

A Defense of the Metaphysics of Divine Simplicity As Explained by Thomas Aquinas

JACOB SPENCER

Drawing inspiration from some of the most famous passages in Exodus, Thomas Aquinas argues that the most logically proper name for God, and the soundest explanation of His nature, is simply “I am” (*Summa Theologica* 1.13.1–13). In doing so, Aquinas does not posit a strange formulation of God unknown to Christian orthodoxy. Rather, Aquinas conceives of “I am” as the best explanation of a divinely simple God. While the metaphysics of God’s simplicity is best articulated in the works of Aquinas, the doctrine of divine simplicity has been promulgated by theologians since the patristic period (Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 1.13.1–13). Despite this long tradition, the Thomistic conception of divine simplicity is now a minority opinion amongst Christian theologians and philosophers. Here I will defend this minority opinion by first explaining what the Thomistic conception of the divine simplicity is. I will then defend the doctrine of the divine simplicity against four common counter arguments: that it is an inadequately thin conception of God, that it identifies God as a property, that it leads to a modal collapse, and that it is unable to account for why there is creation. By defending the doctrine of divine simplicity against these criticisms, I will demonstrate the doctrine’s

Jacob Spencer graduated from Brigham Young University in August 2019 with a BA in philosophy and political science, and minors in logic and legal studies. He is applying for law school this winter with hopes to attend law school in the fall of 2021. His philosophical interests include scholasticism, philosophy of law, and phenomenology. This essay placed first in the David H. Yarn Philosophical Essay Contest.

philosophical robustness and practical feasibility, so as to encourage wider acceptance of the doctrine amongst Christians.

The Divine Simplicity

The simplest summation of the divine simplicity is that in God there is no distinction between His essence and His existence—His whatness and His thisness. The meaning and implications of this notion will be explained in the following paragraphs.

Aquinas begins his metaphysical account of God's simplicity by arguing that simplicity follows clearly from His status as the uncaused cause of contingent being (Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 1.3.4–6). He asserts that a thing's existence must either be given to it by some extrinsic cause, or it must come by essence of the thing itself. For Aquinas, everything in the created world falls into the former category. In other words, everything in creation is an instantiation of a universal, the essences of which preexist the existence of particular instantiations, and whose nature we can contemplate apart from their existence. For example, the essence of humanity preexists the instantiation of any given human being. Furthermore, the existence of these entities is not self-explanatory, for their essence does not suggest their own self-existence (Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 1.3.4–6). This cannot be said of the latter category, namely God, for His essence does not preexist His existence, nor does His existence stand in need of explanation through an appeal to an extrinsic cause, for His existence is necessarily-necessary by virtue of His essence (Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 1.3.4–6).

This point is further supported by the real distinction in contingent entities between essence and existence. When we encounter an entity that exists concretely, which is to say it is an instance of a universal, we are compelled to find a reason for the cause of this instantiation (Lawrence 142). The same can be said for any other distinction observable in an entity. For example, if we consider the category of location and observe an entity who is at point X, we may be compelled to ask why it is not at point Y. When we do so, we are led to investigate the extrinsic causes that resulted in this entity's location (Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 1.3.4–6). Simply put, an instantiation of a category embodies in itself a distinction between its essence and existence, as well as other distinctions such as it is at point X rather than point Y. Whenever we find a distinction within something that may be properly called one entity, we are compelled to ask how the distinct parts of that entity are brought together so as to be one. Such a unification of distinct parts can only occur as a result of extrinsic causes, for it could

not come from any internal agency, as there would not yet have been an internal agent to initiate the cause.

This insight implicates a more fundamental question than why any given entity is individuated as it is; we are led to ask what is the cause of this chain of extrinsic causes itself. The answer to this question is an unmoved mover who exists without any extrinsic cause, and is either the remote or the immediate cause of both this chain of causes and perhaps the causes themselves (Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 1.3.4–6). God is this prime mover. As the unmoved mover who doesn't have any external causes, God must not have within himself a distinction between His essence or His existence, for such a distinction suggests the need to explain itself through an extrinsic cause.

