

## What is God's Power?

(forthcoming in the *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion*)

**Author:** Graham Renz

**Affiliation:** Washington University in St. Louis

**Email Contact:** [renzgraham@gmail.com](mailto:renzgraham@gmail.com)

**Keywords:** God, Power, Dispositions, Creation, Classical Theism

**Abstract:** Theists claim that God can make a causal difference in the world. That is, theists believe that God is causally efficacious, has power. Discussion of divine power has centered on understanding better the metaphysics of creation and sustenance, special intervention, governance, and providing an account of omnipotence consistent with other divine attributes, such as omnibenevolence. But little discussion has centered on what, deep down ontologically, God's power is. I show that a number of prominent accounts of power fail to model what a classical God's power could be, and then develop an account based on teleological and primitivist accounts of power.

[F]or if it does not *act*, there will be no movement.

Aristotle (*Meta.*, XII.6 1071<sup>b</sup> 17-18)

Whence it most fittingly belongs to Him to be an active principle...

St. Thomas Aquinas (*ST*, I, q25. a1. co.)

### 1. Introduction

Whether God is understood fundamentally as the ultimate ontological ground of reality, the greatest possible or maximal being, or that being most worthy of worship, theists believe that God is metaphysically responsible for reality, *somehow*. Many believe that responsibility is to be cashed out in terms of God's creating and sustaining reality. This means that theists believe God is among that class of beings that can make a difference in the world, that God has causal power.<sup>1</sup>

Metaphysicians generally understand a power (or disposition) to be an intrinsic capacity of an object to bring about some type of manifestation, given the right conditions or if mingled with

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<sup>1</sup> I should note that assuming some  $x$  has a power from the fact that  $x$  is causally relevant is controversial. Some think the shape of an object is causally relevant but not itself a power. I deny this, but will not defend my position here. For further discussion, see Bird (2007: 154-160) and Heil (2012: 59-62).

the right manifestation partners.<sup>2</sup> For instance, sugar has the power to dissolve should it be mixed with some hot coffee, and we have the power to cognize entities beyond us, even ones that don't exist. But it is controversial how to spell out best exactly what a power amounts to ontologically. Powers seem to be 'directed at' or 'causally ready for' their manifestations, but what does *this* mean? How are we to understand, metaphysically, something being directed towards a manifestation, whether or not that manifestation exists? Is a power a higher-order relation between first-order properties, whether instantiated or not? Or perhaps is it a quasi-intentional or teleological feature of objects? Taking the directionality of powers as my focus, the question I pursue here is: what does an adequate ontological account of God's power look like?<sup>3</sup>

While philosophers and theologians have written extensively on God's power, few have tried to explicate an ontological account of divine power. The question I pursue is distinct from questions discussed in the divine action literature, where what is in question is whether God creates all of reality directly or through mediating causes. It is distinct from questions about how God governs the world, whether through realistically construed laws of nature or dispositional essences. It is distinct from discussion in the special intervention literature, where what is in question is how to model best God's intervention in the created realm.<sup>4</sup> And it is distinct from questions in the omnipotence literature, where what is in question is what being all-powerful amounts to, and whether being all-powerful is consistent with other attributes, like being all-good, that God is traditionally thought to have. While the account given here may very well have implications for these other debates, it attempts an answer to a question so far given little attention.

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<sup>2</sup> Most believe powers are individuated by the type of manifestation they are for and their stimulus conditions. For instance, solubility is the power to dissolve (type) when placed in a solvent (stimulus condition). But some, e.g. Heil (2003: 83-84, 2012: 72-75), Martin (2008: ch. 1, 48-51), and Williams (2019: ch. 3), discard talk of stimulus conditions and prefer talk of mutual manifestation partners: other dispositions properly mingled with the disposition of interest. So, for example, the disposition to dissolve possessed of some sugar mutually manifests with the disposition to dissolve solutes possessed of some hot coffee, resulting in a dissolving. Others still, e.g. Vetter (2015: ch. 3), do without stimulus conditions altogether. Some also believe that there could be *extrinsic* powers, that perfect duplicates could somehow have different dispositional profiles (McKittrick 2003). For now, we needn't worry about these subtleties, but I mention both stimulus conditions and mutual manifestation partners throughout for completeness.

<sup>3</sup> Although 'power' has been and by some contemporary metaphysicians is considered to be synonymous with 'potentiality,' I do not think ascribing power to God means we ascribe potentiality to God. Following Aquinas and many others, I reject the view that God has *passive* powers, or may be acted on, but I believe God has *active* powers inasmuch as God can act on others. In fact, at least in the case of creatures, I am suspicious of the distinction between active and passive powers itself; see Heil (2012: ch. 6) and Wahlberg (2019) for further discussion.

<sup>4</sup> For discussion of these questions from a dispositionalist perspective, see Adams (2018), Gasser and Quitterer (2015), Göcke (2015), Page (2015), and Schultz and D'Andrea-Winslow (2017).

