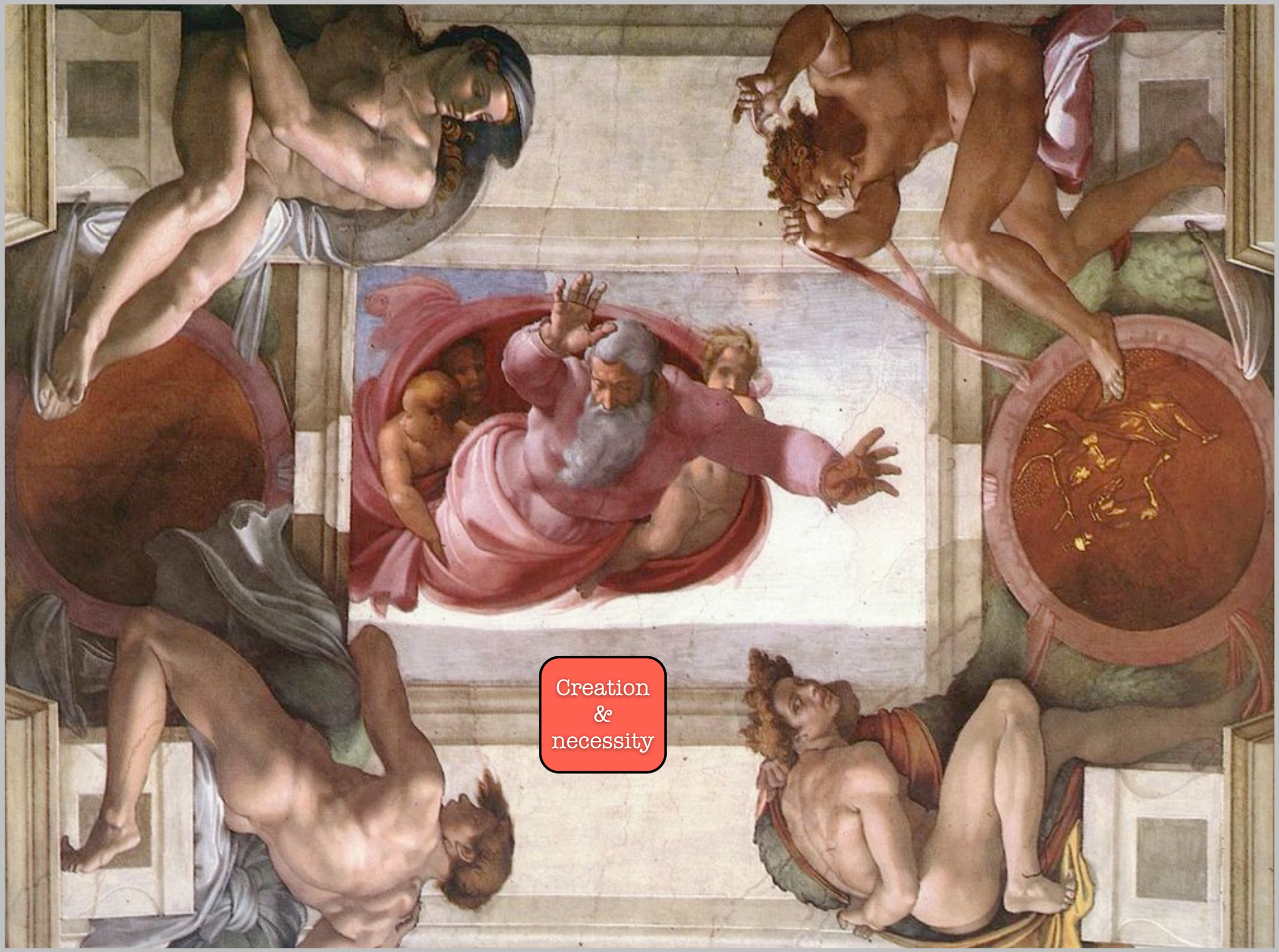

Creation
&
necessity

I believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible.

I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten Son of God, born of the Father before all ages. God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father; through him all things were made. For us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven, and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and became man. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate, he suffered death and was buried, and rose again on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead and his kingdom will have no end.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is adored and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets.

I believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. I confess one Baptism for the forgiveness of sins and I look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.

Today we turn to one of the central claims made about God in the Nicene Creed: that God created "all things visible and invisible."

In the Catechism, creation is described like this:

"We believe that God created the world according to his wisdom. It is not the product of any necessity whatever, nor of blind fate or chance. We believe that it proceeds from God's free will; he wanted to make his creatures share in his being, wisdom and goodness..." (§295)

The point I want to focus on today is the doctrine that God's creation is a free creation; God was not required to create this world, but did so out of free will. This is emphasized in the next passage:

"We believe that God needs no pre-existent thing or any help in order to create, nor is creation any sort of necessary emanation from the divine substance" (§296)

In this emphasis on God's freedom, the Christian doctrine of creation sets itself apart from the Greek view that the world came to be via a kind of necessary emanation from the One.

