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DIFFICULTIES OF SIMPLICITY

Cody M. Bradley

Introduction

The doctrine of divine simplicity, that God is not composed of any kind of proper parts whatsoever, can perhaps be seen as early as in Parmenides, reaches its zenith in scholasticism, and still today remains Catholic dogma. Despite being central to medieval theology, the doctrine—at least in its strongest form—is rejected by many contemporary theologians and philosophers of religion. However, in recent years some philosophers have defended divine simplicity by conjoining it with truthmaker theory, what Noël Saenz calls “divine truthmaker simplicity.”¹ The aim of this paper is to show that the doctrine of absolute divine simplicity, even in its relatively new truthmaker form, still suffers from difficulties which undermine its plausibility.

What & Why

As Yann Schmitt point out, simplicity is a “scale notion,” bearing a range of variation either within the doctrine itself or closely related to it.² For example,

¹ Noël B. Saenz, “Against Divine Truthmaker Simplicity,” *Faith and Philosophy* 31, no. 4 (2014): 460.

² Yann Schmitt, “The Deadlock of Absolute Divine Simplicity,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 74, no. 1 (2013): 129.

Thomas Morris presents a “threefold denial” included in the traditional understanding of the doctrine: (1) spatial simplicity, that God has no proper spatial parts; (2) temporal simplicity, that God has no proper temporal parts; and (3) property simplicity, that God has no proper metaphysical parts.³ Moreover, William Alston, while rejecting property simplicity, advocates divine cognitive simplicity, in which all of God’s knowledge is a single non-propositional intuition.⁴ Similarly, J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig postulate a type of divine creative simplicity in which God’s creation and conservation of the world is a single act in itself, rather than multiple individual acts.⁵

Of the simplicities mentioned above, spatial simplicity is the only uncontroversial one among philosophers and theologians within monotheistic traditions. The most controversial one, and the one this paper seeks to further explore, however, is property simplicity, or what Schmitt calls “absolute divine simplicity” (DDS). This view posits that God has no kind of metaphysical composition or complexity whatsoever. On DDS, (1) God is identical to his essence/nature/existence, (2) God is identical to his properties, and (3) God’s

³ Thomas V. Morris, *Our Idea of God: An Introduction to Philosophical Theology*, ed. C. Stephen Evans, *Contours of Christian Philosophy* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1991), 114.

⁴ William P. Alston, “Does God Have Beliefs?,” *Religious Studies* 20, no. 3 (1986): 287-306.

⁵ J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 526.

properties are identical to each other.⁶ Eleonore Stump explains the doctrine as follows:

For all things other than God, there is a difference between what they are and that they are, between their essence and their existence; but on the doctrine of simplicity the essence that is God is not different from God's existence. Therefore, unlike all other entities, God is his own being.⁷

Some of the motivations for this doctrine are fairly straightforward. If there is no distinction between God and his properties, then this avoids the problem of God being dependent upon his properties for his existence and composition, thus preserving what Alvin Plantinga calls the “sovereignty-aseity intuition.”⁸ Moreover, as noted by Nicholas Wolterstorff, DDS provides a sort of “theoretical fecundity” from which other apparent divine attributes such as incorporeality, eternality, and others naturally flow.⁹ Bearing this in mind, it is no wonder that Aquinas introduces God’s simplicity in his *Summa Theologica* right after arguing for God’s existence.

Difficulties

⁶ Aquinas *Summa Theologica* I q.3 a.3.

⁷ Eleonore Stump, “God's Simplicity,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Aquinas*, ed. Brian Davies and Eleonore Stump (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 135-36.

⁸ Alvin Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1980), 1-2.

⁹ Nicholas Wolterstorff, “Divine Simplicity,” in *Philosophical Perspectives: Philosophy of Religion*, ed. James E. Tomberlin (Atascadero: Ridgeview Publishing Company, 1991), 5:531.

A standard argument against DDS, most notably put forth by Plantinga, is that the doctrine seems to deny God's personhood because it identifies him with his properties.¹⁰ Such an argument can run as follows:

- (1) God is identical to his properties.
- (2) If (1), then God's properties are transitively identical.
- (3) If (2), then God's properties amount to a single super-property.
- (4) If (3), then God is identical to a super-property.
- (5) If (4), then God is a property.
- (6) Properties are abstract entities.
- (7) Therefore, God is an abstract entity—(1), (5), (6).
- (8) Abstract entities are causally inefficacious.
- (9) Therefore, God is causally inefficacious—(7), (8).
- (10) God is a person.
- (11) Persons are causally efficacious.
- (12) Therefore, God is causally efficacious—(10), (11).
- (13) (9) and (12) contradict each other.
- (14) (9) follows from (1).
- (15) To avoid contradiction, either (1) or (10) must be rejected—(13), (14).
- (16) Given theism, (10) is more difficult to reject than (1).
- (17) Therefore, (1) must be rejected—(15), (16).

