The Concept of Divine Necessity

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I

My purpose in this article is (a) to consider the value and the coherence of the concept of divine necessity and (b) to offer some suggestions about the way in which divine necessity might reasonably be understood. I shall argue that there are reasons for denying the value and coherence of one notion of divine necessity but that another way of understanding it is not incoherent. Secondly, I shall defend the view that belief in divine necessity can plausibly be understood as an item of negative theology, as a way of refusing to tolerate certain positive affirmations.

II

Some philosophers have argued that belief in divine necessity amounts to belief that 'God exists' is a necessary proposition. As many recent writers have pointed out, however, there is more than one kind of necessary proposition. The kind which comes immediately to mind is, perhaps, that of logically necessary propositions. These are analytic, i.e. they are coherent and their negations are incoherent. But not all necessarily true propositions are logically necessary. There are, for example, propositions which are not analytic but which seem necessarily true when we think of what is picked out by the referring expressions used in them. An example is 'The number which is the number of the planets is necessarily greater than 6'. The number referred to here is 9, and 9 is necessarily greater than 6. But the number which is the number of the planets could have been 4.

It is not, then, helpful simply to say that belief in God's necessity is belief that 'God exists' is a necessary proposition. One influential view of divine necessity is, however, unaffected by this fact. For according to some philosophers God's necessity is straightforwardly that of logical necessity. One can find this view in, for example, Leibniz and Samuel Clarke. And in his celebrated paper 'Can God's Existence be Disproved?' (reprinted in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, ed. A. Flew and A. MacIntyre, London 1955, pp 47-56) J. N. Findlay appears to be defending the same conclusion. But the conclusion itself has led to problems. For if God's existence is logically necessary it would seem that 'God exists' is logically necessary. And many philosophers have denied that any existential statement can be true of logical necessity. It has therefore been argued that belief in divine necessity is incoherent.

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In recent years this form of attack on the notion of divine necessity has been challenged. It has been argued that there can indeed be logically necessary existential statements (Cf Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism,* Oxford 1977, p 264) or that traditional objections to their possibility are badly argued. There has also been a revival of respect for the Ontological Argument considered as an argument for the view that at least one existential statement (viz. 'God exists') is logically necessary. Until fairly recently it was almost universally agreed that such an argument was *a priori* impossible, but Alvin Plantinga now defends a form of it in *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford 1974, Chapter X).

The case against logically necessary existential statements is, then, less widely accepted today than formerly. But this does not prove the coherence of the belief that God's existence is logically necessary. Even if some existence claims can be logically necessary it does not follow that all existence claims can be such. And some are evidently not. Furthermore, there is a problem of applying to belief in God what is sometimes said about logically necessary existential statements. For can we know that what is meant by the existence of something said to be logically necessary is the same as what is meant by the existence of God when that is said to be logically necessary? It may be, as Swinburne, for example, argues, that the existence of certain numbers is logically necessary. But if God's existence is different from the existence of numbers then knowing that it is logically necessary is not the same as knowing that numbers are logically necessary, just as if Mabel is different from an envelope then knowing that Mabel is plain is not the same as knowing that an envelope is plain.

Even if these problems are soluble, however, there is still a case to be made for fighting shy of the suggestion that God's existence is logically necessary. Two points might be made here. The first is that there seems no decisive reason to believe that when believers talk about God they are talking about what is logically necessary. The second is that there are reasons for denying that it is possible to know that 'God exists' is logically necessary.

In qualification of the first point it has, of course, to be agreed that some people who believe in God have been inclined to talk of God as logically necessary. Again one can appeal to Leibniz and Samuel Clarke. Add to these the case of Descartes. But many believers also flatly deny that God's existence is logically necessary. In this connection, John Hick goes as far as saying that with reference to God's existence "the notion of logical necessity is ... both philosophically and religiously pointless, and indeed even dangerous to theology". (*God and the Universe of Faiths,* London 1973, p 76) Certainly, as Hick properly points out, it seems ludicrous to suppose that biblical writers held to the view that God's existence is logically necessary. Only philosophers can be expected to affirm