This conclusion may also be supported through an appeal to the act/potency distinction (Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 1.3.4–6). Aquinas argues that the first reality, however conceived, must be characterized as being pure actuality, for such a reality could not change as a result of extrinsic causes, and therefore could not have any kind of potentiality that would be subject to extrinsic influence. Yet, essence is a kind of potency. Essence limits or defines a being's act of being, similar to how form characterizes matter by constraining the matter's being in accordance with the form (Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 1.11.1–4). Simply put, since having an essence is to be defined in some way, and since to be defined is to be made finite in the sense that a being is made limited so as to be categorized, it follows that essence functions as a matter of potency. For example, because I am a human being my being is limited by my humanness, for my essence makes it so I am a very particular kind of being, namely human. In contrast to this, there cannot be any limiting definition of His being in the first reality. Thus, God cannot have an essence that is of the same kind that I have. It follows from this that God's kind of essence is not one that constrains His being by making Him a particular kind of being, but rather is His very being. In other words, God's essence is His existence.

These Thomistic arguments bring us to conclude that God cannot be defined in the strict sense of define, for to be defined is to be limited and all limitation is a kind of potency; also that God cannot be considered an instance of any genus, even the genus of being. It is therefore logically improper to speak of God as a being, or as an individual. Then God is not the most powerful individual being, or the greatest conceivable being, but being itself.

The First Critique: The Divine Simplicity as an Inadequately Thin Conception of God

A common critique of the divine simplicity is that it leads to a thin conception of God that is more akin to a Hindu absolute or a Buddhist abyss than the living God of Christianity. Simply put, if God has no internal distinction between His essence and existence, and thus no distinction between Him and any properties, how can He act in such a way that is merciful in one event and just in another? Mercy or justice are properties that seem to be manifested in one circumstance and not in another, which clearly suggests the presence of separate parts and properties in God.

This critique is best refuted through a two-part response: first an explanation of how Aquinas argues that we can speak of God as being merciful or just or anything else good, and then an explanation of how speaking of God in this way does not suggest that He has parts or properties.

We may speak of God in varying ways because there is no contradiction in saying that God is unlimited to be and that God is fully actualized justice or mercy. It can be asserted that as unlimited to be God's being encompasses though is not encompassed by any ontological perfection (Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 1.12.1–12). If God's being is unlimited, God may be said to encompass all of love and thus be love. Though it would be incorrect to say that God is defined as being love, to do so would be in some respect to put the cart before the horse. We are able to speak of the perfections God encompasses through analogical reasoning about perfections that are perceivable by creatures (Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 1.12.1–12). Simply put, by observing and contemplating the nature of justice in creatures, we may reason analogically to what would be the greatest possible manifestation of justice, and may then attribute this to God. This is not to say that God is an individuation of the category of justice, rather we assert that God's being encompasses justice. Analogical reasoning of this kind should be distinguished from metaphorical reasoning about God; which, though useful for literary or descriptive purposes, does not describe a literal truth about God. For example, it may be logically proper to say that God is wise or courageous, but it would be logically incorrect to say that God is an owl or lion.

The second notion that must be refuted is that to speak of God as enveloping an attribute like justice is to speak of God as being predicated by justice; $\exists x(Gx \& Jx)$, *G: is God, J: is perfectly just*. This contention is borne out of confusion regarding the way in which creaturely beings understand properties and then mistakenly attribute this understanding to God. It is correct to speak of subjects as predicated in this way when there is an essence apart from existence that may be predicated, but in God, there

is no essence apart from his existence to be predicated. Thus, to say $\exists x(Gx \& Jx)$ is incorrect because this suggests that the primary substance “x” is predicated by both its being God and its being perfectly just, but more fundamentally because it posits that there is some “x” to be predicated. God is not an entity that can be expressed by the undefined variable “x,” for even to say “ $\exists x$ ” is to speak incorrectly because it implies that existence is something the undefined “x” has, but God is not existentially quantified as being existent, for He is existence itself. Thus, God resists being put into any schema that quantifies and predicates Him. Therefore, it is impossible for God’s love or justice to be a property that predicates his being. As such, we must consider God’s love or justice to be a part of God’s very act of to be. Thus, perfect love or perfect justice is not a property God has but is included in the very being of God.

