### God’s Attributes

### A. Key Terms and Concepts

In this section, we will define terms commonly used in the study of God’s nature. At times, as we shall see, the biblical usage of these terms differs from how they are used in theological discussion.

Our first item is the term οὐσία (*ousia*). In the New Testament, the word οὐσία (*ousia*) is found only once (Lk 15:12-13) where it simply means “possessions.” In Greek philosophy, however, the word refers to an impersonal, all-encompassing, all-pervasive, all-penetrating power – Reason. As a result, in patristic theology the term became associated with God’s nature or essence.

Next, we will discuss the word ὑποστάσις (*upostasis*), which is usually employed by theologians to designate the separate Persons in the Trinity. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three “hypostases” in the triune God. The basic meaning of the term, though, is that which stands under something else, that is, its foundation.[[1]](#footnote-1) Based on that observation, then, the word has a closer association with the *essence* of something than to distinctions within it. The biblical usage reflects this feature as well. In the New Testament, it carries the meaning “realization” (Heb 11:1) or “confidence” (2 Cor 9:4; 2 Cor 11:17; Heb 3:14). It directly connotes God’s essence in Hebrews 1:3: “(Christ) is the radiance of (the Father’s) glory and the exact representation of His nature (ὑποστάσις).

Stoics, though, assigned a different definition to the word ὑποστάσις (*upostasis*) – a concrete manifestation of the all-encompassing οὐσία (*ousia*) in a certain person or thing.[[2]](#footnote-2) Patristic theology embraced this meaning and applied it to the Persons of the Godhead.

The New Testament word “nature” is most commonly a translation of the Greek φύσις (*phusis*). In the New Testament, this word is typically associated with a natural physical condition or function, as seen in the following examples:

- Rom 1:26 – For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions; for their women exchanged the natural function (φύσις) for that which is unnatural.

- Rom 2:27 – And he who is physically (φύσις) uncircumcised, if he keeps the Law, will he not judge you who though having the letter {of the Law} and circumcision are a transgressor of the Law?

- Rom 11:21 – For if God did not spare the natural (φύσις) branches, He will not spare you, either.

- Rom 11:24 – For if you were cut off from what is by nature (φύσις) a wild olive tree, and were grafted contrary to nature into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these who are the natural {branches} be grafted into their own olive tree?

- 1 Cor 11:14 – Does not even nature (φύσις) itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a dishonor to him?

- Gal 2:15 – We {are} Jews by nature (φύσις) and not sinners from among the Gentiles.

- 2 Pet 2:12 – But these, like unreasoning animals, born as creatures of instinct (φύσις) to be captured and killed, reviling where they have no knowledge, will in the destruction of those creatures also be destroyed.

Therefore, φύσις (*phusis*) is the sum of the qualities that make up the nature or essence of something. For example, in Galatians 4:8, when Paul says, “You were slaves to those which by nature (φύσις) are no gods,” he means that idols do not have all the necessary character traits to be classified as “gods.” Similarly, in James 3:7, James describes the animal world and humanity with the word φύσις (*phusis*): “For every species (φύσις) of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by the human race (φύσις).” Again, this word indicates classification by characteristics.

Let us define more exactly the term “attribute.” It refers to qualities or characteristics of someone or something. The entire sum of attributes makes up the nature of the entity. Attributes differ from accidents (pronounced “assendents,” which we will discuss later) in that the former are necessary for qualifying something for its proper classification according to nature. In other words, if a certain entity is missing any one of the attributes that are necessary characteristics of a species, then it cannot be considered a member of that class, since its nature differs from others in that class. In respect to God, Nash writes, “A divine attribute is an essential property of God…. A divine attribute is a property which God could not lose and continue to be God.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

The term “accidents” refers to concrete aspects of an object as well, but unlike attributes, they are not necessary qualities of a thing or person’s nature. In other words, if a certain accident, present in all other members of a class, is missing in the object under study, that does not prevent its inclusion in the given class if all necessary attributes are present.[[4]](#footnote-4) For example, one of the attributes of human nature is the human will. If an entity does not have this feature, it is not human. Humans, though, have various hair colors, which is an accident, since a certain hair color is not a necessary quality for humans.