After a few preliminary remarks and clarifications, I present on-hand accounts of powers and show they fail to model divine power. Then I provide what I take to be a promising and informative account of divine power, based in part on teleological and primitivist accounts of power. In brief, I suggest that divine power is understood best as a primitively (self-)directed, irreducible feature or aspect of the divine essence that lacks stimulus conditions or manifestation partners. One upshot of the proposal is that, should some theists be humeans about the creaturely realm, they must accept irreducible power in at least one instance.

## 1. Some Preliminaries

Before starting in earnest, allow me some preliminaries and to head-off some initial objections. First, the God I have in mind is the God Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas, the God of classical theism. I take God to be simple, atemporally eternal, immutable, impassible, infinite, to exist *a se, et cetera*. I mention this for clarity and completeness, but should note that a neo-classical conception of God countenancing only some of these attributes is sufficient for my arguments to go through.<sup>5</sup> Second, I understand a power or disposition to be a capacity or ability, not a mere tendency or liability. Another way of putting this is that I believe powers necessitate their manifestations; it is physically (and metaphysically) impossible for a lump of sugar to fail to dissolve in a cup of hot coffee—solubility doesn't just increase the *probability* that a lump of sugar will dissolve.<sup>6</sup>

(i) But given a classical conception of God, you might wonder whether it is worthwhile to try to understand God's power as something like a creature's powers. If God is radically different from creation, perhaps divine power is radically different from creaturely power; perhaps divine power is *just not the same sort of thing* as creaturely power. If so, the current project is beset by an unfounded sort of anthropomorphism (Gleeson 2010, cf. Pearce 2019). In response, I do think God's power is radically different from ours, inasmuch as God can do things that we cannot, like create *ex nihilo*, and inasmuch as God's power is infinite and ours is finite. But I do not think the core notion of power is radically different in God and in creatures. For, both God and creatures can make a causal difference

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<sup>5</sup> Should you find yourself wondering, "But why in the world would I *grant* you classical theism?" you can simply take my argument as a conditional: if classical theism is true, then this is what divine power must be.

<sup>6</sup> For discussion and defense of dispositional necessitarianism, see Heil (2015), Marmodoro (2015), and Williams (2014); cf. Hannegan (2016). For arguments against necessitarianism, see McKittrick (2018: ch. 11), Mumford and Anjum (2011: ch. 3), and Schrenk (2010). Note that, even if one denies necessitarianism in cases of creaturely power, it would be very odd to deny it in the case of the divine: God is not the sort of being whose efforts may be stopped, or whose manifestation 'success rate' is less than 1.

in the world, and this just is to be causally efficacious, to have power. So, I follow Aquinas in predicating the same terms of God and creatures *analogically*. We can say literally true things about God, but must note that, in virtue of his transcendence, our predications do not carry *entirely* the same meaning (Clarke 2001: ch. 3, Davies 2012).

(ii) You might also object that, since God is radically different from creation, it just doesn't matter if on-hand accounts of powers prove unsatisfactory in the case of divine power. Even if divine power is the same sort of thing as creaturely power, to think that it should fit neatly within on-hand accounts of powers is asking for too much. In almost all theistic metaphysical systems, God is the exception to the rule: for instance, theistic hylomorphists take substances to composites of form *and matter*, but claim that God is a substance that is pure form, and so, an exception to the rule. So why think it is a flaw of on-hand accounts of creaturely power if they cannot model God's power?

In response, I do not think it is problematic if an adequate account of divine power fails to fit neatly with (or is an exception to) accounts of powers on-hand. Indeed, in at least some respects, an account of divine power will *certainly* diverge from accounts of creaturely power. But my aim is not to show that when accounting for God's power, some accounts of creaturely powers prove inadequate, or that they cannot admit of amendment so as to be satisfactory. My goal is just to try to begin to make sense of divine power *with* on-hand accounts of creaturely power. It just happens that I think many accounts of creaturely power fail to model God's power. This may or may not be a strike against such accounts in general, but I leave that discussion for another time.

(iii) Many accounts of powers take them to be properties of a sort. On some accounts, powers are properties grounded in categorical or occurrent bases (Prior, Pargetter, and Jackson 1982), on other accounts, there are purely dispositional properties lacking categorical bases (Shoemaker 1980), and yet still on other accounts, powers are one 'side' or 'aspect' of properties (Martin and Heil 1999). Whatever your preferred view, it seems that if you are to have powers, you must have properties. But on a classical conception of the divine, God is not propertied; God has no metaphysical composition at all. So how could such a God have power?

In response, note that not all accounts take powers to be (grounded in or aspects of) properties; there are nominalist accounts of power according to which substances are powerful 'through' themselves, not through their properties (Whittle 2009, 2016). While I'm not here

endorsing such a position in the case of creatures, given that I believe God is not characterized by properties (nor *is* a property), I must accept that at least one substance is powerful through itself, assuming, as I do, that God is a substance.

## 2. Ontological Foundations of Powers

A lump of sugar has the power to dissolve in a cup of hot coffee. That is, a lump of sugar is intrinsically such that when placed in a cup of hot coffee, it dissolves; it is somehow directed at or causally ready for the manifestation of being dissolved. The following accounts attempt to provide an ontological foundation for this directedness of powers.