Thus, to say “God is love” is equivalent to saying “God is God,” as long as these statements are uttered in a direct context. The reason saying “God is love” is cognitively distinct from the statement “God is God” is because “God” and “love” both rigidly designate and refer to the same being although their senses differ. Thus, as in the case of Hesperus and Phosphorus, one may learn and say something cognitively significant by saying “God is love,” even though “God” and “love” are co-referential terms. But this difference in the sense of “God” and “love” is not a result of a metaphysical distinction within that which both those terms refer to, but rather is the result of our creaturely perspective. Simply put, just as our distinction between “Hesperus” and “Phosphorus” is not the result of a real distinction in Venus itself, but in our own perspective, our distinction between “God” and “love” is not the result of a real distinction between the two.

It must be recognized that when we reason analogically about God we are doing so from an embodied perspective that is limited by what is offered to us in our perceptual finitude. So, when we identify what we believe to be a part or property of God, we are doing so because we can only perceive a portion of his unlimited being. Just like the early astronomers categorized “Hesperus” and “Phosphorus” as two separate entities because of the limits of their perceptual perspective, we are limited by our perceptual experience when we think we are experiencing God’s justice but not his mercy. In reality, we are experiencing God’s justice as we experience God’s mercy, for when doing so we are simply experiencing God, just as those early astronomers thought they were perceiving the morning star or the evening star, but in reality, they were perceiving Venus in both situations.

In summary, though God is simple in the sense that He is without parts or properties, we may speak meaningfully of God as good or

all-knowing because we are not asserting that there is some “x” that is predicated by these properties; rather, we are reasoning analogically from the potential in creation to the actuality in creator. As we do so, we are limited by our finitude and perception and thus we experience these perfections as metaphysically distinct parts; although they are not metaphysically distinct parts, but rather are co-referential terms that differ only in their sense.

The Second Critique: The Divine Simplicity as Identifying God as a Property

Alvin Plantinga critiques the Thomistic conception of the divine simplicity first by arguing that the simple God is identical to that which we perceive to be his properties, and thus God is not a subject that has any given property, but rather is his own property (Lawrence, 145). Plantinga then suggests that this implies that God’s manner of being is the manner of being of a property. Thus, God cannot be said to be personal, for a property can’t engage in personal action (Lawrence, 145). Yet, God must be personal if He is to be the Christian God. Therefore, God is not simple.

This argument rests on the misapplication of the metaphysics of substance and accident in created beings to the metaphysics of the creator. Plantinga is correct when stating that the kind of property that predicates a contingent being must be incapable of action, but this kind of property is exactly the kind of property that does not obtain in the God who is simply constituted. Rather than say that God is a set of properties or has all good properties, we must say that God has no properties, and is, in turn, all substance. Furthermore, attributes like love or wisdom that exist as metaphysically distinct properties in created beings are co-referential terms when it comes to the creator, and co-refer not to a property but to a substance. Therefore, Plantinga’s argument fails because it assumes that because love and wisdom refer to metaphysically distinct properties in contingent-beings, they would also be distinct in their reference when referring to separate properties of a non-contingent being. This assumption must be rejected on account of what follows from the non-contingency of fundamental being.

The Third Critique: Divine Simplicity Leads to a Modal Collapse

Alvin Plantinga also critiques the concept of divine simplicity by arguing that there are modal difficulties that follow from it. Plantinga suggests that if God is simple across all possible worlds then God will be the same across all possible worlds, for He has no properties or contingent

behaviors independent of his sheer act of being that could potentially vary across possible worlds (Plantinga, 50). Simply put, if “God knows x” is logically equivalent to “x is true” by virtue of God’s knowledge and will being the same, then “x is true” is not a contingent statement but follows necessarily from “God knows x.” Sameness across all possible worlds implies a necessitarianism that leads to the conclusion that there is only one possible world, for everything that happens is logically necessary (Plantinga, 108). Thus, if God is the same across all possible worlds, then His behavior is the same across all possible worlds, and given how his creation is utterly dependent on the creator, then creation is the same across all possible worlds. Simply put, Plantinga argues that Thomistic divine simplicity leads to a strong necessitarianism. Such a collapse of modal distinctions is even more radical than the necessity resulting from a strong conception of predestination in Calvinism or certain schools of Islamic thought, which hold that everything that happens occurs necessarily as a result of God’s previously declared will. For in these schools of thought the necessary events we experience are contingently-necessary, because they could have been different had God willed them to be so, but since He has willed them to be such, they are necessarily such. Plantinga’s critique of the divine simplicity is not that it leads to a contingently-necessary state of affairs (which may be a theologically tenable and biblically supported position), but rather, it is that all states of affairs are necessarily-necessary, which contradicts God’s sovereignty (Plantinga, 5). Therefore, the divine simplicity must be rejected because God’s sovereignty requires that there be more than one possible world.

