

Of the Nature of God

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Book 1—Chapter 4 Of the Nature of God

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There is a nature that belongs to every creature, which is difficult to understand; and so to God, the Creator, which is most difficult of all: that "Nature" may be predicated of God, is what the apostle suggests when he says, the Galatians, before conversion, served them, who, "by nature, were no gods", (Gal. 4:8) which implies, that though the idols they had worshipped were not, yet there was one that was, by Nature, GOD; otherwise there would be an impropriety in denying it of them. Mention is also made of the "divine Nature", (2 Peter 1:4) which, indeed, is not the nature that is in God, but what is infused and implanted in men in regeneration; so called, not only because it is from God, as its author, but because it is the image of him, and bears a likeness and resemblance to him; but then there must be a nature in him to which this is similar, being "created, after him, in righteousness and true holiness"; or there would be no propriety in the denomination of it from him. This is what is called Divinity, Deity, or Godhead; which must not be thought to be "like to gold, silver, or stone, graven by art, or man's device"; or to be in the similitude of any creature, in a picture, painting, or sculpture; and which is to be seen and understood by the visible works of creation, and is what, "in all its perfection and fulness, dwells bodily in Christ", (Acts 17:29; Rom. 1:20; Col 2:9). It is the same with the form of God, in which Christ is said to be, (Phil. 2:6) which designs not any external form, for God has no visible shape, but his internal Glory, excellency, nature, and perfections, in which "Christ is equal with him, and his fellow"; and he is not only the express image of him, but one with him; not merely of a like, but of the same nature; so that he that sees the one, sees the other. Essence, which is the same thing with nature, is ascribed to God; he is said to be "excellent hyvwt in essence", (Isa. 28:29) for so the words may be rendered, that is, he has the most excellent essence or being; this is contained in his names, "Jehovah", and "I am that I am", which are expressive of his essence or being, as has been observed; and we are required to believe that he is, that he has a being or essence, and does exist, (Heb. 11:6) and essence is that by which a person or thing is what it is, that is its nature; and with respect to God, it is the same with his "face", which cannot be seen, (Exo. 33:20, 23) that is, cannot be perceived, understood, and fully comprehended, especially in the present state; and, indeed, though in the future state saints will behold the face of God, and "see him face to face, and as he is", so far as they are capable of, yet it is impossible for a finite mind, in its most exalted state, to comprehend the infinite Nature and Being of God.

This nature is common to the three Persons in God, but not communicated from one to another; they each of them partake of it, and possess it as one undivided nature; they all enjoy it; it is not a part of it that is enjoyed by one, and a part of it by another, but the whole by each; as "all the fulness of the Godhead dwells in Christ", so in the holy Spirit; and of the Father, there will be no doubt; these equally subsist in the unity of the divine essence, and that without any derivation or communication of it from one to another. I know it is represented by some, who, otherwise, are sound in the doctrine of the Trinity, that the divine nature is communicated from the Father to the Son and Spirit, and that he is "fons Deitatis", "the fountain of Deity"; which, I think, are unsafe phrases; since they seem to imply a priority in the Father to the other two persons; for he that communicates must, at least in order of nature, and according to our conception of things, be prior to whom the communication is made; and that he has a superabundant plenitude of Deity in him, previous to this communication. It is better to say, that they are self-existent, and exist together in the same undivided essence; and jointly, equally, and as early one as the other, possess the same nature.