While most believe that we should and can provide truthmakers for our disposition talk, not everyone believes that we should countenance dispositions in our fundamental ontology. Although it might be odd for a humean to think that, deep down ontologically, God lacks power but ‘acts’ in a seemingly powerful way, it will be useful to examine accounts of power that are less than fully realist. I do not take up accounts of the semantics for dispositional ascriptions because, as should be clear by now, my interest is in their *ontological* foundations.<sup>7</sup> After canvassing several quasi-humean accounts, I take up robust or realist accounts of powers.

### 3.1. Quasi-Humean Accounts of Power

(i) D.M. Armstrong (1986) rejects irreducibly dispositional properties; for him, the only natural properties are causally inert categorical or occurrent properties, putatively paradigm cases of which include shape and mass. He claims that the sugar will dissolve because the relevant categorical properties of sugar and hot coffee are related by a second-order necessitating relation (what he identifies as a law of nature). There is some two-place relation  $N(,)$  such that one categorical property  $G$  (dissolving) will follow of necessity upon the instantiation of another categorical property  $F$  (crystalline structure), should the right conditions obtain (being placed in hot coffee):  $N(F, G)$ . If this is right, it is necessary that the sugar will dissolve in the hot coffee, but it is not because of the intrinsic, causal natures of sugar and coffee, but because of some external governing

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<sup>7</sup> For discussion of the semantic side of the dispositionalist literature, see Choi and Fara (2018: §1); cf. Williams (2019: §3.2).

law.<sup>8</sup> The upshot is that first- and second-order categorical properties and relations make disposition talk true.

This account of dispositions straightforwardly fails to model divine power.<sup>9</sup> If ‘sugar has the power to dissolve in hot coffee’ is made true by external governing laws, fine; but God is not *governed* by anything. The exercise of divine power cannot, on pain of violating aseity and the basic idea that God is responsible for governing the world, be the result of a second-order property ‘forcing God’s hand.’ Moreover, second-order necessitating properties are creatures, and it is absurd to say that creatures govern God’s action. So Armstrong’s quasi-humean account of the foundation of dispositionality just doesn’t work for us here.

(ii) E.J. Lowe provides a more promising quasi-humean account of powers.<sup>10</sup> For Lowe (2006: ch. 8), dispositionality is to be analyzed in terms of predication; he is suspicious that there could be two types of property, categorical and dispositional (cf. Mellor 2000: 767-769). When we claim that the sugar has the disposition or power to dissolve, Lowe thinks we’re claiming that the sugar is the kind of thing that can dissolve. Initially, this sounds uninformative, but for Lowe, kinds are substantial universals that objects instantiate. And, like Aristotle of the *Categories* (see Perin 2007), Lowe thinks these substantial universals are characterized by attributes, property universals like ‘being dissolved.’ So sugar is disposed to dissolve in hot coffee because it belongs to a kind that is characterized by the attribute ‘being dissolved.’ The difference, for Lowe, between categorical predication and dispositional predication is that, in the case of the former, an object is characterized by a mode—by an occurrent, particular instance of some attribute—and, in the latter case, an object just belongs to a kind that is characterized by an attribute, a property universal not instantiated by the object. In short, Lowe thinks the sugar is soluble because it stands in a property relation

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<sup>8</sup> The necessity of concern here is physical or natural, not metaphysical. The range of what, if anything, is metaphysically necessary for Armstrong is much narrower than, say, the range of what dispositional essentialists take to be metaphysically necessary. See Armstrong (1989).

<sup>9</sup> All of the quasi-humean accounts I consider rely essentially on properties, and so, violate the simplicity I assume of God. However, this by itself is a relatively uninteresting reason to reject such accounts. So, I do not mention this in my critiques, but simply register the point here.

<sup>10</sup> While Lowe seemed to take powers seriously, I do not think he was a thoroughgoing realist about them. For Lowe, properties are not intrinsically powerful or dispositional. Socrates doesn’t have the power to think because he is propertied in a certain way, but only because the substantial kind he instantiates is characterized by the attribute of thinking. So, for Lowe, it seems particulars have powers only inasmuch as they are related to kinds and attributes; powers are property-relation complexes. To my lights, this doesn’t sound like realist accounts of power according to which particulars are intrinsically modally and causally charged. For further discussion, see Dumsday (2016).

complex, one constituent of which is the uninstantiated (by this very lump of sugar) attribute of ‘being dissolved.’

Like Armstrong’s view, Lowe’s account cannot make sense of divine power. For Lowe, the sugar having the power to dissolve means that being dissolved is a way the sugar can be, but isn’t currently. But applied to God, this conception of power flouts impassability, eternity, perfection, and the classical idea that God is infinite, not limited to any particular way of being. Impassability and eternity because God not being some way he could be implies that God can change, and therefore, is subject to time. And perfection because for God to be able to change implies that God is not fully actual, not in possession of all of his being at once. On a classical conception, God is, ‘right now’ and all at once, all the ways God can be; God has all of his being from all of eternity.<sup>11</sup>