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This doctrine of creation gives rise to a number of philosophical puzzles. But what I want to focus on today is the doctrine's scope: it's claim that God created all things visible **and invisible**.

What sorts of things are invisible?

Perhaps propositions are an example. Consider the proposition that 2+2=4. Evidently, this proposition is the sort of thing that can be believed – since each of us believe it – and the sort of thing that can be true – since it is true. So it must exist. But it does not seem to be part of the visible world – it's not the sort of thing that one can point to.

In thinking about this, it's important to be clear about the difference between the proposition that 2+2=4 and the sentence, "2+2=4." How might you argue that these are distinct?

The proposition that 2+2=4 is an example of an **abstract object** – something which genuinely exists, but which is not spatiotemporally located. Other examples of abstract objects include numbers, sets, and properties. Abstract objects look like good candidates to fall under the "invisible" part of God's creation.

The proposition that 2+2=4 is an example of an **abstract object** — something which genuinely exists, but which is not spatiotemporally located. Other examples of abstract objects include numbers, sets, and properties. Abstract objects look like good candidates to fall under the "invisible" part of God's creation.

Does it make sense to say that God created these sorts of abstract objects? Let's focus in on a particular instance of this question. Take some proposition which is true. Did God make it true? Is its truth part of God's creation?

In the reading for today, Descartes argues that if we don't answer 'Yes' to this question, then we're unacceptably limiting the scope of God's power:

As for the eternal truths, I say once more that they are true or possible only because God knows them as true or possible. They are not known as true by God in any way which would imply that they are true independently of him†. If men really understood the sense of their words they could never say without blasphemy that the truth of anything is prior to the knowledge which God has of it.

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But if God makes necessary truths — like the proposition that 2+2=4 — true, how does God do this? Descartes' answer is simple:

You ask me †by what kind of causality God established the eternal truths†. I reply: †by the same kind of causality† as he created all things, that is to say, as their †efficient and total cause†. For it is certain that he is the

But this answer leads to another question. If God's making the proposition 2+2=4 is just like his creation of other things, and if his creation of other things is free, doesn't it follow that God could have decided not to make the proposition that 2+2=4 true?

You ask also what necessitated God to create these truths; and I reply that he was free to make it not true that all the radii of the circle are equal – just as free as he was not to create the world. And it is certain that these truths are no more necessarily attached to his essence than are other created things. You ask what God did in order to produce them. I reply that †from all eternity he willed and understood them to be, and by that very fact he created them†.

Descartes' view here seems, in one way, extremely orthodox: he's simply affirming that God is the creator of **all** things, whether visible or invisible.

But it seems to lead to paradox. Suppose that, as Descartes says,

God was free to make it not true that that all the radii of the circle are equal.

The following general claims seem plausible:

If A is free to do X, then A can do X.

If A can do X, then it is possible that A does X.

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1. God was free to make it not true that that all the radii of the circle are equal.

2. If A is free to do X, then A can do X.

3. God could have made it not true that all the radii of the circle are equal. (1,2)

4. If A can do X, then it is possible that A does X.

5. It is possible that God makes it true that all the radii of the circle are equal. (3,4)

C. It is possible that all the radii of the circle are not equal. (5)

The conclusion seems clearly false, and the argument is valid, so we must reject one of 1, 2, or 4. Descartes plainly affirms 1; so how should he respond?

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On one plausible interpretation, Descartes' response was to reject premise 4.

This is puzzling. Suppose that I am told that it is impossible for me to do X. In what sense could it be true that I **can** do X?

Descartes might agree that, in this sort of case, **you** can't do X; but things are different with God.

This is because God decides, among other things, what is possible and impossible. As it turns out, God has decided that it should be impossible that the radii of a circle be unequal.

So is it impossible that the radii of a circle be unequal? Yes, since that is what God decided.

Is it impossible that God makes the radii of a circle unequal? Yes, since it is impossible that the radii of a circle be unequal.

But can God make the radii of a circle unequal? Yes again, because God could have made it possible, rather than impossible, for the radii of a circle to be unequal.

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This can seem like a puzzling doctrine; it also leads to difficulties with the free will defense.

Remember that our central question was: why doesn't God give us free will, but always make us do what is right?

Our answer was: because even an omnipotent being couldn't do that; it is impossible to make someone freely choose something, and an omnipotent being can't do the impossible.

