

The Concept of the Divine Energies

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Anyone familiar with the history of western philosophy is aware of how large a role has been played within it by theology. This is true not only of the Middle Ages, when philosophy was the handmaiden of theology, but as recently as Hegel and Kierkegaard, or arguably even Heidegger and Wittgenstein. For almost two millennia philosophers have drawn on theology to help them grapple with issues including, obviously, the existence of God and the relationship of faith and reason, but also such fundamental questions as the objectivity of morality, the meaning of our existence, and the nature of being itself. Naturally borrowings have gone in the other direction as well, and often what philosophers have found in theology is something that theology herself had drawn from philosophy centuries before. Despite this long and intimate association, in recent centuries the trajectory of philosophy has unquestionably been in the direction of secularization. It would be fair to say that most contemporary philosophers, if not embarrassed by philosophy's theological past, are at least glad that it is behind us, and prefer to think of their discipline as now relatively autonomous. Accompanying this attitude is a tacit assumption that, whatever philosophy may have drawn from theology in the past, today the theological well has more or less run dry. To think that philosophy might find in theology today a revolutionary inspiration is, on this view, mere nostalgia.

When one turns from the history of philosophy to that of theology, however, one finds grounds to question these prevailing views. I do not have in mind any deep insights about the nature of theology or the superiority of its methods over those of philosophy. Rather, I have in mind a simple historical fact: the bifurcation of the Christian theological tradition into two streams during the early Middle Ages, and the limitation of western philosophy to only one of those two streams. How this came about is, I trust, a relatively familiar story. Sometime around the late fourth century the elites of the Roman Empire largely ceased to be bilingual, with those of the West increasingly reading and speaking only Latin, and those of the East reading and

speaking only Greek. The change is illustrated by the career of Augustine, who tells us in the *Confessions* how much he detested Greek as a boy and how glad he was to put it behind him. His entire theological formation seems to have taken place without reference to the enormous body of Greek theological writing which was at that time the main repository of Christian thought. Although this absence no doubt aided the flowering of Augustine's originality, it meant that the legacy he bestowed on the western church was remarkably disconnected from the earlier tradition. Meanwhile the Greek tradition continued along its own path, almost wholly oblivious to the enormous importance that Augustine had attained in the West. No works of Augustine were translated into Greek until the thirteenth century, while only a few of the later Greek works—most famously, the Dionysian corpus and the *De Fide Orthodoxa* of St. John of Damascus—were translated into Latin. Since these were read outside of their original context, however, they were often misunderstood, particularly at points where they are at odds with Augustine.

Thus the theology which influenced western philosophy was primarily that of Augustine and his Latin successors. One might think that with the recovery of Greek learning in the Renaissance this imbalance would have been corrected. By that time, however, a long succession of councils and popes had made it clear that western Christianity was and must remain fundamentally Augustinian. The Protestant reformers, far from challenging this result, drew on Augustine for their own understandings of predestination and salvation by faith alone. From the point of view of both camps, the Byzantine Christians were schismatics and heretics. So far as philosophy was concerned, the effect of these hard doctrinal lines was that the way of thinking about God typical of Latin scholasticism—as First Cause, *actus purus*, eternal, unchanging, perfectly simple, and so on, with all of these attributes knowable through “natural reason” alone—remained the starting point of philosophical reflection. Philosophers quarreled over it, tinkered with its details, and in growing numbers wholly rejected it. However, that something like this God is, as it were, the philosophical shape of Biblical religion remained unquestioned, save for a few isolated and eccentric figures such as Kierkegaard.

My goal in this paper is two-fold. First I wish to show that a sharply different way of thinking about God was present within the Christian tradition from an early point, that is, prior to Augustine. Second, I wish to show that this alternative conception is of live philosophical interest. Although I shall be discussing primarily Christian sources, I by no means believe that

what I have to say should be of interest only to Christians. The question of what God is like, if there is a God, is of universal human importance. What ought to interest us in any answer is not what religious label it comes under, but whether it is true.

The concept I will focus on is that of the divine energies. In a sense, the notion that God is energy is thoroughly traditional. The term ‘energy’ comes from the Greek *energeia*, a term coined by Aristotle. Aristotle’s earliest works use it to mean the active exercise of a capacity, such as that for sight or thought, as distinct from the mere possession of the capacity. It is easy to see how from this beginning it came to be used in two otherwise unrelated ways, for *activity* and for *actuality*. (Its correlative term *dunamis* likewise has two meanings, capacity and potentiality.) These two senses, which seem to us quite distinct, sometimes reconverge. In *Metaphysics* ix.6 Aristotle distinguishes *energeia* from motion or change (*kinēsis*) on the grounds that a motion or change is ordered toward some extrinsic end—as housebuilding aims at a house—whereas an *energeia* is its own end. The examples he gives are seeing, thinking, understanding, living well, and flourishing. Plainly these are activities, but they are *activities that are fully actual* in the sense that they contain their own end and thus are fully complete at each moment of their existence, rather than requiring a stretch of time. Aristotle illustrates this difference with the so-called “tense test,” namely that at each moment that one sees (or thinks, or so on) one also *has seen*, whereas at each moment that one builds a house one has not also built a house.