But you might reply that God very well could be different ways without flouting these classical attributes; perhaps in creating one world rather than another, God ‘could have been different,’ and this relies in no way on anything but God himself. In response, note that, on this objection, God can’t himself be different ontologically in creating one world rather than another; for God’s being isn’t impacted in any way by what he creates. So, God doesn’t instantiate different properties because of what world he creates (setting aside simplicity for the moment). But, at this point, what work is Lowe’s account doing? If, per Lowe, power is understood in terms of properties some object can but doesn’t currently instantiate, it is unclear how the current proposal salvages his account.<sup>12</sup>

(iii) Matthew Tugby (2013) has advanced the view that dispositions are platonic property-relation complexes.<sup>13</sup> His account is motivated by finding a satisfactory answer to Armstrong’s modal inversion objection to dispositionalism while doing justice to two dispositionalist platitudes:

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<sup>11</sup> Moreover, it is unclear whether God can belong to a kind, as kind-membership is understood by Lowe. For Lowe, if S belongs to K, then S rigidly ontologically depends on K, and this seems to flatly flout aseity. For further discussion, see Lowe (2006: ch. 3) and Renz (forthcoming).

<sup>12</sup> Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for prompting me to consider this objection.

<sup>13</sup> Tugby seems to take powers seriously too, and while I don’t wish to call his power ‘credentials’ into question, I can’t help but think his account is not wholly realist. Like Lowe, Tugby thinks powers are relational, and this seems to make them less ontologically genuine than full-blooded realists take them to be. For Armstrong, Lowe, and Tugby, properties are powerful if and only if they are properly linked up to other properties. But a property is generally thought to be powerful absolutely, that is, in the medieval sense of whether or not it is related in any particular way to some other entity. For discussion and critique of this aspect of Tugby’s account, see Oderberg (2017: 2399-2404); cf. Heil (2003: 79-81, 122-124) and Martin (2008: 12-13).

(1) that dispositions are intrinsic features of objects, and (2) that dispositions exist whether or not they ever manifest.

Armstrong's (1997: 79; cf. Handfield 2005: 452-456) modal inversion objection suggests that dispositions are ontologically suspicious because they point toward manifestations that do not exist. According to dispositionalists, the lump of sugar has the power to dissolve whether or not it ever dissolves, and that this is a matter of its intrinsic nature (platitudes 1 and 2). But suppose the lump of sugar never mingles with a cup of hot coffee, and no lump of sugar anywhere ever does, and so, that there is never an instance of dissolving. Armstrong thinks that the solubility of the sugar nonetheless 'points toward' the property of being dissolved. So, dispositions point toward non-existent or Meinongian entities, and this is strange, to say the least.

Tugby's reply is to claim that manifestation 'targets' like dissolving exist whether or not they are ever instantiated; they are platonic properties. So the lump of sugar points toward a dissolving manifestation because its properties are somehow related to the platonic property of being dissolved. He ends up with the view that for the sugar to be disposed to dissolve is for it to instantiate a platonic universal ('crystalline structure') that is properly related to another platonic universal, 'being dissolved.'

Tugby's account, while elegant, won't work as a model for divine power. According to Tugby, objects are powerful only inasmuch as the properties they instantiate are properly related to other properties. The relation instantiated properties bear to other properties is the ground of power, not properties on their own. So, even if God did instantiate properties, he would not be powerful unless his properties were properly related to other properties. But this seems to violate aseity.<sup>14</sup> For how could God be wholly independent if he could act only if something besides him existed? How can God exist *a se* if beings outside him condition his power, indeed, *ground* or *constitute* his being powerful?<sup>15</sup> While there are general concerns about the compatibility of theism and platonism (see Craig 2016; cf. van Inwagen 2009), the tension between Tugby's account and divine

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<sup>14</sup> Plus, were God to instantiate some property, he would do so it seems by falling under, and so ontologically depending on, a platonic critter, and this seems to violate aseity too; but cf. Panchuk (2016).

<sup>15</sup> Thanks to Jon Kvanvig for helpful discussion on this point.

power is acute. For, not only would platonic fauna exist simply ‘side-by-side’ with God, they would *ground* his power, and this flouts the basic conception of aseity at work in classical theism.<sup>16</sup>

### 3.2. Realist Accounts of Power

What distinguishes quasi-humean accounts of power from realist accounts of power is that the former take powers to be reducible or non-basic while the latter deny this. That is, a realist denies that powers can be understood in terms of a proper linking of categorical properties, or anything of the like. For the realist, powers are ontological bedrock (Vetter 2015: 24, Williams 2019: §3.1).

Given this, you might wonder how much of an ‘account’ a realist can give. If by ‘account,’ one means a reductive analysis, then realists don’t give accounts of powers at all. But realists do explicate the notion of directedness, and so, try to put some meat on the bones of powers as properties ‘directed at’ manifestations. Here I survey two broad sorts of realist accounts, one teleological and one flatly primitive. In the end, I don’t think these two sorts of accounts are very different, but examining both will hopefully give us a better grasp on the notion of a power’s directedness.