But it seems that if we reject premise 4, this line of reasoning falls apart: the fact that it is impossible for God to do something now gives us no reason to think that God can't do that thing.

And this leaves us with no answer to our basic question: Why didn't God both give us free will, and stop us from using it to bring about evil?

A more common response to this argument is to deny not 4, but 1: God was not free to make it not true that all the radii of the circle are equal, because God is not free to bring about the impossible, and it would be impossible for not all the radii of the circle to be equal. Isn't this, after all, just definition 3 of omnipotence?

Still, the intuitive worry remains: any view which puts the truth of the proposition that 2+2=4 outside of God's creative power is, in some way or another, a denial of the claim that God is the creator of all things, visible and invisible.

Here's one way you might respond to this worry, which is due ultimately to St. Augustine, but was also developed by the German philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz.

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We've already discussed the distinction between essential and accidental properties. But just as you have an essence, one might think, so do properties like being a circle. Just as your essential properties are properties you have necessarily, so the essence of circle-ness implies necessary truths which hold of every circle.

The fact that, necessarily, the radii of a circle are all equal is explained, not in terms of God deciding to make this necessary (as Descartes thought) but rather in terms of the essence of circle-ness.

But this leads to a question: how is this supposed to explain the dependence of this necessary truth on God?

Leibniz answers this question with a view about the nature of essences:

"It is true that God is not only the source of existences, but also that of essences .. This is because God's understanding is the realm of eternal truths or that of the ideas on which they depend."

Essences are, roughly, ideas in the mind of God: they exist in virtue of God's intellectual activity.

Let's return to our argument. It seems that Leibniz would deny 1, on something like the following grounds: the essence of circle-ness simple comes into being in virtue of God's intellectual activity; God did not have to, in addition to having thoughts about this essence, decide to make the claim that the radii of the circle are equal true.

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But one might still ask Leibniz the following awkward question: could God simply have decided not to have thoughts involving this essence, thus not bringing it into existence? If God had done this, then it looks like the proposition that all the radii of the circle are equal would not have been true. But this just is premise 3 of our argument, which leads via 4 to the conclusion we were trying to avoid: that it is possible that all the radii of the circle are not equal.

The trouble with this, though, is that it seems true on Leibniz's view that if God had not had thoughts about circle-ness, then it would not have existed, and hence there would have been no truths about it which God did not know – and hence no violation of omniscience.

One might reply on Leibniz's behalf as follows: God could not have failed to have thoughts about circle-ness, just as God could not have done wrong; the former is inconsistent with God's essential omniscience as the latter is with God's essential goodness.

Could we say, instead, that a perfectly good being would have to consider what sort of world to create, and that doing this requires God to have thoughts involving circle-ness (as well as indefinitely many other essences)?

Even if this strategy — explaining necessity in terms of essence, and explaining essence in terms of God's ideas — works, it can't be — as Leibniz and others realized — perfectly general.

For consider God's essential properties: omnipotence, omniscience, perfect goodness, etc. Surely these can't simply be ideas in the mind of God, for God would have to be powerful in order to have the relevant ideas in the first place.

So what explains the existence of these essential attributes of God? Are they, apparently contrary to what we are told about creation, properties which exist independently of God's creative work?

One answer to this problem is found in the traditional doctrine of God's simplicity, defended by, among many others, Aquinas.

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According to this doctrine, God is identical to God's essence.

This implies

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God = God's omniscience
God = God's perfect goodness
...

Another stems from the transitivity of identity. If

God = God's omnipotence

and

God = God's omniscience

it follows that

God's omnipotence=God's omniscience

If the doctrine of divine simplicity is true, then the problem of explaining how the divine attributes came to be simply vanishes.

But there are a number of reasons why people have found this doctrine puzzling. One is that the above formulation seems to imply that God is a property. But surely God is a thing, not just a way that things could be.

But how could this be? Surely when we say that God is omnipotent we are saying something different about God than when we say that God is omniscient.

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Aquinas was well aware of this problem. His view was that when we say that God is powerful, we're saying something different than when we say that, say, Mike Tyson is powerful; we're not using "powerful" univocally:

"the heat generated by the sun and the sun itself are not called univocally hot. Now, the forms of the things God has made do not measure up to a specific likeness of the divine power; for the things that God has made receive in a divided and particular way that which in Him is found in a simple and universal way. It is evident, then, that nothing can be said univocally of God and other things."

The best we can do when talking about God is to speak analogically: when we say that God is good, we are saying something analogous to, but not the same as, what we are saying when we say that a person is good.

If the doctrine of divine simplicity is true, this might lead you to be skeptical about the very idea of defining the various divine attributes in the first place: for if we give different definitions of, say omnipotence and omniscience, then it seems like the doctrine of divine simplicity implies that at least one must be incorrect.