The nature of God is, indeed, incomprehensible by us; somewhat of it may be apprehended, but it cannot be fully comprehended; "Canst thou by searching find out God? Canst thou find out the Almighty unto perfection?" (Job 11:7). No: but then this does not forbid us searching and inquiring after him: though we cannot have adequate ideas of God, yet we should endeavour to get the best we can, and frame the best conceptions of him we are able; that so we may serve and worship him, honour and glorify him, in the best manner. "The world", the heathen world, even the wisest in it, "by wisdom knew not God", (1 Cor. 1:21) they knew, or might know, there was a God, but they did not know what he was, and so glorified him not as God. An heathen philosopher^[1] being asked this question, what God was? required a day to think of it; when that was up, he asked a second, and still more time; and a reason of his dilatoriness being demanded of him, he replied, that the longer he considered of the question, the more obscure it was to him. Yet, somewhat of God, of his nature and perfections, may be known by the light of nature, (Rom. 1:19, 20) and more by divine revelation; for though it may with propriety be said, "what is his name", or nature, "if thou canst, tell?" (Prov. 30:4) yet he??? whom the heathens "ignorantly worshipped", the apostle Paul "declared" unto them, (Acts 17:23) and though the Samaritans worshipped they knew not what, yet Christ declared to the woman of Samaria, what God, the object of spiritual worship, is; saying "God is a spirit"; that is, he is of a spiritual nature, (John 4:22, 24) and this we may be sure is a true definition, description, and declaration of God, and of his nature; since this was given by the Son of God, who lay in his bosom, and perfectly knew his nature, as well as his will; see (John 1:18; Matt. 11:27) and by which we are taught,

1. That God is not a body, and that we are, in our conceptions of him, to remove every thing from him that is corporeal;

for spirit, and body or flesh, are opposed to one another, (Isa. 31:3; Luke 24:39) and yet there have been some, both ancients and moderns, atheistically inclined, who have asserted, that matter is God, and God is universal matter; and that the whole universe is God, and that extension is one of his attributes: and a sort of people called Anthropomorphites, who bore the Christian name, ascribed an human body, and the parts of it, to God, in a proper sense, mistaking some passages of scripture; and the common people, among the papists, have no other notion of God, than of a grave old man: in this respect both Jews and Heathens have better notions; of the Jews, R. Joseph Albo^[2], Maimonides^[3], and others, deny that God is a body, or consists of bodily parts: and of heathens, Pythagoras^[4], Xenophanes^[5], Sallustius^[6], and others^[7], affirm God to be incorporeal; and the Stoics say, he has not an human forms.^[8] But if God was matter, which is inert, inactive, and motionless, he could not be the maker and

mover of all things, as he is; "for in him we live, and move, and have our being", (Acts 17:28). Matter is without consciousness, is not capable of thinking, and without understanding, wisdom, and knowledge; and as it is not capable of acting, so much less of doing, such works as require contrivance, skill, wisdom, and knowledge, as the works of creation and providence; and therefore if God was matter, he could not be the Creator and Governor of the world; nor if a body, could he be omnipresent; a body is not every where, cannot be in two places at the same time; whereas God fills heaven and earth: and was he of so huge a body as to take up all space, there would be no room for other bodies, as there certainly is; nor would he be invisible; a body is to be seen and felt; but God is invisible and impalpable; "no man hath seen God at any time"; and if a body, he would not be the most perfect of beings, as he is, since angels, and the souls of men, being spirits, are more excellent than bodies.

It is no objection to this, that the parts of an human body are sometimes attributed to God; since these are to be understood of him not in a proper, but in an improper and figurative sense, and denote some act and action, or attribute of his; thus his face denotes his sight and presence, in which all things are, (Gen. 19:13) sometimes his favour and good will, and the manifestation of his love and grace, (Ps. 27:8, 80:3) and sometimes his wrath and indignation against wicked men, (Ps. 34:16; Rev. 6:17). His "eyes" signify his omniscience and all-seeing providence; concerned both with good men, to protect and preserve them, and bestow good things on them; and with bad men, to destroy them, (Prov. 15:3; 2 Chron. 16:9; Amos 9:8). His "ears", his readiness to attend unto, and answer the requests of his people, and deliver them out of their troubles, (Ps. 34:15; Isa. 59:1). His nose and nostrils, his acceptance of the persons and sacrifices of men, (Gen. 8:21) or his disgust at them, anger with them, and non-acceptance of them, (Deut. 29:20; Isa. 65:5; Ps. 18:8). His mouth is expressive of his commands, promises, threatenings, and prophecies delivered out by him, (Lam. 3:29; Isa. 1:20; Jer. 23:16). His "arms" and "hands" signify his power, and the exertion of it, as in making the heavens and the earth, and in other actions of his, (Ps. 102:27; Job 26:13; Ps. 89:13, 118:16; Deut. 33:27).