For now, this may be known as the problem of double identification: coherently identifying God with his properties.¹¹ It is often noted, however, that the ontological framework from which Plantinga and most other contemporary philosophers are working is significantly different than the framework of the likes of Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas. According to Wolterstorff, Plantinga's objections are coming from a "relation ontology" in which things such as natures

¹⁰ See Plantinga, "Does God Have a Nature?," 26-61.

¹¹ Grabbed partially from Schmitt, "The Deadlock of Absolute Divine Simplicity," 125.

or essences are external, abstract properties that a substance has by way of exemplification, and thereby automatically prevents DDS from being a coherent doctrine.¹² In contrast, the medieval theologians mentioned above, says Wolterstorff, were working from a “constituent ontology” in which natures and properties are concrete constituents of that which have them. So, the argument seen above stands on (6)’s assumption that a constituent ontology and a Mannian-type property-instance interpretation of DDS which renders God identical to his proposed concrete individual properties is false.¹³

However, a constituent ontology or property-instance interpretation of DDS is generally disregarded even among contemporary defenders of the doctrine. The reason for this is that such a framework runs into a number of problems, most notable of which is that identifying God as a concrete individual property still leaves him dependent upon the universal of which God, as a property-instance, stands in relation to, thus undermining God’s aseity, the very thing simplicity attempts to preserve.¹⁴ Thus, the prominent defender of DDS,

¹² Wolterstorff, “Divine Simplicity,” 540-2.

¹³ See William Mann, “Divine Simplicity,” *Religious Studies* 18, no. 4 (1982): 451-71; and *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Spring 2015 ed., s.v. “Divine Simplicity,” accessed April 6, 2016, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/divine-simplicity/>.

¹⁴ See Jeffrey E. Brower, “Making Sense of Divine Simplicity,” *Faith and Philosophy* 25, no. 1 (2008): 10-14; Brian Leftow, “Is God an Abstract Object?,” *Noûs* 24, no. 4 (1990): 581-98; and Wolterstorff, “Divine Simplicity,” 531-2.

Jeffrey E. Brower states that “it would seem that any account of simplicity that could render the doctrine coherent without giving up the traditional conception of properties would be preferable.”¹⁵

The next trouble DDS runs into is what Pruss calls “the multiple attributes problem.”¹⁶ Pruss states:

...when God has attributes A and B, then God’s being A is ontologically identical with God’s being B. The difficulty is that under such circumstances ‘mercy’ and ‘justice’ seem to lose their ordinary language meaning and since our linguistic usage is based on ordinary language, it becomes meaningless to use the terms about God.¹⁷

Schmitt pushes a form of the multiple attributes problem that incorporates W. E. Johnson’s and Eric Funkhouser’s work on determinables and determinates.¹⁸ Put simply, the relationship of a determinate to a determinable is that of Mother Teresa’s goodness to goodness itself, Socrates’ wisdom to wisdom itself, and yellowness to color itself. Applying this to God, all of God’s attributes are infinite determinates of various determinables: infinite goodness, infinite power, and so on. However, one could interpret DDS in such a way as to state that God’s attributes are a single infinite determinate of the determinable of perfection. On

¹⁵ Brower, “Making Sense of Divine Simplicity,” 11.

¹⁶ Alexander Pruss, “On Two Problems of Divine Simplicity,” in *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Jonathan L. Kvanvig (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 1:151.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Schmitt, “The Deadlock of Absolute Divine Simplicity,” 119-121.

this interpretation of DDS, God's attributes could be welcomed as a single super-attribute.

However, Socrates' attribute of goodness appears to assign two attributes to Socrates, namely goodness itself and its particular determinate instantiated by Socrates. Likewise, a banana's yellowness attributes both the predicate of 'being yellow' and 'being colored' to the banana. It seems as though the determinable-determinate relation inherently assigns a plurality of intrinsic predications to any concrete individual. The DDS advocate's way out of this seems to be to say that such a plurality of intrinsic predications about God are simply analogical, as opposed to univocal, expressions. So, referring to God's justice and God's mercy is to refer to different manifestations of the same super-attribute that just is God himself, and distinctions in God's attributes such as justice and mercy exist in conception alone, not in reality. Building on Pruss' remarks, though, if the plurality of God's intrinsic predications are purely analogical expressions they seem to lose their meaning, and even contradict the centrality of the determinable-determinate relation.¹⁹ Of course, this does not necessarily render DDS false by any means, but simply limits the molds the doctrine can fit in.