(i) David Oderberg (2017) seeks to make clear the notion of directedness without an appeal to intentionality, which some think would make dispositions, a sort of physical property, quasi-mental (see Mumford 1999).<sup>17</sup> He proposes the ancient and medieval notion of a *telos* or final cause as the best explanation of what directedness amounts to. For Oderberg (2017: 2395-2397; cf. Kroll 2017: 22-28), a final cause is not a ‘striving’ or ‘desiring,’ but rather a delimiting or circumscribing of possible activity. A lump of sugar has dissolving as an end because part of its essence is to dissolve (in the right circumstances or when mingled with the right partners). Oderberg cashes out further this notion with the idea of *selective indifference*. Selective indifference “involves two components: (i) a specific *range* of possible manifestations of a power, and hence a specific range of possible kinds of behavior by the object having that power; (ii) *indifference* with respect to the circumstances of manifestation within that range” (2017: 2394). Sugar may dissolve, but may not fly (i), and sugar dissolves whether it is placed in hot coffee or water (ii).

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<sup>16</sup> Coincidentally, Sarah Adams (2015) has argued that any classical account of omnipotence will flout aseity inasmuch as it makes God’s power extrinsic to him.

<sup>17</sup> Teleological accounts of dispositionality have also been defended by William Hannegan (2018) and Nick Kroll (2017). While the three accounts are different in important ways, I take up Oderberg’s account as representative of the teleological strategy in general.

With the notion of specific indifference in hand, Oderberg claims that ends or manifestation targets are built into the essence of disposition bearers, and that they may be considered, ontologically, as higher-order properties governing first-order properties. And so, Oderberg (2017: 2397-2398) sums up his view:

The reason for salt's dissolution in water is the final cause of its behaviour: salt is governed by a higher-order property in virtue of which it behaves in water in a certain way. That higher-order property is part of the *essence* of salt, what scholastics—following Aristotle's fourfold theory of causation—called the 'formal cause' of salt. In other words, it just is part of the essence of salt to be soluble in water: when we isolate any power or cluster of powers in virtue of which a substance behaves in certain ways, we are thereby isolating one or more final causes of the substance's behaviour.

So, sugar is directed at dissolving (among infinitely many other manifestations) because its essence is in part constituted by a higher-order property 'nudging' some of its first-order properties (crystalline structure) towards other first-order properties (being dissolved), should the right circumstances obtain, or should the right partners be properly mingled. And, contra Armstrong, Lowe, and Tugby, this directedness is wholly non-relational: "That salt needs water in order to dissolve in it does not entail that there must *be* any water for salt to be soluble, any more than my needing sounds in order to hear entails that there must *be* sounds for me to have the power of hearing" (2017: 2401). This is because selective indifference, and so, finality, is part of the essence of the disposition bearer, so "[u]nless the power bearer has a relational essence—in other words, is such that to be the kind of thing it is it must be in an actual relation to some other thing—then the power bearer's directedness is a wholly intrinsic affair, a matter of how it is built to operate" (2017: 2400).

There is much to recommend this proposal. It partially elucidates the idea of directedness by appealing to the pedigreed notion of a natural end. It also makes directedness a wholly intrinsic affair of dispositions and their bearers, not some relation to realistically construed manifestation targets. This allows the account to respect aseity, as God's power isn't grounded in a reified manifestation target.

But you might have some worries when applying this sort of account to God. First, Oderberg's account relies on first and higher order properties, and as such is not compatible with

the classical theism I am assuming. But I suspect that Oderberg's account could be amended so as to do away with properties and deal with God's simple essence only. Here is how.<sup>18</sup>

First, I understand an essence as the *what it is to be* a thing, following Aristotle, Aquinas, and others (see Clarke 2001: ch. 5, Fine 1994, and Lowe 2018). Importantly, an essence is not a property. If the essence of a horse is the what it is to be a horse, and properties depend on substances or things, how could there be a subject, a horse, to possess the property of what it is to be a horse? This would require there to be a subject of some kind to possess a property that makes the subject the very thing it is, and this is clearly absurd.<sup>19</sup>

Now, if God is simple, his essence *is* his existence, and, of course, he lacks any metaphysical composition, such as property possession. So how could God possess higher order properties? One suggestion is just to treat God's simple essence as both first and higher order property, and the 'possession' relation as self-directedness. Metaphysically, there is just a simple God; there is no genuine possessing of himself by himself. But, in turning towards himself, there is a directionality similar to the directionality possessed, in Oderberg's view, by creaturely powers. So God is directed at himself. In my view, there needn't be a prejudice against essences in favor of properties; if a property can possess a (higher order) property, why can't an essence? And why can't an essence possess *itself* as a higher order 'property'? While I don't wish to imply Oderberg would endorse such a view, I think it is a plausible option before us.

Another concern is whether the notion of an end somehow implies that God seeks or strives for something, or is somehow incomplete. For, if God is infinite, perfect, and impassible, why would God desire, strive, or need anything besides himself?

I think we can adequately address this worry and that a response to it fits neatly with the above amendment of Oderberg's view. It seems reasonable to think, with Aristotle (*Meta.* XII.7 1072<sup>b</sup> 20-24) and some medieval Aristotelians, that God is his own end. The end or aim of God is his perfect and infinite essence, and so, God needn't be directed at anything beyond himself. This sits well with the classical ideas that God somehow rejoices in his perfect, infinite being and creates through knowing and willing himself (Clarke 2001: 238).

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<sup>18</sup> Many thanks to anonymous reviewers for prompting me to expand my discussion here.