Another integral part of our discussion is the difference between nominalism and realism. Nominalism means that we ascribe to God certain attributes, but God, in reality, has no specific attributes. We simply assign them to God for the sake of convenience.[[5]](#footnote-5) The Lutheran theologian Francis Piper claims that God speaks of His attributes solely for our sake.[[6]](#footnote-6) According to this theory, God’s nature is “simple” in the sense of “indivisible.” Therefore, it is preferable to speak of God as a whole being, not as a combination of attributes.[[7]](#footnote-7) The theory of nominalism has some common features with apophatism since both systems hesitate to speak of attributes in God. In distinction from apophatism, though, nominalism does not divide God into separate “modes,” namely, essence and energies.

In refutation of nominalism, we can say that God’s Word itself informs us of His attributes. Contrary to Piper, the Scriptures nowhere hint that God does this purely for our benefit. Additionally, if we may not distinguish, for example, God’s power from His knowledge and establish conceptual borders between them, then they may merge to the point where power is no longer power, and knowledge is no longer knowledge. That which God knows, He knows. This is His knowledge. That which God does, He does. This is a manifestation of His power. Knowledge and power are different aspects of His nature, and we must perceive them in distinction from one another.

What about realism? Here it is claimed that God truly possesses specific attributes. Additionally, God’s nature can actually be divided among His attributes. For example, we can say that God, let us say, is 10% wisdom, 30% love, 15% power, etc. The combination of all His attributes, both in quality and quantity, makes up His nature. According to realism, higher order entities are more complex than lower ones, that is, they possess more attributes. Since God possesses the most and highest attributes, He is the greatest Being of all. In realism, we may view God’s attributes as various parts of His being, and it is permissible to divide His nature by His attributes.[[8]](#footnote-8)

On the other hand, if we are able to divide God’s nature by His attributes, then it follows that each of His attributes has a limit. If each attribute makes us a certain “percent” of God’s nature, then they are limited, that is, finite. The Bible, though, speak of God’s attributes as infinite. If God Himself in infinite, then His attributes must be as well.

Additionally, such a view can lead to polytheism. If God’s nature can be divided by His attributes, then the potential exists for the independent existence of these attributes. The result is many gods. This likely occurred among the peoples of antiquity, who acknowledged, for example, a god of love, a god of war, a god of reproduction, a god of wisdom, etc.[[9]](#footnote-9)

The biblical position is well expressed by several evangelical theologians. Millard Erickson, for example, rightly claims, “God is an integrated person,” i.e., it is improper and even impossible to divide His nature by attributes – it is “simple.”[[10]](#footnote-10) On the other hand, in order to preserve the integrity of God’s revelation and prevent a confusion of His attributes with one another, we must speak of specific attributes in God. Although we cannot *divide* God’s nature, we can *distinguish* definite qualities in it.

In order to avoid the errors connected with realism, one must insist that God’s attributes can have no independent existence outside of Himself, but exist only within His integrated nature. His attributes do not act as an outside force to limit Him or define His behavior, but simple describe what God’s character is like. Tozer writes in this regard, “All God’s reasons for doing anything lie inside of God. They do not lie outside of God to be brought to bear on Him.”[[11]](#footnote-11) So then, God’s nature is the sum of His attributes, yet, unlike realism, each of God’s attributes is just as infinite as He is.

Other evangelical thinkers share this view.[[12]](#footnote-12) Shedd defines divine attributes as “the Divine essence, whole and entire, contemplated in a particular mode of external operation.”[[13]](#footnote-13) Shedd also claims, “We must not conceive of the essence as existing by itself, and prior to the attributes, and of the attributes as an addition to it. God is not essence and attributes, but in attributes.”[[14]](#footnote-14) Erickson also affirms that God’s nature consists in His attributes: “When we speak of the attributes of God, we are referring to those qualities of God which constitute what he is. They are the very characteristics of his nature.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Tozer summarizes well the evangelical position: “The mercy of God is simply God being merciful. And the justice of God is simply God being just.”[[16]](#footnote-16) Within God’s nature, there exists no conflict between His attributes: “God always acts in conformity with the fullness of His own wholly perfect, symmetrical nature.”[[17]](#footnote-17)

### B. Classification of God’s Attributes

It is useful to classify God’s attributes in some sort of overarching structure that will provide us with clarity of thought about His nature. Might not such a structure, though, distort the biblical picture of God? Chafer emphasizes the importance of this issue when he writes, “An omission or slighting of any of these (attributes), or any disproportionate emphasis upon any one of them cannot but lead to fundamental error of immeasurable magnitude.”[[18]](#footnote-18) Therefore, this step must be taken carefully.