This critique can be combated by clarifying how in a simple God there are things that obtain necessarily independent of God’s will, such as his omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence, and things that obtain as a result of God’s free choice. Aquinas sees no contradiction between affirming the simplicity of God and affirming a distinction between what is necessary and contingent in God because created being is dependent on God, but God is not at all dependent on created being (Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 1.3.4–6). Simply put, Aquinas holds that we are really related to God, but God is not really related to us; the former is a real relationship in the sense of dependence, while the latter is not. Thus, it may be the case that we can imagine a wide variety of possible worlds while holding that God is the same in each of these possible worlds. God would be in no way other than He is even in a possible world that is utterly different than the one that obtains, for there is no real relationship between the state of affairs in a possible world and God in that possible world. Simply put, if in God there is a voluntary will, then God may act voluntarily without being influenced by the result of His voluntary will. There may then be differing

possible worlds because of a voluntary will in God, but this variation in possible worlds does not suggest a variation in God's being. Therefore, it is the case that God can be simple and there are many possible worlds.

Yet, doesn't the existence of a voluntary will in God, apart from that which necessarily obtains in God, constitute a distinction in God that refutes the thesis of the divine simplicity? This counterargument fails because it incorrectly conceptualizes God's voluntary will as itself voluntary. What God voluntarily chooses through his voluntary will is voluntary, but that there is a voluntary will is necessarily a part of God. Thus, there is no distinction between any other attribute and God's voluntary will, for it is necessary that each obtain in God necessarily. Therefore, how God's voluntary will is manifested is varied even though the presence of a voluntary will is necessary. Furthermore, because that which is manifested by God's voluntary will is necessarily a manifestation of God's love, justice, mercy, etc, by virtue of God not having any distinct parts, it follows that there no real metaphysical distinction between a contingent action of God's will and God necessarily being loving or anything else. Therefore, it is not a contradiction to hold that a simple God has a voluntary will that allows for a wide array of possible worlds.

It should be noted, when considering propositions regarding God it is useful to view these propositions through the paradigm developed by contemplating the ontological divide between God and creation. In light of the limitations put onto us by our finite ontology, it is worth recognizing that we are bound to face difficulty when conceptualizing anything that is infinite. Furthermore, if we accept the conclusion that God cannot be represented by an undefined "x" in a propositional function, it necessarily follows that we will run into difficulties when analyzing propositional functions that place God within the proposition. Any attempt to glean insight into the metaphysical composition of God through analytic reasoning is therefore fundamentally problematic. This issue is amplified the more we consider the limits of language. If propositional functions contain the actual entity referred to by the terms in the proposition, as is the case in Bertrand Russell's explanation of propositional functions in *On Denoting*, then to speak of God in an analytic proposition would require placing God himself in the proposition, which is absurd if God is considered to not be a being, but rather the act of being itself. Frege's conception of propositional functions as containing the senses of the terms in the proposition seems on the surface to be better equipped for speaking of God since there are senses of terms concerning God that could then be present in the proposition. As explained earlier, we can conceive the sense of "God's love" as distinct from the sense of "God's wisdom," though they each share the same referent. Thus, it seems as though the sense of "God's

love” or “God’s wisdom” could then be present in a propositional function in such a way that could make the proposition have a verifiable truth value. Yet, what still does not follow is that a sense of “God” Himself could be put into a propositional function, because “God” has no all-encompassing sense. Therefore, though we can speak meaningfully of aspects of God, we cannot speak meaningfully of God Himself. Yet, the whole thesis of the divine simplicity is that God does not have any metaphysically distinct aspects. Thus, even as we are speaking meaningfully of the aspects of God we perceive, we are not speaking meaningfully of God himself. At best, we are speaking of a representation of God as can be perceived from our creaturely perspective. As such, when grappling with propositions regarding God, it is appropriate to exercise caution because such propositions attempt to reason from the senses of terms to the actual being of God who has no sense.