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God's logical necessity, and even some of these have refused to do so. Hick is a case in point another is Aquinas. It has been suggested that according to Aquinas God is necessary in that he is a necessary being. 'Necessary being' has then been taken to mean 'logically necessary being'. (See the references cited at the beginning of Patterson Brown's excellent paper *St Thomas' Doctrine of Necessary Being.* Brown's paper can be found in *Aquinas: A Collection of Critical Essays,* ed. Anthony Kenny, London 1969.) In fact, however, though Aquinas agrees that God is necessary (Cf *Summa Theologiae* 1a,2,3), he talks about there being many necessary beings. At *Summa Theologiae* 1a,44,1 he says that "there are many necessary things in existence". He speaks of "those necessary things that are created" (*Summa Theologiae* 1a2ae 93,4) and refers to "all that is in things created by God, whether it be contingent or necessary". (ibid) It emerges, in fact, that by 'necessary' Aquinas regularly means 'not generable or corruptible'. In Aquinas' system a necessary being is something that cannot undergo change in the ways permitted by the Aristotelian theories of form, matter, potency and act. Examples of necessary beings would, for Aquinas, be souls, angels and the heavenly bodies. (Cf S.T. 1a115,6; 75,6; 50,5)

Judging by the words of believers, then, there seems no compulsion to equate belief in God with the belief that 'God exists' is logically necessary. The second reason for rejecting the logical necessity of God brings us to the problem of our understanding of God.

Consider what has to be involved in asserting that 'God exists' is logically necessary. In view of what logical necessity seems to be, one must hold that a certain predicate forms part of what the subject means. Someone who claims that 'God exists' is logically necessary has therefore to be saying that the notion of existence is involved in the meaning of the word 'God', We can see that 'man is an animal' is logically necessary because 'animal' is included in the meaning of 'man', because it is part of the definition of 'man'. In the same way we would have to say that 'God exists' is logically necessary because 'exists' is included in the meaning of 'God', because it is part of the definition of 'God'. But the trouble is that there are problems in saying that the meaning of 'God' is accessible or that 'God' can be defined.

This point may seem an odd one to make. For one might be inclined to assert that the meaning of 'God' is perfectly accessible. Adopting some correlation of meaning and use, one might, for instance, point to analyses of various sentences with 'God' in them and one might argue that in this way it is possible to say what the word 'God' means. As for definition, is it not evident that 'God' can be defined? Can we not say, for example, that

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God is a transcendent being or a supernatural person?

In fact, however, matters are less simple than might at first appear. To ask what the word 'God' means may involve more than asking how people use the word 'God'. For there is a sense in which we can ask for the meaning of a word where what is in question is the nature of whatever the word is used to refer to. And when we ask about the nature of what 'God' is used to refer to we are at once in difficulties. To have a nature is normally to be a particular kind of thing with particular properties or capabilities. Yet where is the sense in regarding God as a particular thing with particular properties or capabilities?

As 'God' has been traditionally understood, it is supposed to be true that God is the source of existence. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, God is the answer to the *Seinsfrage*, to the question of why there is something rather than nothing. And it is existence that is God's proper or characteristic effect. This suggests that God cannot himself be said to exist as do particular things. It also suggests that he cannot seriously be regarded as a being of any kind. For a being is a particular thing (Cf Aristotle, An. Post. 92 b 13-14). The task of defining 'God' is thus problematical whatever purported definitions are forthcoming in the literature. To define something is to pick it out as a particular kind of thing over against other things. But if it is true that to be concerned with God is to be concerned with the source of existence, it seems that one is forced into something like the conclusion of Aquinas: *Deus non est in genere* (Cf *Summa Theologiae* 1a,3,5); God cannot be classified. As Paul Tillich puts it, "The being of God is being-itself. The being of God cannot be understood as the existence of a being alongside others or above others. If God is *a* being, he is subject to the categories of finitude, especially to space and substance. Even if he is called the 'highest being' in the sense of the 'most perfect' and the 'most powerful' being, this situation is not changed. When applied to God superlatives become diminutives. They place him on the level of other beings while elevating him above all of them." (*Systematic Theology* Vol 1, University of Chicago Press 1960, p 261. For a recent discussion of the view that God is in no genus see Michael Durrant, *The Logical Status of 'God'*, London 1973.)

