CHAPTER 10

The Separation of Ground and Mind

Suppose an argument about motion convinces you that the chain of causes has a last member. Someone then insists that this last member must be coloured. You see the mistake at once. The end of a causal chain needs no colour. Chapter 10 argues that insisting it must be intelligent has the same shape.

The target is the prime mover tradition, which runs from Aristotle through Aquinas to Leibniz. It holds that explanation ends in one being, and that this being is both the ground of everything else and a knowing agent. A ground is what other things hold in virtue of. The chapter argues that two separate demands have been fused here.

Chapter 4 argued that one kind of end closes grounding off for good, and that end has no internal distinction. The chapter calls it zero complexity. A brute end is also available, though it keeps internal distinctions and closes nothing off. This chapter takes the closing end as its subject.

The chapter counts thinking broadly. Its “cognitive predicates” cover any state of knowing, willing, intending or being aware.

Two demands that pull apart

Chapter 6 supplied a rule the chapter leans on. No property that needs a distinction in order to obtain can belong to a state that has none. Thinking is such a property. To know something is to be one way and not another way.

Chapter 2 supplies the bridge from that rule to the end of the chain. Any cognitive state has content. Any content needs a contrast. A state with no contrast has no content, and so does no knowing.

So the two demands pull in opposite directions. Grounding is complete only where distinctions are absent. A mind needs them present. The chapter says there is strong reason to think they cannot both be met there.

The result has a limit. The target is a God who is absolutely simple. A theist who has already given up simplicity is not the target and loses no result here. Alvin Plantinga and Richard Swinburne are the examples named. A ground with internal complexity could bear thinking, and the chapter leaves it standing. Such theists inherit that ground, with the cost Chapter 24 attaches to it. The constraint bites with full force on the strongest simplicity, and with less and less force on weaker versions.

The doctrine of divine simplicity makes God’s attributes identical with one another and with God. His knowledge and his power are then one thing under two descriptions. A distinction between two attributes is one kind. A distinction inside a single attribute is another. Knowing that something is so differs from not knowing it, and no doctrine of simplicity can afford that difference.

Three ways to the same mistake

Aristotle held that an eternal, immaterial substance is the goal of all motion. It is pure actuality, and its activity is thought thinking itself. Pure actuality means having no unrealised potentials. Zero complexity meets that condition, since it has no potentials at all. The chapter insists that this match is not a trivial one. Self-identity, a thing's being itself, is met by anything. Self-contemplation is thinking with content, and content needs a distinction.

So the unmoved mover faces a choice with no middle. Either its activity adds some character to bare self-identity, and a distinction is present. Or it adds nothing, and it is self-identity under a flattering name.

Aquinas argued that the chain of causes ends in pure act. He then identified pure act with a knowing God. The chapter does not dispute the first step and locates the trouble in the identification. It insists that the tradition argues for the identification, and that both arguments must be met first.

The first argument runs through immateriality. A form is what makes a thing the kind of thing it is. A knower can hold the form of another thing as well as its own, and matter is what confines a thing to its own form. So the wholly immaterial end of the chain should be the most knowing thing there is. The chapter replies that its rule was never about matter. Grasping the form of horse without matter is still grasping this form.

The second argument runs through containment. Nothing gives what it in no way has. So the cause of all things must somehow hold the forms of all its effects. Holding forms immaterially is what being an intellect is. Here the chapter builds its containment fork. Ask whether a held form is a definite content. If it is, then horse and oak are two definite things in the container, and the container has internal distinctions. If it is not, then the container holds horse no differently from oak, and the bridge to intellect collapses.

The Thomist reply is the virtual distinction. God's attributes and the forms he holds differ only in how they are conceived. In God there is one foundation, and the difference between horse and oak lies in the creatures. The tradition pictures the sun, whose one light heats one thing and colours another. The chapter replies that the picture shows one definite feature grounding many relations. The doctrine needs a case of no feature grounding many, and the tradition offers none.

Leibniz held that every contingent fact has a sufficient reason. He argued that the chain of such facts needs a necessary being as its reason, and that this being is perfect in every way. The chapter replies that a sufficient reason need only be a condition in virtue of which a fact holds. The boundary where further grounding becomes impossible is such a condition. The demand is then met as far as any account can meet it. One structureless residue is left over, which Chapter 5 owns.

The defences the chapter tests

Six modern defences meet the same obstacle in six forms. The identity thesis removes the distinctions between attributes and leaves the ones inside each attribute untouched.

A second defence has God make true every truth about himself while holding no distinct properties. The chapter replies that what makes “God knows P” true must differ somehow from what makes “God knows Q” true. Otherwise the connection is correlation and not making true. Asked how God would differ if he did not know a necessary truth, the defender answers that this supposition holds in no possible world. The chapter accepts that, and confines this what-if test to contingent truths. Its first reply still covers necessary truths, since two of them are still two contents.

A third defence separates God’s essence, simple and unknowable, from his energies, which are his activities in the world. The chapter calls this the most coherent option for a theist who wants both simplicity and intelligence. Its cost is that God’s innermost nature is unintelligent, and omniscience belongs to what God does and not to what God is.

The fourth defence allows God distinctions about what he could have willed. A distinction between the actual and the possible is still a distinction. Remove it and divine freedom goes with it. The fifth defence denies all positive descriptions of God, which concedes the conclusion outright. The sixth holds that “knows” applies to God by analogy. The chapter replies that some core of the ordinary word must survive, and a surviving core is a definite content.

The objections the chapter answers

The strongest objection is that divine thinking is of its own kind. It has no steps, no time and no inner pictures, so the chapter has imported a human model. Its reply is that the argument asks only the smallest condition on knowing anything. A knowing must be a knowing of something and not of nothing.

A second objection says the tradition means something else by “simple”. It means the fullest realisation of being, and not the absence of all distinction. The chapter answers that this third reading is no third condition. Either God’s knowing of one creature differs, in God, from his knowing of another. Then God is a structured reality, and the end of the chain has been vacated. Or it does not differ there, and the one act registers no creature as distinct.

What the chapter claims

The chapter yields three results, and all three are graded *established*. That is the rung below the book’s top mark. The grade means a result follows validly from premises the book defends, so a challenger must reject one of those premises.

The first result is that the demand for a ground and the demand for a mind come apart. The second is that the prime mover tradition and its modern

defenders run the two together, each at a different point. The third is the ecumenical one: there can be a ground without a mind.

Three conditions are marked. One formulation, the truthmaker argument, needs contents counted finely enough that “God knows P” and “God knows Q” are two. A reader who counts all necessary truths as one loses that formulation. The containment fork holds either way, but a Thomist who keeps the virtual distinction rejects it by name. The chapter names what that costs: one ground then grounds every form and none in particular. The first result reaches pure act read as full determination only by way of Chapter 7. That chapter holds that an act carrying no distinction carries no distinct contents. A follower of Aquinas may refuse that for the intellect while allowing it for the senses.

One retreat remains: perhaps God transcends description altogether. First, Chapter 11 takes up one more route to God. It reaches God through the universe’s beginning in time, and not through grounding.