The most interesting application of *energeia* in this sense is in Aristotle’s theory of the Prime Mover. The Prime Mover is a being whose substance (*ousia*) is *energeia* (*Met.* xii.6 1071b20), in three distinct but related senses. First, since the Prime Mover is posited to explain motion it cannot itself be subject to motion, and thus it has no potentiality to change or be acted upon. Second, because it must be eternally and unchangingly active it can have no unrealized capacities to act; everything it can do it already does, all at once and as a whole. The first point raises the question of how the Prime Mover can move without being moved. Aristotle answers this question with his famous theory that the Prime Mover is self-thinking thought, a being whose “thought is a thinking of thinking” (xii.9 1075b34). This means that there is yet a third sense in which its substance is *energeia*, this time in the sense of activity rather than actuality: namely, its substance is nothing other than the self-subsistent activity of thought.

In saying this I do not wish to imply that the Prime Mover thinks of nothing but itself and thus has a rather impoverished mind. Aristotle is quite clear that the Prime Mover's thinking embraces all possible intelligible content; after all, if it did not, there would be a kind of thinking in which it could engage but does not, and it would in that respect fail to be fully actual. In saying that the Prime Mover "thinks itself," what he means is that, precisely because its act of thinking is fully actual, this act is identical to its object, for there is nothing other than the object—no unrealized potency—constituting the act as what it is. (One might compare Hume's view that the self is a bundle of impressions and ideas. Aristotle would in general say that our selves are distinct from our actual thought because they include a vast range of unrealized potencies; in the case of the Prime Mover, however, that distinction disappears.) Given the identity of the Prime Mover's thought with its object, a remarkable result follows: the Prime Mover not only *thinks* all possible intelligible content, it *is* all possible intelligible content, existing all at once as a single eternal and fully actual substance. Aristotle does not draw this conclusion explicitly, but later commentators, beginning with Alexander of Aphrodisias, did so, and it became a fundamental ingredient in the synthesis of Plato and Aristotle executed by the Neoplatonists.¹

My interest here is not in the Prime Mover as such, but in what all this implies about the meaning of *energeia*. In the Prime Mover we have a being which both *thinks* and *is* all possible intelligible content, existing as a single eternal and unchanging whole. The intelligible structure of things, however, is what makes them what they are. (This is the familiar doctrine that form is substance, articulated particularly in *Metaphysics* vii.17.) Thus one could equally say that the Prime Mover is *present in* all things, imparting—or rather, constituting—their intelligible structure, and thus their being. In light of all this, when we say that the Prime Mover is pure *energeia*, how ought we to translate that term? Activity? Actuality? Plainly the answer is both—and therefore neither. It seems to me that the closest we can come in English is to say that it is pure energy. Specifically, I have in mind the sense given in the *American Heritage Dictionary* as "power exercised with vigor and determination," and illustrated with the phrase, "devote one's energies to a worthy cause." But of course no illustration drawn from ordinary objects will be adequate to the notion of a being that is *pure* energy, an energy that constitutes the being of other things.

At the same time, let us note that Aristotle assumes that one can sensibly speak of what it is like to *be* the Prime Mover. For example, he states that its way of life is “such as the best which we enjoy . . . , since its energy (*energeia*) is also pleasure,” and he goes on to add that it “is always in that good state in which we sometimes are” (xii.7 1072b14-25). Lest we think of the identification of the Prime Mover with energy as a sort of physicalistic reduction, we must remember that it is a being with mental states in some sense analogous to our own. That there is such an analogy is presupposed in the identification of its activity as thought (*noēsis*), for thinking is something in which we too engage, although in an incomparably more partial and limited way.

Now I wish to fast-forward about four centuries to the Apostle Paul. During the intervening period the metaphysical associations that Aristotle gave to *energeia* were largely ignored. In popular usage *energeia* simply meant activity. However, even in this sense it is natural to speak of the *energeia* of God or the gods, and one finds such references among Hellenistic historians and within Alexandrian Judaism. This raises the question of how the divine *energeia* relates to our own. What happens when a god wishes to perform something through a human being? Does the divine *energeia* simply overpower the human? Or is there instead some sort cooperation or synthesis, and if so how are we to conceive it?