¹⁹ Ibid, 121.

The multiple attributes problem also faces what Schmitt calls “the co-specificity problem.”²⁰ According to Schmitt, for any divine instance of F, F is co-specific, meaning “belonging to a common species”, with any instance of F whatever.²¹ So, God’s divine instance of wisdom is co-specific with Socrates’ instance of wisdom. However, since God’s divine instance of wisdom is co-specific with his divine instance of goodness, by transitivity, Socrates’ instance of wisdom would be co-specific with Mother Teresa’s goodness. But surely one could instantiate wisdom without instantiating goodness. Schmitt recognizes that one can escape this problem by again appealing to analogy, but since the doctrine of analogy leaves us epistemically uncertain in regards to God’s being, there is no guarantee that such analogies are strong enough to sufficiently avoid the co-specificity problem.

Defenses

Christopher Hughes has developed a possible solution to the problem of double identification mentioned above by conjoining David Lewis’ theory of first-level properties and W. V. O. Quine’s comments on sets.²² According to Lewis,

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Christopher Hughes, *On a Complex Theory of a Simple God: An Investigation in Aquinas’ Philosophical Theology*, Cornell Studies in the Philosophy of Religion (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1989), 63-67.

first-level properties are sets of actual and possible individuals.²³ So, on this view, the property of ‘being yellow’ will be the set of all actual and possible yellow individuals. Similarly, the property of ‘being infinitely powerful’ will be the set of all actual and possible infinitely powerful individuals.

Now, since there is only one individual which is and can possibly be infinitely powerful, namely God, this makes the property of ‘being infinitely powerful’ identical to the set containing only God. According to Quine, some interpretations of set theory have it that a singleton, a set with only one member, can be identical with the individual in it.²⁴ Now, consider the following argument:

- (1) First-level properties are sets of actual and possible individuals.
- (2) ‘Being infinitely powerful’ is a first-level property.
- (3) God is the only individual that actually does or can possibly have the property of ‘being infinitely powerful’.
- (4) Therefore, the first-level property of ‘being infinitely powerful’ is a singleton, namely a set with only God as its member—(1), (2), (3).
- (5) A singleton can be identical with the individual in it.
- (6) Therefore, God can be identical to the singleton ‘being infinitely powerful’—(4), (5).
- (7) A singleton, as a set, is identical to a property.
- (8) Therefore, God can be identical to the property ‘being infinitely powerful’—(6), (7).
- (9) If (8), then God can be identical to a property.
- (10) Therefore, God can be identical to a property—(8), (9).
- (11) God is a concrete individual.
- (12) Properties are abstract entities.

²³ *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Spring 2015 ed., s.v. “Divine Simplicity,” accessed April 6, 2016, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/divine-simplicity/>.

²⁴ *Ibid*; Schmitt, “The Deadlock of Absolute Divine Simplicity,” 124.

- (13) Therefore, God can be both a concrete individual and an abstract entity—(10), (11), (12).

Although it may very well be the case that there could not possibly be two infinitely powerful individuals—for, as Schmitt points out, two infinitely powerful individuals might limit one another by a conflict of will and ability—it is not entirely obvious that there could not possibly be two infinitely knowledgeable or infinitely good individuals, for instance; there is no obvious contradiction between two individuals that know all true propositions.²⁵

Moreover, (13) seems to be categorically false. How can an abstract entity be identical to a concrete individual? Schmitt, in Hughes' defense, argues that although he shares this immediate concern of (13) being a category mistake, if one defines 'abstract' as existing outside of space-time and 'concrete' as causally efficacious, then God can exist both as an abstract and concrete individual.²⁶ But such a definition of 'abstract' simply becomes interchangeable with what philosophers and theologians typically ascribe to God as 'transcendence', and the word thus loses all of its relevance.