III

To regard God's existence as logically necessary is not, then, without its drawbacks. But does this spell the end for the notion of divine necessity? It has been argued that such is not the case since God's necessity can be understood not as logical but as factual. To say that God's existence is necessary is thus to say that God is factually necessary. Or, as one sometimes finds it said, it is to say that God is 'ontologically' or 'metaphysically' necessary.

One possible interpretation of this suggestion is open to criti-

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cism. One might hold that God is factually necessary and that this means that God is a factually necessary being. This interpretation might then be fleshed out in the assertion that God is an uncaused being. But does it make any sense to talk of God as an uncaused being? We have already seen reason for denying that God can be called a being, but even apart from that there are difficulties. As 'God' has been traditionally understood within Judeo-Christianity, belief in God is belief that there is a Creator God. To hold that there is a Creator God is not to hold that there are two things, a series of lesser or caused beings and a greater or uncaused being standing out over and against them. Within Judeo-Christianity, creation is creation *ex nihilo,* and to say that there is a Creator is to say that, as critics of the Ontological Argument are fond of pointing out, every plausible candidate for the title 'a being' is such that it might not exist at all. In terms of the doctrine of creation, 'beings' are poised over nothingness, not in the sense that some causal and temporary prior agent need not have done whatever it was that brought them about in some place at some time, but in the sense that they need not exist at all, that all beings are there when they might not be. And from the viewpoint of belief in creation it has to be true that the fact that there are beings at all is due to God. Here it seems that one has to appeal to the notion of God as the cause of all beings. Belief in creation is belief that all beings are caused to be. From the viewpoint of belief in creation, therefore, it might be urged that if X is uncaused then X is not a being, just as if X is made of water then X is not a typewriter. Within the doctrine of creation the notion of a being unfolds into the notion of something that is caused to be. Hence the familiar characterisation of God as the first cause of all beings, the first cause who is himself uncaused by any being whatsoever.

But these suggestions do not entail that the notion of factual necessity is of no use whatever to someone who wants to say that God is in some sense necessary. Leaving aside such expressions as 'necessary being', let us concern ourselves with the statement 'God is factually necessary'. What might this statement mean? At least three possibilities suggest themselves. 'God is factually necessary' could mean that it is incoherent to suppose that what is referred to by 'God' in 'God exists' could cease to exist. Secondly, it could mean that 'God exists' is true and that it is incoherent to suppose that any agent can at any time bring about a state of affairs in which it is not true. Finally, it could mean that the truth of 'God exists', if it is true that God exists, does not depend on the action of any individual apart from God. And on these understandings of 'God is factually necessary' there is something to be said for the view that the notion of divine necessity is, after all, coherent.

Take first the notion that 'God exists' is necessary in the sense

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that it is incoherent to suppose that what is referred to by 'God' in 'God exists' could cease to exist. There are clearly difficulties in regarding 'God' as a referring term, but we can surely regard 'God' as referring at least in the sense that what it stands for is truly said to be the Creator of the universe, assuming that the universe has a Creator. The question now is whether it is coherent to suppose that the Creator of the universe, supposing there to be one, can coherently be thought of as ceasing to exist. And there are reasons for saying that he cannot. To talk about the Creator of the universe is to talk about the source of existence, and it does not sound very sensible to say that the source of existence can cease to exist. What would such a statement mean? Furthermore, there is a point about the meaning of the expression 'cease to exist'. It is difficult to get a purchase on the notion of ceasing to exist without thinking of some kind of change. Thus Felix the cat ceases to exist when his body gets run over by the sports car. And the gnome in the garden ceases to exist when someone melts it down to make plastic cups. To talk about the Creator of the universe cannot, however, be to talk about something capable of undergoing change in this kind of way. It is actually to talk about the source of this kind of change. It follows that ceasing to exist is not something that could be thought of in the case of God.