An answer to these questions is implied in the writings of St. Paul. I do not wish to suggest that Paul explicitly addressed the divine *energeia* as a theological topic, but only that he uses the term often enough, and in a sufficient variety of contexts, that we can determine what his answer to these questions would have been. For example, Paul refers to himself as “striving according to Christ's working (or energy, *energeia*), which is being made effective (or actualized, *energoumenēn*) in me” (Col. 1:29).² Here it would seem that the divine energy serves two distinct functions. It is at work within Paul, transforming him, so that from this standpoint he is the object of God's activity; at the same time it finds expression in Paul's own activity, so that he may also be seen as the agent or conduit through whom God is working. Yet nothing in such external direction prevents his actions from remaining his own. It would be possible to fill out in detail the events in Paul's life that this passage alludes to, for he has left us some vivid descriptions of his various trials and exertions. Not only do they exhibit full engagement and self-control, they do so more than did his actions prior to his conversion. As the story is told in Acts, Saul was trapped in self-deception until God set him free on the road to Damascus. Now

the divine energy that works in him is also his own, more truly than anything he did was his own before he ceased to “kick against the pricks” (Acts 9:5).

The belief that God is active in human beings is, of course, deeply rooted in the Old Testament. There it is usually God's Word or Spirit that is the vehicle of divine indwelling, ways of speaking that tend to suggest control from without. Paul's use of *energeia* and related terms, such as *sunergein* (to cooperate) and *sunergos* (co-worker), shifts the emphasis from one of external control to one of cooperation.³ However, the term ‘cooperation’ can be misleading if it suggests that there are here two equal agents who simply choose to work together. In the present case, since one is the Creator and the other a creature, the action of the latter depends for its reality upon the active support of the former. I take it that Paul interprets this notion in light of the common experience of feeling that one's actions were not truly one's own while one was mired in sin and self-deception. On his view, synergy, the cooperation of God and man, is neither a symmetrical relation nor one in which the divine overpowers and replaces the human. It is rather one in which the human *becomes fully human* by embracing the divine. This is not a radically new idea; something like it can be found in the Old Testament, as well as in other religious traditions.⁴ What is new is the use of the vocabulary of *energeia* to express it.

The last stage preparatory to the thought of the Greek Fathers was pagan Neoplatonism. Let us return to the philosophical tradition to ask precisely how the Neoplatonists attempted to synthesize the thought of Plato and Aristotle. One criticism which might be raised against Aristotle's theology is that it has no room for a proper sense of the mystery of the divine. After all, if the Prime Mover is the summation of all intelligible content, what he is can in principle be grasped by the act of thinking (*noēsis*), however far our own thinking falls short of that ideal. In Plato there are hints of a sharply different picture. The famous depiction of the Good in the *Republic* as “beyond being” could be taken—and was taken by the Neoplatonists—as meaning that the Good is beyond *noēsis* as well, notwithstanding that Plato himself seems to regard it as an intelligible object. This development was spurred by the association of the Good with the One of the First Hypothesis of the *Parmenides*. In this section of the dialogue, Parmenides gives the strictest possible interpretation to the notion of unity. He concludes that the One has no limits or shape, is neither at rest nor in motion, is neither like nor unlike anything else, and finally that it does not partake of being, has no name, and is not an object of knowledge, perception, or opinion (*Parm.* 137c-142a). To think that the Good of the *Republic* should be

identified with this wholly unnamable and unknowable no-thing is certainly a remarkable idea. However, it is worth remembering that in his unwritten doctrines Plato posited a One which (in conjunction with the Indefinite Dyad) is the source of the Forms. Aristotle tells us that some in the Academy, perhaps including Plato himself, identified this One with the Good (*Met.* xiv.4). Later interpreters, putting these various fragments together, concluded that the One of the unwritten doctrines, the One of the *Parmenides*, and the Good of the *Republic*, are all one and the same.

Here we have, then, a first principle sharply different from that of Aristotle: unknowable, unnamable, the source of being for other things, while itself “beyond being.” Yet because it is also the Good, all things in some inchoate way seek it. The philosopher who saw a way to harmonize this Platonic conception of the first principle with that of Aristotle was Plotinus. Plotinus identified the One (or Good) as the ultimate first principle, and Aristotle’s Prime Mover he rechristened as Intellect (*nous*), the first hypostasis after the One. The One is no-thing, not any particular being because it is the source of all particular being. In the overflow of its goodness it gives rise to Intellect, which is all things inasmuch as it is present in all as their being, intelligibility, life, and other perfections. The object of Intellect’s thought is in a sense the One, but since Intellect cannot apprehend the One in its unity it instead refracts it into a vast array of separate intelligibles (*noēta*), which are the Forms. By relating the One and Intellect in this way, Plotinus established a careful balance between the apophatic—that is, the denial to God of all predicates—and the kataphatic—that is, the ascription to God of all predicates.