In more recent years, advocates of DDS such as Pruss, Jeffrey E. Brower, Michael Bergmann, and even Graham Oppy have interpreted DDS in light of

²⁵ Schmitt, "The Deadlock of Absolute Divine Simplicity," 124.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

truthmaker theory to argue for the doctrine's coherence.²⁷ Brower, the leading defender of divine truthmaker simplicity (DTS), presents a "truthmaker account of predication" to support DDS:

(TA) If an intrinsic predication of the form "*a* is *F*" is true, then *a*'s *F-ness* exists, where this entity is understood as the truthmaker for "*a* is *F*".²⁸

On this interpretation of DDS, God does not become identical with a property or state of affairs, but becomes identical with the truthmakers for his intrinsic essential predications, where the truthmaker for these intrinsic essential predications are identified as individuals. Thus, if God is identical to the truthmakers for his intrinsic essential predications, and the truthmakers for his intrinsic essential predications are individuals, God will not be identical to anything that is not an individual. In Brower's own words: "God is identical with the truthmakers for each of the true (intrinsic) predications that can be made about him."²⁹ If this be the case, DTS would alleviate DDS from the problem of double identification and any potential problem with DDS not allowing for God to

²⁷ See Pruss, "On Two Problems of Divine Simplicity," 150-67; Brower; Michael Bergmann and Jeffrey E. Brower, "A Theistic Argument Against Platonism (and in Support of Truthmakers and Divine Simplicity)," in *Oxford Studies in Metaphysics*, ed. Dean Zimmerman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 2:357-86; Graham Oppy, "The Devilish Complexities of Divine Simplicity," *Philo* 6, no. 1 (2003): 10-22.

²⁸ Brower, "Making Sense of Divine Simplicity," 27.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 31.

possess intrinsic accidental properties. So, this interpretation of DDS appears very promising.

Now, on DTS, that in virtue of which ‘God is good’ is true is the very same thing in virtue of which ‘God is wise’ is true, namely God. Brower contends:

Socrates himself, just in virtue of being the concrete individual he is, can be regarded as the truthmaker for “Socrates is human”, “Socrates is an animal”, “Socrates is a material object”, “Socrates exists”, “Socrates is identical with himself”, and so on.³⁰

He uses this to postulate that God himself, just in virtue of being the concrete individual he is, can be regarded as the truthmaker for all of his intrinsic essential predications. In response to this, Schmitt argues that Brower’s comparison between Socrates and God fails because Socrates’ essence or form better serves to constitute the minimal truthmaker for Socrates’ intrinsic essential predications rather than Socrates himself, especially since Socrates is a material entity, and thus not a simple one.³¹ The implication of this is not that DTS is incoherent—indeed, Schmitt concedes its coherence—but that simplicity is not the necessary minimal truthmaker for God’s intrinsic essential predications, for God’s form or

³⁰ Jeffrey E. Brower, “Simplicity and Aseity,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Theology*, ed. Thomas P. Flint and Michael Rea, Oxford Handbooks (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 111.

³¹ Schmitt, “The Deadlock of Absolute Divine Simplicity,” 126.

essence could just as easily be the truthmaker for his intrinsic essential predications, without invoking double identification.

Schmitt's closing demand of DTS proponents is that "we need an explanation of truthmaking relation that associates a simple entity with different intrinsic predications,"³² bringing the attention back to the multiple attributes problem. This is where Saenz's recent discrepancy with DTS picks up. According to Saenz,

...even if how things intrinsically and essentially are is pre-built into the essences of those very things, it does not follow that the things that have the essences are good explanations for truths about their essences."³³

This appears to be the central problem with DTS: states of affairs serve as truthmakers for propositions, but truthmakers do not appear to serve as sufficient explanations for states of affairs. Hence why Schmitt is skeptical regarding DTS' use of truthmaker theory and why Saenz claims that "listing Plato as that which makes true 'Plato is a human' is of no help in telling me what it is that metaphysically explains that it is true that he is human," and thus is "explanatorily empty."³⁴

Conclusion

³² Ibid, 128.

³³ Saenz, "Against Divine Truthmaker Simplicity," 466.

³⁴ Ibid, 465.

Absolute divine simplicity, though attractive in many respects, without the truthmaker interpretation seems to run into too many difficulties to either adopt or maintain in one's conceptual scheme. Divine truthmaker simplicity certainly can be said to aid and potentially eliminate multiple difficulties from which DDS suffers, but it is not entirely assured that DTS accomplishes its goal. Naturally, DTS can only be as strong as truthmaker theory itself, which is a topic deserving of its own paper, but granted the coherence and correct application of truthmaker theory to DDS, DTS still does not appear to exemplify the virtue of plausibility.

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