One method for discovering God’s attributes is the “philosophical approach.”[[19]](#footnote-19) According to this method, we define God’s attributes by means of the following. *Via negationis,* i.е., “the way of negation,” eliminates from God’s nature all the imperfections we observe in the world. For example, since death is an imperfection, God must be free of death, or immortal and eternal. Next, the *via eminentice*, i.е., “the way of culmination,” elevates good qualities to the maximum and ascribes them to God. For example, love is an admirable quality. Therefore, God must be perfect love. Finally is the *via causalitatis*, i.е., “the way of causation.” Here we ascribe to God those qualities that are necessary to explain the phenomena of nature. Accordingly, God must be almighty to create and sustain the universe.

A competing approach for discovering God’s attributes in the “revelational approach.” Here we discover who God is by examining His self-revelation in Scripture. The Bible becomes the standard for our knowledge of God and His nature.[[20]](#footnote-20) Since God is the best source of information about Himself, we will operate on this principle.

After identifying God’s attributes in Scripture, how should we classify them? Various systems are proposed: immanent vs. emanent attributes, communicable vs. incommunicable attributes, positive vs. negative attributes, natural vs. moral attributes, and essential, cognitive, and volitional attributes.[[21]](#footnote-21)

We will begin by examining immanent vs. emanent attributes. Immanent attributes are those that are unique to God and independent in their manifestation from creation. They describe who God is in relation to Himself. If creation never existed, God would still display these qualities. Here we may list such characteristics as God’s eternal nature, His omniscience, and others. Emanent attributes are those that God manifests in His relation to creation. [[22]](#footnote-22) We assume that if creation never occurred, then God would not have opportunity to express these qualities. Here we find such items as mercy, faithfulness, and others.

Another system divides God’s attributes into communicable and incommunicable. Communicable attributes are those that people can acquire (at least in part) as well. They would include such characteristics as holiness, love and similar traits. Incommunicable attributes, then, only God can manifest. We can include here omniscience, omnipotence, immutability etc.[[23]](#footnote-23)

Others employ the categories of positive and negative attributes. In this classification system, positive attributes are traits actually existing in God. For example, God is almighty, loving, faithful, etc. Negative attributes are imperfections that God does not possess, such as His eternal nature (not subject to time), His immutability (not subject to change), and His infinite nature (not subject to any limitation).[[24]](#footnote-24)

Another system, a tripartite one, employs the followings groups: essential, cognitive, and volitional attributes. The first group relates to God’s essential being, the second – to His intellectual abilities, and the third – to actions of His will. God’s eternal nature would appear in the first category, His wisdom in the second, and His omnipotence and righteousness in the third.[[25]](#footnote-25)

A very popular approach is to divide divine attributes by the categories of natural and moral. The latter concern exemplary moral behavior, like holiness, love, righteousness and the like. Natural attributes are features that do not concern behavior such as omniscience, omnipotence, omnipresence, etc. Millard Erickson proposes a similar system, yet employs these categories: God’s greatness and God’s goodness. God’s greatness corresponds to God’s “natural” attributes, and God’s goodness – to His moral attributes.[[26]](#footnote-26)

Although Erickson’s approach has much in its favor, a slight adjustment can improve its quality. The classification “God’s goodness” does not recognize the distinction between aspects of God’s character that relate to His holiness, and those that relate to His love. We would propose, then dividing this category in two parts.

Therefore, in this volume we will employ three categories for classifying God’s attributes: God’s greatness (i.e., His “natural” qualities), His holiness, and His love. Such a system corresponds to the three instances where the apostle John uses the formula: “God is…”: “God is spirit” (Jn 4:24), “God is light” (1 Jn 1:5), and “God is love” (1 Jn 4:8, 16). “God is spirit” reminds us of His natural, non-moral traits, “God is light” – His holiness, and “God is love” – His mercy and grace.

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