The most striking point for our purposes is the use that Plotinus made of the concept of *energeia*. I argued earlier that the Prime Mover is pure energy, an energy that constitutes the being of other things. It is natural to ask whether this conception is truly coherent; that is, whether an energy that is not the energy of something, some active agent that is not itself simply identical with the energy, actually makes sense. Plotinus answers this question with what is known as the “theory of two acts.” Intellect comes forth from the One precisely as its external act or energy, what Plotinus refers to as its *energeia ek tēs ousias*, the energy that comes forth from the substance. So far, then, the answer is that Intellect as an energy is dependent upon the One. However, Plotinus is too deeply steeped in Aristotle to think that substance is not itself a kind of *energeia* (a point emphasized in *Metaphysics* viii.2). Hence he also posits an *energeia tēs ousias*, an internal act or energy constituting the substance, of which the external act is a kind

of image. His favorite illustration of this is fire, which has an internal heat that constitutes its substance and an external heat that it gives forth into the world, but the distinction is meant to be perfectly general. Ultimately it turns out that the internal act of all things is some form of contemplation, for all things are what they are by contemplating their prior in the chain of emanation.

We now have enough background in hand to see what use the Greek Fathers made of these ideas. The provocation that caused them to develop a more or less philosophical doctrine of God was the Arianism of Eunomius around the mid-fourth century. Eunomius had a simple argument that the Son is not God. It was that God is ingenerate or unbegotten, and furthermore this is not merely a privative attribute or human conception, but the divine substance or essence (*ousia*) itself. Plainly such an *ousia* cannot be shared with another by begetting. Hence the Son, who is begotten of the Father, cannot be of one essence (*homoousion*) with the Father. As for terms such as ‘life,’ ‘light,’ and ‘power,’ which in the New Testament are used of both the Father and the Son, Eunomius argued that they must be taken differently in the two cases. Since the divine essence is utterly simple, “every word used to signify the essence of the Father is equivalent in force of meaning to ‘the unbegotten’ (*to agennēton*).”⁵

The task of replying to Eunomius fell to St. Basil of Caesarea. Basil objected both to the assumption that the divine *ousia* can be known and to assumption that, because of divine simplicity, all non-privative terms said of God are identical in meaning. He writes:

We say that we know the greatness of God, His power, His wisdom, His goodness, His providence over us, and the justness of His judgment, but not His very essence (*ousia*) . . . But God, he [Eunomius] says, is simple, and whatever attribute of Him you have reckoned as knowable is of His essence. The absurdities involved in this sophism are innumerable. When all these high attributes have been enumerated, are they all names of one essence? And is there the same mutual force in His awfulness and His loving-kindness, His justice and His creative power, His foreknowledge and His requital, His majesty and His providence? In mentioning any of these, do we declare His essence?

The question, then, is how to characterize the distinction between that in God which cannot be known (the divine *ousia*) and that which can be known, such as the divine power, wisdom, and goodness. Basil's answer emerges in the continuation of the passage:

The energies are various, and the essence simple, but we say that we know our God from His energies, but do not undertake to approach near to His essence. His energies come down to us, but His essence remains beyond our reach.⁶

As I understand him, Basil is here applying to the Christian God the distinction between *ousia* and *energeia* found in the philosophical tradition, and particularly in Plotinus.

His doing so raises at least two distinct questions. One is that of the ontological relationship between the essence and the energies. In Plotinus the external act of the One comes forth as the distinct hypostasis of Intellect. Is something similar true here in Basil? The other question is that of divine freedom, or, more precisely, the capacity to do otherwise. In Plotinus the One could not do otherwise than produce Intellect. Of course Plotinus sees this fact as not an impairment but rather an expression of the One's freedom, since nothing other than the One's own nature determines it to act as it does. By contrast, in the Christian tradition God is thought of as sufficiently like a person that in at least some cases, such as the creation of the world, he could do otherwise. Should we say, then, that his energies could be different than they are?

