

[1960. In *Baker's Dictionary of Theology*. Everett F. Harrison, ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House.]

ATTRIBUTES, THE DIVINE. The divine attributes are, in the language of ordinary conversation, simply the characteristics or qualities of God. As water is wet and fire hot, so God is eternal, immutable, omnipotent, just, holy, and so on. Perhaps these divine characteristics are quite numerous; but usually it is only the more comprehensive terms that are discussed.

Beneath this simplicity lurk some of the most intricate problems and some of the most futile discussions ever attempted by theology. Taking their start from Aristotle's confused theory of categories, theologians have analyzed God into an unknowable substratum, called his substance or essence, on the surface of which lay the knowable attributes, much like a visible coat of paint on a table-top that could never be seen or touched. Luther and Calvin made a great advance when they buried this scholastic rubbish, though it has been dug up more than once since.

ASEITY is a barbarous Latinism to indicate God's absolute independence. He depends *a se*, on himself. He is self-existent. Sometimes, on the assumption that every reality must have a cause, God has been said to be the cause of himself. In this case he would also have to be the effect of himself; but the terms *cause* and *effect* must be stretched beyond any ordinary meaning, if only a single reality is in view. It would be more intelligible to say that God is the necessary Being — a phrase used in the ontological argument for God's existence. In some imaginary polytheistic system there might be several self-existent beings and no creation *ex nihilo*; but in its biblical context the aseity of God and the doctrine of creation are inseparable. Certainly creation *ex nihilo* presupposes God's self-existence.

The ETERNITY of God also seems to be involved in his aseity. The two appear to be in reality the same thing. If God does not exist in virtue of some external cause, but is self-existent, he could not have come into being; for it is inconceivable that a pure nothing should suddenly generate a self-existent God. Furthermore, if time is a function of the created mind, as St. Augustine said, or a function of moving bodies, as Aristotle taught, and is therefore an aspect of the universe, it follows that God transcends temporal relationships.

IMMUTABILITY follows upon aseity and eternity. Time and change are together denied of God. "They shall be changed, but thou art the same" (Heb. 1:12). If self-existence should change, it would become dependent existence; eternity would become time; perfection imperfection, and therefore God would become not-God. Cf. Num. 23:19, Ps. 33:11; Mal. 3:6; James 1:17.

INFINITY is hardly different from the preceding. Infinite means unlimited. What is self-existent must be unlimited. Infinite has sometimes meant indefinite or imperfect, from which it has been concluded that an infinite God could not have the limitation or definiteness of personality. This

ancient usage is not what is intended. God is not the vague “boundless” of Anaximander; he is thoroughly definite. Etymology to the contrary, his definite attributes are in-finite. Nothing limits his power, wisdom, justice, and so on.

OMNIPOTENCE means that God can do all things. See the entry on GOD. Sophistic objections are sometimes brought against divine omnipotence by raising pseudo-problems. Can God create a stone so heavy that he cannot lift it? Can God draw a square with only three sides? These questions involve self-contradictions, are therefore meaningless, and set no real problem. With omnipotence should be joined sovereignty. God is the Supreme Being.

OMNIPRESENCE, Ubiquity, and Immensity refer to God's relation to all space. To put it simply, God is everywhere. Cf. Ps. 139:7. Instead of saying God is everywhere in the world, it might be better to say that everywhere in the world is in God; for “in him we live and move, and have our being” (Acts 17:28). The difficulty is that God is not an extended, spatial being; God is a Spirit; and the preposition *in* cannot be used in its spatial sense. There are non-spatial senses: note the second *in* in the preceding sentence. Omnipresence therefore means that God knows and controls everything. It hardly differs from omnipotence.

OMNISCIENCE means that God knows all things. Why should he not? He made all things and decided their history. He works “all things after the counsel of his own will” (Eph. 1:11).

Theologians have argued whether these attributes are really distinct and differ in God, or only seem different to us. Both positions have been defended. Some theologians have tried to straddle the question by saying that the attributes are not *really* different, nor merely *apparently* different to us, but are *virtually* different. It is hard to attach a meaning to such a vague expression. The short account above might suggest that the attributes are not only the same in God, but with a little thought they appear to be the same to us too.

Distinguished from these previous attributes, sometimes awkwardly named the natural attributes, is a second set called the moral attributes: WISDOM, JUSTICE, HOLINESS, GOODNESS, and the like. Neither group has a logical principle of derivation, and therefore there is no fixed number. The moral attributes are not too easily defined, but are better described by the scriptural passages that refer to them. With respect to wisdom one might cite: “The Lord is a God of knowledge” (I Sam. 2:3); and “His understanding is infinite” (Ps. 147:5). As for justice: “All his ways are judgment, a God of truth and without iniquity, just and right is he” (Deut. 32:4); and “to declare at this time his righteousness, that he might be just and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus” (Rom. 3:26). Holiness is sometimes thought of as a synonym for justice and righteousness; it has also been given a root meaning of *separate*, from which the inference has been drawn that holiness is not an “attribute”

but an effect of the attributes: the attributes separate God from all else.

At first sight these moral attributes seem more distinguishable among themselves than the natural attributes are, and still more distinguishable from the natural attributes. Yet justice is easily interpreted as a particular form of wisdom, and this merges with omniscience. Similarly righteousness is an expression of God's sovereignty in maintaining the divine legislation, and this is an exercise of power and knowledge. The unity of the attributes therefore is a thesis that cannot be thoughtlessly dismissed.

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