<sup>19</sup> For a recent defense of an account of essence I'm sympathetic to, and especially the role essence plays in property possession, see Oderberg (2011).

So, in virtue of something like a process of elimination up to this point, I suggest we accept tentatively the basic idea that directedness “is just a way of characterising part of the very essence of any object possessing a power...” (Oderberg 2017: 2393). So, a power is a part or the whole of the essence of a being that somehow encodes the ways in which it may (may not, and must) behave. The question now is whether flatly primitivist accounts of power give us any more than this, and, if they do, whether they are substantially different from teleological accounts and whether either account is wholly capable of modeling divine power.

(ii) Those who espouse what I call the flatly primitivist view include John Heil (2003, 2012), C.B. Martin (2008), C.B. Martin and Karl Pfeifer (1986), U.T. Place (1996), and George Molnar (2003). While these views are often characterized as ‘intentionalist’ because they argue physical properties have a directedness similar to mental states, I believe their views are better described as ‘primitivist’ because they refuse to model ontologically a power’s directedness in any way. They have it that a power’s directedness is a wholly intrinsic affair and non-relational. A power is a directed property, where there is no directedness relation and no ontologically reified ‘target’ at which the property is directed. So while these authors make use of the notion of intentionality, they nonetheless take the directionality of powers to be ontologically basic. Heil and Martin sum up nicely the contours of the primitivist view:

Imagine a key with a particular shape. The key would open locks of a particular (complementary) shape. This power is intrinsic to the key. If the key ‘points beyond’ itself to locks of a particular sort, it does so in virtue of its intrinsic features. This is what it is to be a key of this shape. The key is (as Martin would put it) ‘ready to go’. We can say this without committing ourselves to the existence of possible locks. The truth-maker for ‘this key would open a lock of kind *K*’ is not the key, a possible lock of kind *K*, and a relation between the key and *K*. The truth-maker for the assertion is just the key itself’s being a particular way: its being rigid and its possessing a particular shape. (Heil 2003: 124)

Causal dispositions are directive and selective—that is, they are dispositions *for* and *to* some kinds of manifestation rather than others—and so they are, whether physical or mental, in their very *nature* directive, projective, discriminatory readinesses *for* and *to* what is external to themselves... Dispositions or readiness potentials exist embodying programs for, *not* for, and even prohibitive *against* an infinity of manifestations... (Martin 2008: 59-60)

Powers are properties of a subject that direct it toward some type of manifestation, and this directedness implies neither that the manifestation exist somehow, nor that the power is in any ontologically serious way *related* to the manifestation. The sugar is, as Martin suggests, *programmed* to dissolve in hot coffee, and this is an ontologically basic feature of the sugar's intrinsic nature (see also Ross 2008: ch. 7, Williams 2019: §4.3).

As I see it, the primitivist view as explicated by Heil, Martin, and others is strikingly similar to the teleological view propounded by Oderberg. Both camps deny that a power's directedness is a relation to some reified manifestation, and both camps flesh out directedness in terms of a range of possible behavior grounded in a power's nature or essence. While not as explicitly essentialist as Oderberg, Heil seems to make this latter point in the above quote: "This [having the power to unlock a type of lock] is *what it is to be* a key of this shape" (my emphasis).

#### 4. An Ontological Account of Divine Power

Allow me to suggest, for our purposes here, that teleological and primitivist accounts of power differ only in that the former have a label for the metaphysically basic directedness both views countenance.<sup>20</sup> Henceforth, I treat them as one. The question now is whether or not, given that the quasi-humean accounts so far considered cannot work as models for God's power, a realist account can adequately model divine power. I think a realist account can, and I think developing such an account is a matter of tweaking the teleological and primitivist accounts we've just encountered.

First and foremost, any account will need to do away with properties. As I suggested above, I think Oderberg's account can do away with properties. Rather than talk of first and higher order properties constitutive of a thing's essence, we should, when thinking about God, just talk of God's simple essence. God's power to create and sustain reality, answer prayers, *et cetera* are not properties constitutive of God's essence, but are simply different ways he can express his essence. And as I mentioned in §2 above, there are accounts of power according to which substances are powerful through themselves and not through their properties, and so, if God has no properties, we have the makings for a framework for understanding a simple God's power.

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<sup>20</sup> I do not, however, want to suggest that defenders of the primitivist view would be happy with the teleological machinery in Oderberg's account (or that Oderberg would be happy with the commitments of the primitivist account). My suggestion to treat them as one is just for my purposes here.

At this point you might object that since a power is at least partly individuated by the manifestations it is directed at, and since God can create, answer prayers, *et cetera* that it seems God has more than one power. But this violates my presumption of divine simplicity, even if powers aren't properties.