Let us begin with the first question. Plainly for Basil the energies are not a separate hypostasis, or series of hypostases. Rather, they are acts which God performs. Many scholars would in fact prefer to translate *energeia* in the passage that I have quoted as 'operation,' and to take Basil as saying only that God's *operations* come down to us. I believe that the history of the distinction between the divine *ousia* and *energeia*, as I have sketched it here, argues against such a view. I find support at this point in an interesting semantic argument presented by Basil's brother, St. Gregory of Nyssa, who defended Basil against a reply by Eunomius. Gregory adopts the view, which was widespread in antiquity, that a name is in some way indicative of the form or intrinsic characteristics of the thing named. Since God has no form, he has no name in the proper sense. Instead terms such as 'god' (*theos*) name the divine *energeia* of oversight or governance. (Gregory derives *theos* from *theaomai*, behold.) Now it is plain that by *energeia* here Gregory has in mind an operation. However, it cannot be *only* an operation, for then in

speaking of God we would be speaking of an operation of God—that is, an operation of an operation, and so on in an infinite regress. Somehow by *energeia* Gregory and Basil would appear to understand *both* that which God is, and that which God performs.

I believe that this is perfectly intelligible in light of the history that we have traced. From the time of its introduction by Aristotle, *energeia* always indicated the energy which God both *is* and *does*. Plotinus refined this picture by distinguishing between internal and external act, but he did not overthrow it. Basil and Gregory in their turn revise Plotinus by rejecting the distinction of hypostasis between Intellect and the One. For them the relevant distinction is rather that between God *as he exists within himself and is known only to himself*, and God *as he manifests himself to others*. The former is the divine *ousia*, the latter the divine energies. It is important to note that both are God, but differently conceived: God as unknowable and as knowable, as wholly beyond us and as within our reach.

To put the distinction this way, however, could be misleading if it suggests something like a fixed and permanent boundary. The Cappadocians—Basil, Gregory, and their colleague, St. Gregory Nazianzen—think instead of that which is unknowable in God as a kind of receding horizon. Precisely the fact that we cannot know God as he knows himself draws us forward to seek to know him ever more deeply. Gregory Nazianzen expresses vividly this sense of a longing that is always both being satisfied and seeking satisfaction:

In Himself [God] sums up and contains all being, having neither beginning in the past nor end in the future; like some great sea of being, limitless and unbounded, transcending all conception of time and nature, only adumbrated by the mind, and that very dimly and scantily—not from the things directly concerning Him, but from the things around Him; one image being got from one source and another from another, and combined into some sort of presentation of the truth, which escapes us when we have caught it, and takes to flight when we have conceived it, blazing forth upon our master-part, even when that is cleansed, as the lightning flash which will not stay its course does upon our sight—in order as I conceive by that part of it which we can comprehend to draw us to itself . . . and by that part of it which we cannot comprehend to move our wonder, and as an object of wonder to become more an object of desire, and being desired to purify, and by purifying to make us like God.⁷

The “things around God” are, I take it, another name for the divine energies. Two points are here especially worth noting. One is the necessity for the play of images, “one image being got from one source and another from another,” in order to form anything like an adequate conception of God. Here we find the underlying philosophical rationale for the immense variety of liturgical poetry and iconographic expression within the eastern Christian tradition. The other point is the sequence leading from wonder, to desire, to purification, and finally to *homoioōsis theōi*, likeness to God. A philosophical reader cannot help but notice here the echoes of Plato and Aristotle, as for instance of the famous statement of Aristotle that philosophy begins with a sense of wonder, and of the Platonic emphasis on the need for purification of the soul, and of the theme found in both authors that the human *telos* is achieving a likeness to God.

Nonetheless, the fundamental distinction between God as He is known to Himself and as He is known to us was derived by the Cappadocians not from philosophical sources, but from Biblical revelation. Most obviously, it was inspired by the encounter of Moses with God on Mount Sinai in Exodus 33. There God warns Moses that “thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me, and live.” Nonetheless he continues: “it shall come to pass, while my glory passeth by, that I will put thee in a clift of the rock, and will cover thee with my hand while I pass by: And I will take away mine hand, and thou shalt see my back parts: but my face shall not be seen” (33:22-23). Gregory Nazianzen takes this passage as a model for understanding his own experience. In doing so he draws a distinction much like that we have seen in Basil between God as he is known to himself and as he “reaches to us”:

What is this that has happened to me, O friends and initiates and fellow lovers of the truth? I was running up to lay hold on God, and thus I went up into the mount, and drew aside the curtain of the cloud, and entered away from matter and material things, and as far as I could I withdrew within myself. And then when I looked up I scarce saw the back parts of God, although I was sheltered by the rock, the Word that was made flesh for us. And when I looked a little closer I saw, not the first and unmingled nature, known to itself—to the Trinity, I mean; not that which abides within the first veil and is hidden by the Cherubim, but only that nature which at last even reaches to us. And that is, so far as I can tell, the majesty, or as holy David calls it, the glory which is manifested among the

creatures, which it has produced and governs. For these [i.e., the majesty and glory] are the back parts of God, which He leaves behind Him as tokens of Himself like the shadows and reflections of the sun in the water, which show the sun to our weak eyes because we cannot look at the sun itself.⁸