Nor is it any proof of corporeity in God, that a divine person has sometimes appeared in an human form; so one of the men that came to Abraham, in the plains of Mamre, was no other than the Lord omniscient and omnipotent, as the after discourse with him shows, (Gen. 18:3). And the man that wrestled with Jacob till break of day, was a divine person, of which Jacob was sensible; and therefore called the place where he wrestled with him, "Peniel", the face of God, (Gen. 32:24, 30). So he that appeared to Manoah, and his wife, (Judg. 13:6, 10, 18) with other instances that might be mentioned. But then these were appearances of the Son of God in an human form, and were presages of his future incarnation; for as for the Father, no man ever saw his shape, (John 5:37) and, it may be, the reason why the parts of an human body are so often ascribed to God, may be on account of Christ's incarnation, to prepare the minds of men for it, to inure them to ideas of it, to raise their expectation of it, and strengthen their faith in it; and the rather since these attributions were more frequent before the coming of Christ in the flesh, and very rarely used afterwards.

Nor will the formation of man in the image, and after the likeness of God, afford a sufficient argument to prove that there is something corporeal in God, seeing man has a soul or spirit, in which this image and likeness chiefly and principally lay; and which was originally created in righteousness and holiness, in wisdom and knowledge: and though he has a body also; yet, inasmuch as a body was prepared in the council and covenant of grace, from eternity, for the Son of God to assume in time; and in the book of God's eternal purposes, "all the members of it were written; which in continuance were fashioned, when as yet there was none of them", (Heb. 10:5; Ps. 139:16). God might, according to the idea of it in his eternal mind, form the body of the first man.

2. The description of God, as a Spirit, teaches us to ascribe to God all the excellencies to be found in spirits in a more eminent manner,

and to consider them as transcendent and infinite in him. By spirits, I understand not subtilized bodies, extracted out of various things; nor the wind and air, so called because invisible, and very piercing and penetrating, though bodies, and very ponderous ones; nor the spirits of animals, which are material, die, and go downwards to the earth: but rational spirits, angels, and the souls of men; the former are called spirits, (Zech. 6:5; Heb. 1:1, 5) and so are the latter, (Job 32:8; Heb 12:23) they are indeed created spirits, (Ps. 104:4; Zech. 12:1) but God an uncreated one, and is the Creator of these, and therefore said to be, "the Father of spirits", (Heb. 12:9). These are creatures of time, and finite beings; made since the world was, and are not every where: but God is an eternal, infinite, and immense Spirit, from everlasting to everlasting; and whom "the heaven of heavens cannot contain"; yet there are some excellencies in spirits, which may lead more easily to conceive somewhat of God, and of his divine nature.