One might reply that it is possible for something to cease to exist without changing. Might not something cease to exist by being annihilated or by just 'popping' out of existence? In the case of God, however, to speak of him being annihilated makes no sense since it would suppose him capable of being causally affected by something. We shall return to this shortly. And to speak of God 'popping' out of existence brings us back to the difficulty noted above. We would have to regard it as possible for the source of existence to cease to exist.

It has been asked whether we might not plausibly entertain the possibility of God committing suicide. But is such a question even intelligible? Here I agree with John Hick. As he rightly observes (*God and the Universe of Faiths*, pp 87-8), "First, the expression 'commit suicide' is highly misleading in this context. The suicide of absolute self-existent being would not be like a human suicide though on a much grander scale. For the concept of divine death is not analogous to that of human death. The death of a human being means the destruction or the cessation of the function of his physical body; but God has no physical body to be destroyed, whether by himself or by another. We have to try to think instead of a purely 'mental suicide'; but as far as I can see this is a completely empty phrase to which we are able to attach no positive meaning." The implication of Hick's remarks is clear. People may talk about God committing suicide, but then they are either thinking about some man committing suicide, in which case

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they are not thinking about God, or they are not thinking of anything capable of committing suicide, in which case they are not thinking of God committing suicide.

It is not, then, silly to say that it is coherent to suppose that God is necessary in the sense that what is referred to by 'God' in 'God exists' cannot intelligibly be thought of as ceasing to exist.

Nor does it seem wildly absurd to suggest that God's necessity can also be defended with reference to the other two senses of necessity noted above. Take first the sense according to which 'God exists' is true and it is incoherent to suppose that any agent can at any time bring about a state of affairs in which it is not true. As we have seen, God cannot be thought of as something which may pass out of existence. And one does not have to believe in God to see that it is plainly incoherent to say things like 'Some individual can put God out of existence'. Granted the notion of God as Creator it follows that God is just not something which can be thought of as lying at the receiving end of the action of individuals. Granted that God is the Creator it has to be said that anything falling under the description 'action of an individual' is ultimately God's own action.

This point is also relevant to the view of God's necessity as residing in the fact that God's existence does not depend on any action of any individual apart from God. For given that the action of individuals is ultimately God's own action there could be no action of individuals independent of God's existence and it would be nonsense to suppose that God's existence depended on the action of any individual apart from God.

One might ask why it is not possible to think of God somehow allowing an agent to annihilate him. But it can reasonably be replied that where one is concerned with a Creator God the causal relationship can never work from creatures to God, that God cannot be caused to be or to do anything by creation since all the causal powers of creatures come from God and are hence nothing outside his own action. Again one might contemplate the possibility of divine suicide, which would at this point in the argument be the possibility of creatures being allowed by God to annihilate him. But again the above objections from Hick seem relevant. One might also ask how one can in any sense think of the source of existence bringing about its own non-existence. In order to get a purchase on the notion of divine annihilation by creatures it seems that one has to accept a highly anthropomorphic concept of God which any serious believer in God may refuse to take seriously as a useful tool in talking about God.

I want, in a moment, to qualify what has just been said, but before passing on it is, perhaps, worth noting at this point that the above interpretation of 'God is factually necessary' allows one to offer some account of another claim which is very commonly

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made on behalf of God, i.e. the claim that God is free.

What could it possibly mean to say that God is free? This question has elicited a number of answers. Surely, however, it has to be allowed that whatever one might say about God's freedom one has to allow that it has something to do with a lack of compulsion. For if X is compelled to do something then X is not free not to do it. And if X is compelled to be something then X is not free not to be it. But this brings us back to factual necessity. For to say that God is factually necessary can be seen as a way of denying that it makes sense to regard God as compelled. For belief in God's factual necessity entails that one cannot say such things as 'God is brought into existence by something' or 'God can be causally affected by creatures'. Such statements say that God cannot be compelled, cannot be acted on, that things cannot be done to him. And to say this is surely to give some content to the claim that God is free. In that case, however, 'God is factually necessary' can be regarded as at least part of the meaning of 'God is free'.