More broadly, the Cappadocians took all the Biblical theophanies—including, most famously, the burning bush of Exodus 3—as pointing to a similar distinction. In such events God is known *precisely as unknowable*; it is the very extremity of his condescension in appearing and making himself known which underscores the deep chasm between his mode of being and our own.⁹

In light of this Biblical background, the notion of *theōsis* or deification may seem like a foreign importation. It is at this point that the Pauline usage of the concept of *energeia* becomes crucially important. An especially important passage was I Corinthians 12. There Paul speaks of the “gifts of the Spirit” as including both miraculous powers such as prophecy, speaking in tongues, and the discernment of spirits, and enduring states of soul such as faith and wisdom. Significantly, he describes these gifts as *energēmata* (works performed) of the Spirit, and the Spirit as “working” (*energōn*) them. Basil in his work *On the Holy Spirit* develops this notion to understand such gifts as a form of divine energy. He writes:

As is the power of seeing in the healthy eye, so is the energy (*energeia*) of the Spirit in the purified soul . . . And as the skill in him who has acquired it, so is the grace of the Spirit ever present in the recipient, though not continuously active (*energousa*). For as the skill is potentially in the artisan, but only in operation when he is working in accordance with it, so also the Spirit is present with those who are worthy, but works (*energei*) as need requires, in prophecies, or in healings, or in some other carrying into effect (*energēmasin*) of His powers.¹⁰

This passage is almost Aristotelian in its distinction between an enduring state of the soul (in Aristotelian terms, first actuality) and its active expression (second actuality). However, for Basil these are two different forms of energy, the one latent and the other active. Thus Basil understands participation in the divine energy as an ongoing state of the soul that finds

expression, as need be, in particular acts. This is what is meant by deification in the Greek patristic tradition: an ongoing and progressively growing participation in the divine energies.

It is worth noting how this understanding of participation in the divine avoids a certain cul-de-sac present in pagan Neoplatonism. For Plotinus we do not so much *participate* in Intellect—much less the One—as rediscover our true identity *as* Intellect. We are each in our truest core an unfallen intellect (*nous*) which shares in the unity-in-multiplicity of Intellect, much as the light of each lamp in a room shares in the room’s light, or each theorem of a science shares in the integral meaning of the whole. In rediscovering our true identity as *nous*, we leave behind the accidents of memory and personality that individuate us here below in order to merge into the pristine clarity of perfect noetic activity. Later Neoplatonists such as Iamblichus and Proclus were dissatisfied by this starkly impersonal conception of our relationship to the divine, and attempted in various ways to change it. For the Cappadocians, however, such a problem does not even arise. The distinction of essence and energy enables them to understand human-divine communion as taking place within the sphere of joint personal activity. In coming to be deified we share progressively in God’s activity, but without losing our distinct identity. Indeed, much like St. Paul, they believe that we only fully achieve our own identity when we make our own activity that of God. Such synergy is, in their view, a way of knowing God that is neither inferential, nor noetic in the Aristotelian sense, nor a matter simply of feeling or intuition. It is the knowledge that comes through sharing actively in the work of another, and thereby coming to know him as the author of that work.

From all of this it is clear how the second of our two questions, that of whether the divine energies could be different than they are, is to be answered. If they are the sphere of personal action in the way that I have described, then at least some of them could be different; otherwise they would be a kind of emanation rather than the free acts of a free Creator. However, the same constraint means that there are limits to the ways that they could be different. The range of acts that would constitute a legitimate expression of my character is quite large, yet I trust that at least some acts, such as murder, adultery, or treason, fall beyond it. In the same way, if the divine energies are to manifest the divine *ousia*, then although they can vary enormously they must fall within the range that is properly related to the divine *ousia* (whatever the *ousia* might be!) as expression to source. For example, God need not have created, and given that he did create he might have created the world differently than he did; furthermore, even given that he created this

world he might act within it differently, for example, by distributing different spiritual gifts. Thus many of the divine energies, including those of creation, providence, and foreknowledge, as well as the gifts of the Spirit, could be different or could not exist at all. On the other hand, if he acts at all his action cannot fail to be good. Hence if there are any energies at all, goodness is among them. The same would seem to be true of wisdom, being, power, life, love, holiness, beauty, virtue, immortality, eternity, infinity, and simplicity, all of which the Cappadocians (or other Fathers after them) list among the divine energies.