When these insights are considered in light of the critiques offered by Plantinga it becomes clear why the Thomistic mode of analysis is more effective, for Aquinas argues that we can only reason about God on this other side of the ontological divide through analogical reasoning, or by saying what God is not, as we cannot definitively say what God is. Plantinga argues positively about God when using the premise that a simple God would always act the same in every possible world. Thus, Plantinga is assenting to a proposition that speaks positively not of our experience of God, but of God himself, for He is suggesting what God would be able to do even prior to the creation of beings. The Thomistic counterargument to Plantinga does not fall into the same error because any premises that speak positively of God do so about aspects of God that can be perceived and experienced on this side of the ontological divide, and any premise that speaks of God on the other side of the ontological divide does so negatively.

The Fourth Critique: The Divine Simplicity as Unable to Account for Why There is Creation

The fourth critique may be posited even if the third critique is rejected, for its modal argument does not require a premise that there is only one possible world, but rather posits a difficulty that may arise even if there are multiple possible worlds. Simply put, it seems to be the case that there are some possible worlds where God creates and others where God did not create. Why then did God create? The answer does not seem to be in God himself, for if God is simple He is without contingent parts or reasoning that could be situated so as to create contingent beings

in one possible world, and situated as to not create contingent beings in another possible world. Thus, the answer to why God created the world would need to be found outside of God. Yet, the answer cannot be found in creation for creatures are not ontologically prior to the decision that they be created. Something that is not ontologically prior to a given event cannot be a cause of that event. The answer for why God created cannot be found in creation. Yet, it also cannot be found anywhere else, for there is nothing apart from being itself and created being. Therefore, one who holds to the divine simplicity cannot explain why God created at all, and since we should be able to explain why God created we must not hold to the divine simplicity (Mullins, 197).

A major flaw in this fourth critique is the premise that if God is simple He is without contingent parts or reasoning that could be situated as to create contingent beings in one possible world but not in another. This premise can be adequately refuted through the same argument and mode of reasoning offered in the previous section, but if the previous section's arguments do not hold, then this fourth critique still stands in need of refutation.

An alternative refutation may begin by rejecting the final premise that we should be able to explain why God created or why He could have chosen otherwise. Generally speaking, it is not necessary to explain the why of God's actions in order to explain the what. In order to resolve metaphysical questions like why there is causation, contingent-being, or any given natural law, an explanation that demonstrates the origin of these things is sufficient without an appeal to intention. Furthermore, any a priori or a posteriori argument regarding intention is bound to be weak because personal intentions must be expressed by the subject bearing the intention rather than reasoned about the subject from a third-person perspective. Just as one cannot know with assurance what another human being's intentions are by observing their actions, though one can wager a reasonable guess, we cannot reason about the intentions of God with certainty. God's intentions or will is therefore not accessible through a priori or a posteriori reasoning. Therefore, just as other agent's intentions are made known to us through that agent's articulation of those intentions, the same likely holds true for God. In short, we cannot know God's will through reason, but only revelation. As such, any argument that critiques the concept of divine simplicity by positing that it is unable to explain why the current state of affairs obtains, fails because explaining why the current state of affairs obtains is beyond the scope of any metaphysical analysis into the being of God.

Conclusion

There is a reality that exists necessarily by virtue of its own essence. This reality is best understood as pure actuality; who's act is to be to be. This reality is utterly simple, which means that it is without metaphysically distinct parts or properties, but rather is one united act of being that is only perceived as having separate parts by created beings because of the limitation these beings have for comprehending infinite, unlimited being. This fundamental reality explains the existence of all other beings by providing a necessary ground for the existence of contingent beings. This reality's manner of being cannot be said to be that of a property, but rather must be recognized as unlimited substance without properties. The existence of this being does not lead to a fatalistic necessitarianism, for a difference between possible worlds in the created order does not suggest a change in the creator. This necessary being is not really related to contingent being though contingent being is related to it, and thus the immutability of this reality does not logically entail the possibility of only one possible world. This reality's most general activity may be said to be to be, for itself is fundamentally to be to be, and so to be must be the fundamental manifestation of its being. The sense of this being cannot be captured by $\exists(x)$, for it has no sense that can be delineated, as well as because this being's kind of being cannot be quantified. This simple being is God. He who is most properly called, "I am."

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