There are two responses to this sort of objection. The first is to question whether God is genuinely manifesting different powers when he creates, answers prayers, *et cetera*. Perhaps creating and answering prayers, however distinct they may seem to us, are one and the same type of manifestation of God's power? For instance, is the act of answering a child's prayer asking that their parents bring home a puppy really different from the act of creating a world in which that child's parents do in fact bring home a puppy? I'm not sure I see the difference here, but pursuing this line of response any further takes us too far afield. Second, it is plausible that one and the same power can manifest itself in different ways. To borrow an example from Heil, a round ball can roll on an incline, appear round visually, and leave a circular impression on a pillow, and it can do all of these things in virtue of a single property, its roundness. Metaphysicians claim this means that some powers are *multi-track*: one and the same power can bring about many, if not infinitely many, different manifestations (see Vetter 2013, Williams 2011).<sup>21</sup> If this is right, then there is no need to claim that God has as many powers as types of manifestations he can bring about. Following Heil (2012: 120-122), we might claim that God's power manifests in different ways with different manifestation partners (or with different triggers): God's power in concert with a petitionary prayer yields the manifestation of God's answering that prayer, and God's power in concert with, say, a virtuous agent yields a beneficial final judgment.<sup>22</sup>

So, suppose that God's power to create and sustain reality, say, is an end or manifestation at which God's essence is directed, full-stop. What more needs to be done? Beyond doing away with properties, we need to say something about the stimulus conditions in or manifestation partners

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<sup>21</sup> While I find the idea that some, if not all, powers are multi-track quite plausible, I should note that such a position is not entirely uncontroversial. Some prominent powers theorists reject the existence of multi-track powers, e.g. Lowe (2010) and Molnar (2003).

<sup>22</sup> Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for encouraging me to expand my discussion here, and for raising a number of fascinating questions regarding the multi-track nature of God's power, particularly whether or not such a nature implies God's power is complex, not simple. A brief response: I do not think so. The multiplicity of multi-track powers comes from the multiplicity of their manifestation partners or stimuli, not their intrinsic nature. Sugar tastes sweet to those with properly functioning palates, and not to those with malfunctioning palates, but the sugar is one and the same. I discuss this question more, and amend my account slightly, below.

with which God's power manifests. For, God did create, but didn't need to; God's power could have stayed dormant, unmanifested. So what 'triggered' God's power to create?

Right away, we should be clear that without supposing creation to already exist, there cannot be anything separate from God that triggered his power to create. So, whatever 'triggered' God's power to create has to be something within God in a sense, and so, be God himself. Second, we cannot think, whatever the trigger be, that it somehow nudged or forced God to create. This is because God chose to create freely, and because, I am assuming, God is impassible.

So what could it be that sprung God's power into action? I think there are two plausible answers that work within the current teleological-primitivist account and respect classical theism. First, following Augustine, Aquinas, and others, we might claim that God's power is somehow triggered by or mutually manifests with divine ideas. Traditionally, divine ideas were taken to be exemplars or models according to which God created (see Doolan 2008). You could also conceive of them as possible worlds, or just the various possible outcomes of God's power, that is, what is within the range of God's omnipotence.

But two worries now present themselves. First, you might think a dualism between God and his ideas violates simplicity. However, there are recent and promising attempts to show that divine ideas do not violate divine simplicity (for example, Panchuk forthcoming), and I am content deferring to these and future research for now. However, the more serious worry is to understand how the presence of a divine idea triggers God's power. Since God did not have to create, and since divine ideas would exist whether or not God created, it is unclear what triggering work such ideas could do. For, triggers (or mutual manifestation partners) are such that, should they come on the scene, a power will of necessity manifest. Moreover, if divine ideas are possible worlds or exemplars of all of what's metaphysically possible, and they all exist in the mind of God, how does the current proposal explain why God exercised his power to create *this* world rather than some other? So, something is missing from the current proposal.

The second proposal for what might trigger God's power can be modeled on a case considered by Heil (2012: 124-126). A radium atom spontaneously decays and emits, among other things,  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$  particles. There is no telling when the radium will decay. Nor is there any trigger or manifestation partner that when mingled with the radium results in its decaying; the manifestation of its power to decay is akin to, Heil says, an Aristotelian unmoved mover's power to put others in

motion. So, it seems we have a concrete example of power manifestations that lack triggers or manifestation partners. We might claim that God's power is just like this: it lacks any triggers or manifestation partners. It just manifests, full-stop.

One worry you might have with this proposal, if taking the analogy with radium seriously, is that it seems to make the manifestation of God's power inexplicable. If the science is right, it is indeterminate when exactly the radium will decay. But we don't want to claim that the manifestation of God's power is inexplicable; that would seem to make creation random, unintelligible.

I have two responses: first, there is a temporal disanalogy between the radium and God. With Augustine and many others, I think it is just wrongheaded to ask 'when' God creates, for God created time itself. So, there is no indeterminacy or randomness as to 'when' God creates. Second, even in the case of the radium, it isn't that there is no sufficient reason for when the radium decays. While the *exact* time at which the radium decays appears genuinely undetermined, there is a sufficient reason for the *overall rate* at which it decays. This is just the half-life of the radium, and so, a feature of its essence or nature. If this is right, although the exact time at which some radium emits an  $\alpha$  or  $\beta$  particle is indeterminate, there is, grounded in the radium's nature, a sufficient reason for its emission of  $\alpha$  or  $\beta$  particles generally. And we can say just the same about God: the manifestation of God's power is not indeterminate or random in any sense, but grounded in his nature.

