

10-1-1985

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James Ross

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### Recommended Citation

Ross, James (1985) "Discussion: Comments On Absolute Simplicity," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 4 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol2/iss4/4>

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# COMMENTS ON “ABSOLUTE SIMPLICITY”

James Ross

1. *Introduction.* The paper says Aquinas’ view of God’s simplicity is that there are “two sorts of necessity without a real distinction,” and no contingency, in God. Kretzmann and Stump adapt their own view, which is admittedly weaker (pp. 368, 369, 373), from Aquinas by relativising simplicity to “a given initial-state set of worlds.”<sup>1</sup> That analysis is applied to solve four problems, two at the outset and two at the end.

Overall, I think the paper does not present Aquinas’ basis for simplicity, from which no “weakening” is needed, nor does it present Aquinas’ grounds for denying any “real distinction”<sup>2</sup> in God. It says Aquinas held there is no contingency in God, but equivocates on “logical” and “metaphysical” contingency, (“contingency,” as used in the Third Way and SCG I, 85). It does not, in my opinion, find a proper role for the fact that although God is some way he might not have been, God is not *really different* from what he might have been, any more than he is really changed.

In brief, I argue that the paper substitutes a logical consequence of God’s simplicity for Aquinas’ explanation, and fails to deliver the explanation it promises of why there is no real distinction between the suppositionally necessary features of God and the absolutely necessary ones. Then, I suggest the doctrine of divine simplicity is, strictly, neither necessary nor sufficient for the conclusions of the “applications.”

2. *The Main Points.* I agree with the denials of all real composition that the authors accept from Aquinas, though I’d emphasize that they follow directly from the “pure act” doctrine. I would not say, however, that “perfect knowledge” and “perfect power” differ in sense while being “identical in reference,” as do “the morning star” and “the evening star.” I think they differ in reference, too, but not in referent. Yet, that still does not capture Aquinas’ idea that God’s knowledge and power are the same.

Using C. I. Lewis’ notion of signification (“that on the part of the thing required for the given term to apply”) and his notion of “intention” (“the other expressions that have to apply if the given one does”), we can say non-synonymous divine predicates differ in intention but have the same signification, *the same entitative conditions of application* (not, in all cases, “across possible worlds,” unless-indexed and across all worlds, of course). For I use “perfect



power” to refer to God’s power and “perfect knowledge” to refer to God’s knowledge; so while there is sameness of referent, there is difference of *reference*. The authors say there are “non-synonymous expressions *designating* quite distinct manifestations of one and the same thing” (italics added); it is, I take it, the “distinct manifestations” that are referred to.

The heart of Aquinas’ position is, I think: that the REAL truth-condition for *all* the divine attributes (whether contingent or necessary) is the *same*, and would have been one and the same, though logically different, had God created differently. I will explain this, Sec. 3 below, because it suggests what I take to be a better answer to Kretzmann’s and Stump’s main problem. (Thus, with God’s necessary attributes, meaning cannot be equated with truth-conditions.)

The fact that God’s essence is to exist and that the divine attributes are all “the same,” “without any real distinction,” does not permit an account of “identity” as “numerical” or “Leibnizian” identity. The paper does not talk that way, but, by not providing an analysis for “real distinction” and describing the contrary sameness as “identity” (pp. 354-55) which is not analysed, it does not warn against the “numerical,” “Leibnizian” terms that have been used so often recently.

For Aquinas numerical, “Leibnizian,” identity is a RATIONAL relation, not a real relation, of an *actual individual* to itself. (So, “not really the same as” does not imply “is really distinct from.”) Non-individual real sameness is not analysed as Leibnizian or phrased as “everything that’s true of the one is, necessarily, true of the other,” but only as absence of real distinction. (I skip, for now, the issues about FORMAL sameness, and the sameness of real natures in many things.)

The quantification over properties for formulating numerical identity makes it incoherent to apply to God, because ‘being’ is not a property and has no properties and, thus, God’s being cannot have “all its properties in common with” God’s essence. And if God’s essence were deemed to have or be properties, the identity would be false. Moreover, the implicit Platonism of the second-order quantification over properties is incompatible with Aquinas’ metaphysics. Further, God does not have distinct features picked out by predicates with different *de re* truth-conditions (unless they are “world-indexed,” and then, the whole collection is the same for all worlds). So, the real sameness of God’s power and knowledge, say, is *not* with any fidelity to Aquinas’ text and time to be analysed as Leibnizian identity. I think we agree about that.