Spirits are immaterial, have no corporal parts, as flesh, blood, and bones, (Luke 24:39) and though eyes, hands, &c. are ascribed to God, yet not of flesh, (Job 10:4) but such as express what is suitable to spiritual beings in the most exalted sense. Spirits are incorruptible; for having no matter about them, they are not liable to corruption; they are, indeed, capable of moral corruption, as appears from the angels that sinned, and, from the depravity of the souls of men by the fall; but not of natural corruption: but God is not subject to corruption in any sense, and is therefore called the "incorruptible God", (Rom. 1:23) Spirits are immortal; angels die not, (Luke 20:36) the souls of men cannot be killed, (Matt. 10:28) not consisting of parts, that are capable of being divided and separated, they cannot be brought to destruction. It is one of the characters of God, that he is "immortal", yea, "only hath immortality"; and so more transcendently, and in a more eminent manner immortal than angels, and the souls of men; he has it of himself, and underivatively, and is the giver of it to others, (1 Tim. 1:17, 6:16). Spirits are invisible; it is a vulgar mistake that they are to be seen; who ever saw the soul of a man? or an angel, in its pure form? whenever they have made themselves visible, it has been by assuming another form, an human one. "God is invisible, and dwells in light, which no man can approach unto; whom no man hath seen, nor can see", (1 Tim. 1:17, 6:16) and therefore as no likeness and similitude of a spirit can be formed and taken, so none of God: who can tell of what colour, form and figure, shape and size, the soul of a man is? Nor can any describe the form and figure of an angel: as for the pictures, paintings, and sculptures of them, they are the fruit of mere fancy and imagination, and at most but emblematical: because angels have appeared in an human form, therefore they are painted as young men; and because of their quick dispatch, and swiftness, in doing the errands and messages they have been sent upon, wings are given, them; but never was such a creature in real being, or ever seen in the whole world, in any age, as a young man with wings at his shoulders. So no likeness can be formed of God; no similitude was ever seen of him, and to whom can he be likened and compared? (Deut. 4:12; Isa 40:18, 46:5). Some of the Heathens^[9] have acknowledged the invisibility of God, as a Spirit; and Aristotle^[10] argues the invisibility of God, from the invisibility of the soul of man.

But besides these properties, there are others still more excellent in spirits, by which they approach nearer to God, and bear a greater resemblance to him, and serve to give us clearer ideas of his nature; they are living, active, endowed with understanding, will, and affections; they are lively, have a principle of life; angels are commonly thought to be the living creatures in Ezekiel's vision; however, they are such, and so the souls of men: the body of Adam, when first made, was a lifeless lump of clay; but when God breathed into him the breath of life, "he became a living soul", (Gen. 2:7). God is the living God, has life in and of himself, and gives life

to all creatures that have it. Spirits are active, and can operate upon others, as the souls of men on their bodies; God is all act, "actus simplicissimus", as he is sometimes styled, the most simple act; there is nothing passive in him, as matter, to be wrought upon; he works, and always works; and "all creatures live and move, and have their being in him", (John 5:17; Acts 17:28). Spirits, angels, and the souls of men, are intelligent beings, have a faculty of understanding things natural and spiritual; the understanding of God is infinite, there is no searching of it; he understands himself, and all created beings, and their natures, (Ps. 147:6; Isa. 40:28). Spirits have the power of willing, they are voluntary agents; and God wills whatever he does, and does whatever he wills; his will is boundless, uncontrollable, and sovereign, (Ps. 115:3; Dan. 4:35). Spirits have the affections of love, mercy, pity, &c. God not only loves his creatures, but "is love itself", (1 John 4:16). "His mercy is from everlasting to everlasting, on them that fear him"; and he pities them as a father pities his children, (Ps. 103:13, 17).

3. God being a Spirit, we learn that he is a simple^[11] and uncompounded Being, and does not consist of parts, as a body does;