An objector might retort that this point is unacceptable since to say that X is free is to say more than that X is not compelled. It might also be suggested that 'X is free' and 'X is compelled' are not necessarily incompatible. And to some extent these points are correct. One normally regards people as free in making choices if they are able to deliberate and make decisions, while it is true that 'X is uncompelled' does not obviously mean the same as 'X is able to deliberate and make a decision'. And a person can freely act in a situation which has not been brought about by him so that he may be both compelled in some sense and able to act freely. But it still seems true that much of what we mean by freedom is reducible to a lack of compulsion. A person may be able to deliberate before doing something, but if he is manhandled into doing what he does we would agree that he is not free in doing what he does. And although someone may not have manufactured the circumstances in which he finds himself, he still would not be said to act freely within these circumstances if some agent other than himself acts on him so as to make him act in turn. The notion of freedom always brings to mind some lack of compulsion, though not, perhaps, always a lack of some particular compulsion. And for this reason, to say that God is not compelled by any agent, to say that he cannot be causally acted on by any individual, is to say that he is free. At this point divine necessity and divine freedom come together.

IV

There is, then, something to be said for the view that God can coherently be regarded as factually necessary. But now it is important to introduce some qualification to what has been argued so far.

Suppose we agree that it is coherent to say that God is neces-

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sary on the understandings of 'necessary' introduced above in the discussion of God's factual necessity. What kind of statement is 'God is necessary'? More precisely, is it one that gives us some kind of understanding about the nature of God? Is 'necessary' some kind of adjective and is it true that 'God is necessary' can be regarded as ascribing some property to God?

One might initially suppose that talk about divine necessity can be regarded as descriptive and hence as straightforwardly informative. On the above understandings of 'necessary' it might seem that to call God necessary is to say that he has such and such a nature, that, for instance, he has the attribute of being a cause which cannot be causally operated on by other causes. In fact, however, a little more subtlety is required in understanding divine necessity, and there is a case to be made out for the view that talk of divine necessity tells us nothing positive about God at all.

A lot here depends on how one understands the term 'God'. If one thinks, for example, that 'God' is the name of some individual then there might be something to be said for holding that terms like 'necessary' can be regarded as applying to him so as to tell us something of what he is like. The reasoning behind this conclusion would be some such premiss as 'God is an individual and individuals can be described'.

The trouble with this argument, however, is that there is good reason for denying the individuality of God. Taking up the above remarks about God as a being, it can be said that when we are talking about God the Creator we are not talking about a being and hence not talking about an individual. So what follows now? If God is not an individual, must it not be said that he cannot really be described? For how does one describe what is not an individual? To describe something is to pick it out as an individual and to say that it has such and such properties. If, however, God cannot be called an individual, if he belongs to no kind and does not stand out over and against anything, then he cannot be picked out as if he were an individual and properties cannot be ascribed to him. One cannot, that is to say, describe nothing. To try to do so would quickly land one in the sort of nonsense parodied in *Through the Looking Glass.* " 'Who did you pass on the road?' the King went on, holding out his hand to the Messenger for some more hay. 'Nobody,' said the Messenger. 'Quite right,' said the King: 'this young lady saw him too. So of course Nobody walks slower than you.' 'I do my best,' the Messenger said in a sulky tone. 'I'm sure nobody walks much faster than I do!' " (Chapter VII) (For a defence of the view that God is an individual see Robin Attfield, 'The Individuality of God', *Sophia,* April 1971. Attfield holds that 'God' can name a "kind of thing or a kind of being which is non-spatial and non-temporal." My reasons for disagreeing with Attfield should be clear from the present paper.

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One might also ask whether 'non-spatial and non-temporal being' can serve to tell us what something is and hence serve to individuate it. Cf Durrant, pp 24-26.)

Returning now to the understanding of necessity discussed and approved of above, some points need to be added.

