

Independence

BY HERMAN BAVINCK

Now this independence of God is more or less recognized by all humans. Pagans, to be sure, degrade the divine by drawing it down to the level of the creature and teach a theogony; however, behind and above their gods they often again assume the existence of a power to which everything is subject in an absolute sense. Many of them speak of nature, chance, fate, or fortune as a power superior to all else; and philosophers tend to speak of God as the Absolute. In Christian theology this attribute of God was called his independence (ἀυτάρκεια), aseity, all-sufficiency, greatness. In the East, a number of terms were used: “(θεος ἀναρχος) God, without beginning or cause, unbegotten,” and theologians preferably spoke of God as “(αὐτογεννητος) the self-generate, (αὐτοφυης) self-begotten, (αὐτουσιος) self-existent, (αὐτοθεος) self-divine, (αὐτοφως) self-luminous, (αὐτοσοφια) self-wise, (αὐτοαρετη) self-virtuous, (αὐταγαθος) self-excellent, and so on.”² All that God is, he is of himself. By virtue of himself he is goodness, holiness, wisdom, life, light, truth, and so on. As stated earlier, the church fathers usually followed Philo in grounding their description of God in the name yhwh. That was the name that described his essence par excellence. God was the Existent One. His whole identity was wrapped up in the name: “I will be what I will be.” All God’s other perfections are derived from this name. He is supreme (sumum) in everything: supreme being (esse), supreme goodness (bonum), supreme truth (verum), supreme beauty (pulchrum). He is the perfect, highest, the most excellent being, “than whom nothing better can exist or be thought.” All being is contained in him. He is a boundless ocean of being. “If you have said of God that he is good, great, blessed, wise or any other such quality, it is summed up in a single word: he is (Est). Indeed, for him to be is to be all these things. Even if you add a hundred such qualities, you have not gone outside the boundaries of his being. Having said them all, you have added nothing; having said none of them, you have subtracted nothing.”³ Scholasticism as a whole fell in line with this view,⁴ also treating this attribute under the name of the “infinity” or “spiritual greatness” of God,⁵ or under that of the “aseity” of God, meaning that as the “supreme substance,” God is “what he is through or by his own self.”⁶ Later Roman Catholic theologians as a rule also proceeded from this aseity or independence.⁷

In this regard the Reformation introduced no change. Luther, too, on the basis of name yhwh, described God as the absolutely existent one and as pure being. Yet, refusing to dwell on abstract metaphysical descriptions, Luther swiftly passed from “the hidden God” (Deus absconditus) to the “God revealed in Christ” (Deus revelatus in Christo).⁸ Melancthon in his *Loci* describes God as “spiritual essence.” While Lutherans usually adopted this description, they often added the qualifying words “infinite,” “subsisting of himself,” or “independent.”⁹ Among the Reformed this perfection of God comes more emphatically to the fore, though the word “aseity” was soon exchanged for that of “independence.” While aseity only expresses God’s self-sufficiency in his existence, independence has a broader sense and implies that God is independent in everything: in his existence, in his perfections, in his decrees, and in his works. Accordingly, while in the past theologians mostly used the name yhwh as their starting point,¹⁰ in later years God’s independence occurs most often as the first of the incommunicable attributes.¹¹

Now when God ascribes this aseity to himself in Scripture, he makes himself known as absolute being, as the one who is in an absolute sense. By this perfection he is at once essentially and absolutely distinct from all creatures. Creatures, after all, do not derive their existence from themselves but from others and so have nothing from themselves; both in their origin and hence in their further development and life, they are absolutely dependent. But as is evident from the word “aseity,” God is exclusively from himself, not in the sense of being self-caused but being from eternity to eternity who he is, being not becoming. God is absolute being, the fullness of being, and therefore also eternally and absolutely independent in his existence, in his perfections, in all his works, the first and the last, the sole cause and final goal of all things. In this aseity of God, conceived not only as having being from himself but also as the fullness of being, all the other perfections are included. They are given with the aseity itself and are the rich and multifaceted development of it. Yet, whereas in the case of this perfection the immeasurable distinction between the Creator and creature stands out vividly and plainly, there is nevertheless a weak analogy in all creatures also of this perfection of God. Pantheism, indeed, cannot acknowledge this, but theism stands for the fact that a creature, though absolutely dependent, nevertheless also has a distinct existence of its own. And implanted in this existence there is “a drive toward self-preservation.” Every creature, to the extent that it shares in existence, fears death, and even the tiniest atom offers resistance to all attempts at annihilating it. Again: it is a shadow of the independent, immutable being of our God.

1 John of Damascus, *The Orthodox Faith*, I, 6ff.; P. Lombard, *Sent.*, I, dist. 2ff.; Bonaventure, *Breviloquium*, I, 2ff.; P. M. Vermigli, *Loci comm.*, 36ff.; F. H. R. Frank, *System der christlichen Wahrheit*, 2 vols. (Erlangen: A. Deichert, 1878–80), I, 151ff.; A. von Oettingen, *Lutherische Dogmatik* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1897–1902), II, 243ff.

2 Cf. J. C. Suicerus, *Thesaurus ecclesiasticus*, s.v. “ἀυτάρκεια.”

3 Bernard de Clairvaux, *De consideratione* (Utrecht: Nicolaus Ketelaer and Gerhardus Leempt, 1473), I, 5, ch. 6.

4 Anselm, *Monologion*, 6; P. Lombard, *Sent.*, I, dist. 8; T. Aquinas, *Summa theol.*, I, qu. 2, art. 3; I, qu. 13, art. 11; idem, *Summa contra gentiles*, I, 43.

5 T. Aquinas, *Summa theol.*, I, qu. 7; idem, *Summa contra gentiles*, I, 43.

6 Anselm, *Monologion*, 6.

7 Dionysius Petavius, “De Deo deque proprietabus,” in *De theologicis dogmatibus*, I, ch. 6; *Theologia Wirceburgensi*, III, 38ff.; G. Perrone, *Prael. theol.*, II, 88–90; J. B. Heinrich, *Dogmatische Theologie*, III, 326; G. Jansen, *Prael. theol.*, II, 26ff. A. Straub, in several articles on “Die Aseität Gottes,” *Philosophisches Jahrbuch* 16–17 (1903–4), properly distinguishes, speaking of the divine essence as basic metaphysical being (ens metaphysicum) and aseity as the first attribute of that being.

8 J. Köstlin, *Luthers Theologie in ihrer geschichtlichen Entwicklung und ihrem inneren Zusammenhange*, 2d ed., 2 vols. (Stuttgart: J. F. Steinkopf, 1901), II, 302ff.

9 H. F. F. Schmid, *The Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, trans. Charles A. Hay and Henry Jacobs, 5th ed. (Philadelphia: United Lutheran Publication House, 1899), §17.

10 A. Hyperius, *Methodi theologiae moralis*, 87, 135; Georg Sohn, *Opera sacrae theologiae*, II, 48; III, 261; Amandus Polanus, *Syn. theol.*, 135.

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