his spirituality involves his simplicity: some indeed consider this as an attribute of God; and his spirituality also: and, indeed, every attribute of God, is God himself, is his nature, and are only so many ways of considering it, or are so many displays of it. However, it is certain God is not composed of parts, in any sense; not in a physical sense, of essential parts, as matter and form, of which bodies consist: nor of integral parts, as soul and body, of which men consist: nor in a "metaphysical" sense, as of essence and existence, of act and power: nor in a "logical" sense, as of kind and difference, substance and accident; all which would argue imperfection, weakness, and mutability. If God was composed of parts he would not be "eternal", and absolutely the first Being, since the composing parts would, at least, co-exist with him; besides, the composing parts, in our conception of them, would be prior to the compositum; as the body and soul of man, of which he is composed, are prior to his being a man: and, beside, there must be a composer, who puts the parts together, and therefore must be before what is composed of them: all which is inconsistent with the eternity of God: nor would he be "infinite" and "immense"; for either these parts are finite, or infinite; if finite, they can never compose an infinite Being; and if infinite, there must be more infinities than one, which implies a contradiction: nor would he be "independent"; for what is composed of parts, depends upon those parts, and the union of them, by which it is preserved: nor would he be "immutable", unalterable, and immortal; since what consists of parts, and depends upon the union of them, is liable to alteration, and to be resolved into those parts again, and so be dissolved and come to destruction. In short, he would not be the most perfect of Beings; for as the more spiritual a being is, the more perfect it is; and so it is, the more simple and uncompounded it is: as even all things in nature are more noble, and more pure, the more free they are from composition and mixture.

Nor is the simplicity of God to be disproved by the Trinity of Persons in the Godhead; for though there are three distinct persons, there is but one nature and essence common to them all, and which is not parted and divided among them, but is jointly and equally possessed by them; nor do these persons really differ from the divine nature and essence, nor from one another, but by their distinct modes of subsisting; so that they only distinguish and modify, but do neither divide nor compose the divine nature: nor is it to be disproved by the decrees of God; the decrees of God are within himself, and, as it is commonly said, whatever is in God, is God, and so are no other than God himself, as to the act of decreeing, though not with respect to the things decreed; and though they are many and various, as to the objects of them, yet not in God, who, by one eternal act, in his infinite mind, has decreed every thing that has been, is, or shall be;

and is what Plato^[12] means by en kai polla, "one" and "many" in God; one, as to his essence; many, as to the ideas and decrees in it, which many are one: nor is it to be disproved by the attributes of God; for they are no other than God himself, and neither differ from one another, but with respect to their objects, and effect, and in our manner of conception of them; nor from the nature and essence of God; they are himself, and his nature; he is not only eternal, wise, good, loving, &c. but he is eternity itself, wisdom itself, goodness itself, love itself, &c. and these are not parts of his nature, but displays of the same undivided nature, and are different considerations of it, in which we view it; our minds being so weak as not to be able to conceive of God at once and together, and in the gross, but one thing after another, and the same in different lights, that we may better understand it: these several things, called attributes, which are one in God, are predicated of him, and ascribed to him distinctly, for helps to our finite understandings, and for the relief of our minds; and that we, with more facility and ease, might conceive of the nature of God, and take in more of him, as we can by parcels and piecemeals, than in the whole; and so, as a learned Jew^[13] observes, all those attributes are only intellectual notions; by which are conceived the perfections that are in the essence of God, but in reality are nothing but his essence; and which attributes will be next considered.

ENDNOTES:

[1] Simonides apud Cicero. de Natura Deor. l. 1.

[2] Sepher Ikkarim, l. 2. c. 6.

[3] Hilchot Yesude Hatorah, c. 1. s. 5. ,6.

[4] Apud Laetant. de Ira, c. 11.

[5] Apud Clement. Stromat. 5. p. 601.

[6] De Diis et Mundo, c. 2.

[7] So Aristotle, Laert. l. 5, in Vita ejus.

[8] Laert. l. 7. in Vita Zeno.

[9] Philemon et Orpheus apud Justin. de Monarch. p. 104, 105.

[10] De Mundo, c. 6. so Minutius Felix, in octavia, p. 35, 36.

[11] aploun te einai, kai pantwn hkista thv eautou ideav ekba. nein, is simple, and least of all departs from his own idea, --remains alway simply in his own form, Plato de Republ. l. 2. p. 606.

[12] In Philebo, p. 372, &c. et in Parmenide, p. 1110, &c.

[13] R. Joseph Albo in Sepher Ikkarim, l. 2. c. 8.