is purely actual (which to Aquinas is equivalent to "God is simple"), and cc. 18ff. take up God's simplicity.

3Anselm infers divine simplicity from divine perfection at *Monologion* 16-17. Aquinas infers it from God's "pure actuality" in ST Ia 3, then explains in Ia 4 that necessarily, a being is "purely actual" iff it is perfect.
5Cf. op. cit. n. 4 and Plantinga (1980); Mann (1982), (1983), (1985). The literature is currently burgeoning.
7In this essay, all unqualified modal terms express metaphysical or "broadly logical" modalities.
8I would find this claim puzzling. Plausibily only existing things have attributes. If only existents have attributes, God can have any attribute, including His nature, only if He exists. If God must exist in order to have His nature, how can it also be that His nature explains His existing? But we need not discuss this; I am merely noting that some might make the claim in question.
9Against this see Guleserian (1985).
10One also could put G in terms of God's having all the intentions He actually has up to some time t, etc. Nothing turns on which way one explains G; the text's formulation is simpler.
11The necessity in (UA) is de dicto: (UA) expresses a requirement any state of affairs must meet to bear the name "G."
13The argument of this paragraph parallels that of Plantinga (1980), pp. 31-33.
14Thus (9) entails (1) taken as in section I. (1) so taken also entails (9). For suppose that it does not. Then in some possible world, some x is God and creates and sustains some y on which x depends for its existence or its deity. If x creates a y on which x depends for its existence, x makes its own existence possible. But if the claim that something makes itself actual is absurd, the claim that something makes itself possible is even more so. As to the second case, if some x creates a being on which x depends for deity, this x makes itself God. This sounds like an impossible feat; we will see below that it is. Thus it is false that in some possible world, some x is God and creates and sustains some y on which x depends for its existence or its deity. So (1) entails (9).
15For that matter, this would follow even if God created that on which He depends for His deity, and by doing so in effect made Himself God. I argue below that this is impossible. But even if it were possible, it would not save (UA), for still the existence of this other thing would not be included in G. Thus whether or not God creates God's essential attributes, if these attributes are distinct from God, (UA) is false. We thus see (what will emerge again in section IX) that (UA) itself entails the Identity Thesis.
16Cf. Morris (1987a), pp. 161-178. Leftow (forthcoming a) argues in detail against Morris's ingenious defense. Here I confine myself to reasoning which seems to me persuasive but does not engage certain countermoves Morris could make; the latter are discussed in Leftow (forthcoming a).
18The idea of explaining talk of a perfect being via respects of perfection is from Morris (1987a), pp. 10-25.
20Plantinga (1980), passim.
21Ibid., p. 80.
22So the "asety-sovereignty intuition" is at least close in content to (1) as section I took it.
24Ibid., pp. 30-31.
25Ibid., p. 47.
26Sets are one and all abstract. But sets with contingent members exist contingently, sets with temporal members exist only while their members all exist, and sets with temporal members are mutable at least in the sense that they cease to exist when one of their members ceases to exist. If attributes exist, they are abstract and are present in space in the manner stated.
Plantinga also objects (op cit. p. 47) that if each of God’s essential attributes = God, then God has but one essential attribute, and such apparently distinct attributes as omniscience and omnipotence turn out identical, both of which are counterintuitive results. This objection has no more force than the first. Omniscience is or supervenes on that state which is God’s knowing what He does. Omnipotence is or supervenes on that state which is God’s having the abilities He has. The terms “omniscience” and “omnipotence” of course carry distinct senses, but what reason is there to find it odd that God satisfies them in virtue of the same inner state? Is this any more surprising than that some substance satisfies “water” (taken as having a sense involving directly perceptible attributes) and “H2O” in virtue of the same inner constitution?

Cf. ST Ia 3. I assimilate the lack of form-matter distinction to (i), the lack of genus-difference distinction to (ii) and the lack of substance-accident distinction to (iii). (ii) licenses the third move.

Aquinas’ Third Way (ST Ia 2, 3) allows for the existence of necessary but caused beings. The distinguishing mark of such a thing, according to Aquinas, is that because it is caused, its nature ≠ its existence. Aquinas does not mean by “necessary” what we do, but Leftow (forthcoming a) shows that no philosophical difficulties follow if one takes him to mean what we call “broadly logical” necessity.

A related argument which dispenses with the assumption that possibly God exists is developed in Leftow (forthcoming b).

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