To know whether these energies are necessary, then, we must ask whether it is possible that God not act at all—that is, whether he could be wholly without energy (*anenergēton*). So far as I know this question was not raised in such terms. However, a question very close to it—that of whether there would be divine energies even apart from creation—was at the center of a celebrated controversy in the fourteenth century. Certain monks known as hesychasts claimed to have been granted a vision of what they called the uncreated light. Whether it is possible that there be such a light, and if so what is its nature, became the focus of an intense debate. Ultimately it was decided that there *is* an uncreated light and that it is simply the visible form of the divine energy. This means that the divine energy is present in some form with the godhead from all eternity, quite independently of the act of creation. That in turn implies that the divine energy is not (as one might otherwise be tempted to suppose) simply the way in which God manifests himself to creatures. It is that, to be sure, but even without creatures there would still be an eternal self-manifestation within the godhead. Within a Christian context it is natural to understand this as the mutual love and self-revelation of the persons of the Trinity. There are hints of such a view among the earlier Greek Fathers, beginning with Gregory of Nyssa, but unfortunately the debate over the divine energies in the fourteenth century failed to make these connections explicit. The end of Byzantine civilization not long thereafter prevented any final clarification.

Where does all of this leave us? It seems to me that the Greek patristic conception of God has a number of advantages over that found in Augustine and his successors. In the first place, it succeeds in incorporating the apophatic approach to God in a way that western theology does not. The divine *ousia* is beyond any act of naming or conceptual thought, known only by actively sharing in its energetic expression. Such a view is in keeping with both the Biblical theophanies and the New Testament concept of synergy. It is also philosophically well grounded, for as

Plotinus saw, if God is the source of form he must himself possess no form. Yet if he is the source of form he must *also* be present in things as their form, the intelligible structure which makes them what they are. Whereas Plotinus separates these two functions into distinct hypostases, the Greek Fathers consider them two ways of understanding the one God.

One might expect that Augustine, with his knowledge of Plotinus, would have followed a similar path. In fact he did not. Augustine characteristically thinks of God as Truth itself, the Truth that is present to our minds enabling us to know. In line with the classical identification of thinking and being, he also describes God as *ipsum esse*, being itself. In essence this is the Plotinian understanding of Intellect. Augustine has no use for the other side of Plotinus, the understanding of God as beyond being and beyond intellect. Granted, he acknowledges that in this life we cannot know the divine essence, but that is a limitation of our present bodily existence. Moses and St. Paul are for Augustine paradigms of persons who for a brief time were taken out of their bodies into a state of rapture, enjoying a direct vision of the divine essence. The blessed in heaven, being finally removed from this life, will enjoy such a vision for all eternity. Aquinas adopts this idea and integrates it within his own Aristotelian framework. He argues that as pure act God must be *intrinsically* intelligible, however much our present limitations prevent us from understanding him. Drawing on Book X of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, as well as Augustine, he identifies the *telos* of human existence as the intellectual apprehension of the divine essence.

These differences regarding apophaticism point to a second major area of difference, the roles that the two traditions assign to personal activity. I have pointed out how the Greek Fathers drew on the Pauline concept of synergy to see the human *telos* as an ever deepening participation in the divine energies. Such participation begins in this present life and engages the body as much as the soul. On this view, our present acts of obedience to God, seeking him in prayer, and sharing in his life through worship and the sacraments are the sort of thing that is ultimately constitutive of our final beatitude. Our final state will be purer and richer, of course, but it will be recognizably in continuity with these present ways of knowing God. On the Augustinian-Thomistic view, by contrast, prayer, obedience, and the sacraments are related to the human end instrumentally rather than constitutively. According to Aquinas, in the afterlife God will infuse the blessed with the *lumen gloriae*, the “light of glory” that will enable them to apprehend the divine essence. All of our present acts are designed to bring us to that point. The body has no

real role in the beatific vision, and indeed Aquinas states explicitly that the resurrection of the body is not necessary for beatitude and does nothing to increase its intensity. So far as I can see, the same is true of our memory and other personal characteristics. Since the beatific vision is strictly an act of intellect, it is no more a personal act than is the Aristotelian *theōria* upon which it is modeled.