But these responses don't settle things entirely. For, we might think, even if God's power requires no trigger or manifestation partner, there still must be a sufficient reason for its manifestation *at all*, or in general. We can say that God's essence explains or provides a sufficient reason for how he created, but we still don't know *why* he created, given that he didn't need to. The radium must decay, but God needn't create.

Here I think we must remember that God is an agent, that God has a will. We shouldn't think of God's power as just like the sugar's power to dissolve. The sugar and its power are non-agential, whereas God is an agent: the sugar cannot give any input on whether or not it will manifest its power to dissolve, but God can (though not for a power to dissolve!). Indeed, on the classical conception of God I'm working with, God's will *is* his power (and God is his will, and is his power). This doesn't mean that I think God's will, his act of choosing to create, is the trigger for or manifestation partner with which his power is activated. What it means, for our purposes here at

least, is that God's *willing* is the exercise of his power. So, God's power manifests not because of some stimulus from without, as is the case with most creaturely powers, but because he wills it to.<sup>23</sup>

Now, we must still answer why God's power results in one manifestation rather than another, for example, why God created *this* world rather than *some other* world. If God's power is multi-track, how are we to understand the conditions under which it brings about numerous different effects? Since God himself is the only candidate for a 'trigger' of divine power, and his willing is what explains the exercise of that power at all, there can be no difference in manifestation because of difference in trigger or manifestation partner (as I initially suggested above). So, metaphysically, what explains how the same power and same 'trigger' can bring about different results?

Here, again, we must note that God is an agent. God's power may bring about various manifestations because he may *will it to*. So, God created this world rather than that world because he willed *this* world rather than *that* world. While this may seem like a shallow explanation, it shouldn't if we take it that God's will alone is enough to 'trigger' his power in general. The nature of a will is to choose, and if God can choose to manifest his power in the first place, it seems natural that he can choose *how* to manifest it. Perhaps you could ask how God 'sees' or 'imagines' what he creates, or from what options he chooses, and here I think the divine ideas may play an important role: God cognizes one world in particular and wills to manifest his power to create it, rather than some other world.

But even if this is a satisfactory response to how God can manifest his power in different ways, it is still reasonable to wonder *why* God manifests his power in the particular ways he does. Here, I think we can take recourse in God's perfect goodness, wisdom, and justness. Even though God has the power to annihilate all of reality (one way to exercise his power), he continues to sustain it (another way to exercise his power) because he is infinitely good, wise, and just. While the infinite power of God might sound like a power to do anything (logically possible) whatsoever, we must remember that God's perfect goodness and the rest will 'guide' the manifestation of that power in only some directions.

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<sup>23</sup> As Aquinas writes: "For God does things because He wills to do so; yet the power to do them does not come from His will, but from His nature" (*ST*, I, q25. a5. ad1.)

If this is on track, I think we're in a position to sum up the preceding discussion and formulate, in rough outline, the beginnings of an ontological account of divine power. *Divine power is a wholly intrinsic, non-relational, primitive directedness of God's essence whose manifestation depends on (but really just is) God's free choice to create.* We can understand this directedness as a divine self-directed telos, or a flatly primitive feature of the divine-essence—again, for our purposes here, I think this difference is substantially terminological.

You might worry that this account just is the classical conception of divine creation (and so power) as God knowing/willing/loving himself, and so, makes for no genuine progress in understanding God's power. But I take it that my account's fitting neatly with the classical account of creation is a good-making feature, not a defect. My goal has been to provide an ontological account or foundation of divine power, just as many metaphysicians have tried to provide ontological accounts or foundations of the directedness of creaturely power. My goal has not been to break new ground on a metaphysical account of creation. Given this, if an adequate ontological account of divine power *diverged* from the classical conception of creation (assuming one is already onboard with this conception), it would be problematic, not a virtue of the account.

## 5. Conclusion and Upshot

Much has been written about how God creates and sustains the world, how God might intervene in the world, how God might govern the world, and what God's being all-powerful amounts to. But little has been written directly about what, deep down ontologically, God's power is. I have attempted to do so here, and my conclusion is that God's power is understood best as an intrinsic, non-relational, primitive directedness grounded in the divine essence, whose manifestation depends on God's free choice. Again, I don't take myself to have broken new ground here, but do take myself to have called attention to an intriguing lacuna in the literature, and to have begun filling it. More work needs to be done to make the above account precise, and more still on the relations such an account bears to the above questions regarding intervention, omnipotence, and the like.

An interesting upshot worth noting is that the only account of a power's directedness that is suitable for the case of God is one where that directedness is taken to be primitive. That is, quasi-humean accounts of power, accounts that reduce intrinsic directedness to property-relation complexes and the like, just can't model divine power (at least without flouting some classical and neo-classical divine attributes). This means that, should a theist be a humean about the creaturely

realm, they must be a full-blooded Aristotelian about the divine realm. While this might not seem like much of a bullet to bite to those already in the realist, Aristotelian camp, I find it suggestive for the overall prospects of a broadly-humean metaphysic.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> I would like to thank Niklas Andersson, William Bell, Billy Dunaway, John Heil, Jon Kvanvig, and Jeremy Skrzypek for very helpful comments on previous drafts of this paper.

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