It does make sense to subscribe to 'God is factually necessary'; there is nothing evidently incoherent in doing so. But it also makes sense to say that subscription to the claim that God is factually necessary cannot be an attempt to say what God is like. How, then, can it be understood? The obvious answer is: as an attempt to say what God is *not* like. 'God is factually necessary' is not incoherent, but it must be seen not as a description but rather as a dogged refusal to allow certain things to be said, a notification that certain statements cannot be regarded as providing coherent, true propositions about the Creator. The statements in question here are statements like 'God can cease to exist', 'God can be caused to be by some agent' and 'God can be put out of existence by some agent'. These statements can be replied to by 'God is factually necessary', but, on the assumption that God is the Creator, this statement in its turn must be uninformative in the sense that it cannot be thought to tell us anything about God in himself. In short, it is very much part of apophatic theology and logically it belongs to the kind of statements offered by Aquinas in his Questions 3-11 of the *Prima Pars*. Although Aquinas is often described as providing here an account of God's attributes, a description which could suggest that Aquinas' aim is to ascribe properties to God as one can ascribe properties to a man, Aquinas himself prefaces his discussion by insisting that what he is doing is saying what is *not* true of God. "Now we cannot", he observes, "know what God is, but only what he is not; we must therefore consider the ways in which God does not exist, rather than the ways in which he does." Aquinas is quite clear that when the philosopher has done his job in talking about the being (*esse*) of God he is left without a comprehension of God's nature. (For accounts of Aquinas which do justice to the aspect of negation in his system see: Victor White, *God the Unknown*, London 1956; Josef Pieper, *The Silence of Saint Thomas*, Logos Books 1965; David Burrell, *Aquinas, God and Action*, London 1979.)

We may, then, regard belief in God's necessity as part of negative theology, as a way of saying what should not be attributed to God rather than as a way of describing him. And if we do regard belief in divine necessity like this we can be helped to see the weakness of certain attacks on belief in God. As we have seen, it is sometimes argued that 'God is necessary' means 'God is logically necessary', which is supposed to be nonsense since it means that 'God exists' is analytic, which it cannot be. And one reason why it is said that it cannot be is that 'existence' is not a property or

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attribute. But 'God is necessary' need not involve any ascription of properties or attributes to God. On the contrary, it may be saying that he lacks certain characteristics, that he cannot be talked of as a certain kind of thing. Understood in this way, belief in divine necessity does not have to contain a disguised adherence to the Ontological Argument.

In his paper *Divine Necessity* (reprinted in *The Philosophy of Religion,* ed. Basil Mitchell, Oxford 1971), Terence Penelhum says that it does. And he actually accuses Aquinas (of all people) of being a covert believer in what are supposed to be the errors of the Ontological Argument. The reply to this suggestion is that it represents a misreading of Aquinas and a failure to recognise the apophatic nature of talk about divine necessity. According to Penelhum, Aquinas has an argument which "leads us from finite beings to a being whose existence does follow from his nature, and this entails that *if* we knew God's nature we *could* deduce his existence from it – and *this* is the mistake ... It is not our ignorance that is the obstacle to explaining God's existence by his nature, but the logical character of the concept of existence." (p 185) What Aquinas actually says, of course, is that God's nature is *to be* since there is no *compositio* in God of essence and existence. That is a piece of negative theology and it says that God is the Creator, that the 'Why is it there at all?' question makes no sense when applied to God since God is not an 'it' in the first place. Certainly, Aquinas need not be taken as affirming that existence is an attribute that God has. For this reason he need have no quarrel with what Penelhum calls "the logical character of the concept of existence".

V

It would be desirable to develop the above points in more detail, and I hope to do so eventually. But, even on the basis of what has so far been said, perhaps it is now possible to offer some conclusions.

In the light of what has been argued above, I suggest that two claims might plausibly be made with reference to the notion of divine necessity. In the first place, the notion of God's necessity is a coherent one (a) since it is possible to maintain that God's necessity is not that of logical necessity and (b) since one can offer a defence of the coherence of the statement 'God is factually necessary'. Secondly, however, to talk of God's factual necessity can plausibly be understood as only to talk of God in an oblique way. Talk of divine necessity may be viewed as talk about talk about God and as a denial that certain kinds of talk make any sense. Talk about divine necessity may thus be regarded as non-descriptive. This is not to deny that it is talk that has sense; rather it is to say that it can profitably be regarded as expressing a refusal to talk nonsense. 'Necessity', we may suggest, is not something that God has; its essence lies in what he lacks, the dubious privilege of being other than he is.

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