Finally I will touch briefly on a third area of difference, one that is large and deserves more careful exploration than I can give it here. Much of traditional natural theology is built around the concept of divine simplicity. Augustine and Aquinas have different ways of reaching this point, but they agree that all non-relational and non-privative predicates said of God are different ways of signifying the divine essence. Part of what this implies is that God's will is identical to his essence. Of the many difficulties to which such a view gives rise, I will mention two. The first pertains to divine freedom. If God is free in the way traditionally assumed in Christianity, he could will differently than he does. Does this mean that in such a case his essence would be different? And if so, how different could it be? Assuming that there is at least some aspect of the essence that could never be different—say, divine goodness—then there must be a distinction within the essence between that which could be different and that which could not. Surely, however, if anything is contrary to divine simplicity, it is the presence of such a distinction within the divine essence!

The second difficulty pertains to reciprocity between God and creatures. If the divine will is identical to the divine essence, it would seem that the divine will cannot in any way be a response to creatures' own initiative, for in that case creatures would contribute to determining the divine essence. Aquinas recognizes this problem, if it is one, and bites the bullet: his position is that God's will is not in any way a response to creatures but is determined solely by God. It is hard to see how most traditional religious practice, including petitionary prayer, sacrifice, and even simply the desire to please God, can make sense on such a view. Indeed, as Aquinas recognizes, on this view the Augustinian interpretation of predestination is not only true but is *necessarily* true, since God *could not* create creatures who are capable in any way of affecting his judgments regarding salvation and damnation.¹¹ Yet the Augustinian position began precisely as the attempt to exalt the divine will over all necessity. Such are the tangles one is led to by divine simplicity.

It is problems such as these that led Pascal to exclaim that the God of the philosophers is not the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The Augustinian-Thomistic God, who is perfectly simple and fully actual, seems to be locked within a box from which he cannot escape in order to interact in any meaningful way with his creatures. Plainly there needs to be some other way of understanding divine simplicity, one that does not involve these unacceptable limitations. Such a way is provided by the distinction of the divine essence and energies. The Greek Fathers think of simplicity as itself a divine energy, one of the ways in which God manifests himself in his activity. As with any energy, God is *both* simplicity itself *and* beyond simplicity as its source. Just as the sun is simple and yet possesses an indefinite multitude of rays, so nothing about divine simplicity prevents God from possessing an indefinite multitude of energies. Likewise nothing prevents these energies from being affected by creatures. The energies are precisely the realm of reciprocity, that in which God shares himself with creatures and summons them to offer themselves to him.

Undoubtedly many questions remain to be answered. I hope I have said enough, however, to make good on my original claims that we have here a way of thinking about God that is both deeply traditional and worthy of serious philosophical attention. In closing I will only say that it seems to me that the long movement of philosophy away from God has been, for the most part, a movement away from the God of Augustine and western theology. Will we find that all the while that we have been fleeing from the God of the West we have in fact been approaching the God of the East? That is a question that I invite you to ponder.

¹ I am moving quickly here through some knotty exegetical territory. For a full defense of this and most of the other interpretive claims I make in this paper, see my *Aristotle East and West: Metaphysics and the Division of Christendom* (Cambridge University Press, 2004).

² That *energoumenēn* in this verse is passive and not middle (as taken by most translations) has been argued by Joseph B. Mayor, *The Epistle of St. James: The Greek Text with Introduction, Notes, and Comments* (London and New York: Macmillan, 1892), 177-79, and J. Armitage Robinson, *St. Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians: A Revised Text and Translation with Exposition and Notes* (London and New York: Macmillan, 1903), 244-47. I defend and elaborate their position in "The Divine Energies in the New Testament," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 50 (2006), 189-223.

³ See also I Cor. 3:9, 12:6-11, II Cor. 6:1, Gal. 2:8, 3:5, Eph. 1:11, 19-20, 2:2, 3:7, 4:16, Phil. 2:13, 3:21, Col. 2:12, I Thess. 2:13, 3:2, II Thess. 2:9, 11, with discussion in the paper cited above.

⁴ For example, see Psalm 1.

⁵ Eunomius, *Apology* 19; ed. and trans. Richard Paul Vaggione, *Eunomius: The Extant Works* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 59.

⁶ Basil, Epistle 234; trans. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1982 [reprint]), vol. 8, 274.

⁷ Gregory Nazianzen, *Orations* 38.7; trans. NPNF, Second Series, vol. 7, 346-47.

⁸ *Orations* 28.3; NPNF, Second Series, vol. 7, 289.

⁹ See further my "The Divine Glory and the Divine Energies," forthcoming in *Faith and Philosophy*.

¹⁰ Basil, *On the Holy Spirit* XXVI.61; trans. NPNF, Second Series, vol. 8, 38.

¹¹ See *Summa Theologiae* I, Q. 19, art. 5-6; Q. 23, art. 4-5.