The underlying problem is “to resolve the apparent incompatibility of God’s simplicity and God’s free choice.” What produces the problem? The combination of what God must be and what God chooses to be. Perhaps, the conjunction of the logically necessary divine nature with the logically contingent divine electing defeats “identity” of nature and choice, causing plurality, not simplicity, in God? (It is assumed, apparently, the real sameness, like Leibnizian identity, is necessary

and so, holds across possible worlds; Aquinas thinks God is really the same thing, no matter what, but not that God is the same, no matter what; it's just that "not the same," applied counterfactually to one thing, does not imply "it is *really* different from" some other way it might have been.)

The authors also accept that God would have been really different, had he done something else or nothing at all. So, God can't have transworld simplicity that implies transworld sameness. I do not think Aquinas held that assumption. (As I said, simplicity does not imply trans-world sameness for Aquinas, just the opposite. But "trans-world difference" is not *real* difference, either.) Thus, they propose to "relativise" simplicity, in part because they think "being the creator of Adam" and "not having created at all" are REALLY DIFFERENT. They make *simplicity* not a trans-world trait but an in-world trait (see pp. 369, 371).<sup>3</sup> The retrenchment is not needed. That's mainly because, in the relevant passages of Aquinas, "being really different from," requires real distinction, and thus, obtains among actual things, intrinsic principles of being, etc., and does not obtain between the actual and *entia rationis*, or between the way God is and the ways God might have been (or any imaginary relatum). Had God done otherwise, God would not have been really different at all, just "rationally."

They say Aquinas holds "that there is no contingency in God himself" (pp. 367, 369). But there is logical contingency in God by nature, because it is not inconsistent that God have done otherwise. They say (p. 367) that *follows* from the suppositional necessity of God's free acts. It does not. On the contrary, conditional necessity (suppositional necessity from eternity) not only does not preclude logical contingency in God, it ENTAILS IT. So the bothersome duality is still to be resolved. They write (p. 367) "Instead, God's nature is altogether necessary, either absolutely or conditionally," as if that got rid of the logically contingent. And, "Thomas maintains there is only necessity in God and that whatever is true of him is essentially true of him." (p. 369). "Essentially" vs. "accidentally," yes; "essentially" as in "of the essence of," no. "Only necessity" in contrast to what?

Aquinas denies "contingency" in God in the sense of "real dependence, with real beginning"; he does not deny that God is as he might not have been, e.g. creator of the world. God is simple in all possible worlds (to talk in recent fashion); but different things are true of him in different worlds, though all "the world-indexed truths" are the same. (I mention that "possible worlds" talk is seriously misleading about God, but like poisons, it has its uses.)

Whether or not things are contingent, logically, is not a divine choice, as is implied (p. 374)<sup>4</sup>; see *Contra Gentiles*, I, 85. Nor is contingency, in either sense, "logical contingency" or "possibility with real dependence," incompatible with a situation's being suppositionally necessary, even from eternity. So, saying "God's nature is altogether necessary either absolutely or conditionally" (p. 367)

is a pun on “necessary” because in one meaning “necessary” precludes logical contingency of the same thing and in the other, requires it.

The authors think the suppositional necessity of God’s free act somehow defeats a real distinction between the logically contingent attributes and the necessary attributes of God (pp. 371-74). How? (My being and my accidents are really distinct, yet both are suppositionally necessary ab eternitate from God’s will.) That’s supposed to be the point of the paper. They don’t, in the end, tell any story about it. They repeat that “the logical distinction between conditionally and absolutely necessitated aspects of the divine will does not reflect a metaphysical difference.” (p. 372). Why not? They do not show *why* there is “no basis on which to infer a metaphysical distinction within the divine will itself” (p.372), by showing what *blocks* that conclusion. Instead they offer an illustration that involves no relevant combination of logical and conditional necessity at all.

The suppositional necessity of God’s acting from eternity is not *why* there is no real distinction in God between God’s necessary nature and God’s free election of creatures. The suppositional necessity of God’s free act is merely a consequence of divine simplicity, freedom and eternity.

Instead, there is another, a dispositive reason why there is no real distinction between the divine nature and the logically contingent “act of creating.”

3. *A Better Answer.* God’s being as he chooses, from eternity, (a) involves no change; (b) is not a *real* difference from a determinate “would otherwise have been,” (c) is, whatever he chooses, logically necessary for his being free (which is a necessary attribute) and (d) is related to his being free as a *determinate to a determinable*, analogically. That’s why there is no real distinction between the contingent attributes of God and the necessary ones. A determinate cannot be related to a determinable as act is to potency; but in the same subject, act-potency relation is necessary for a real distinction. (The same reasoning applies to God in “different possible worlds.”)

God’s choice is no more really distinct from his being than “being red,” in a thing that must by nature (say) choose its color, is distinct from its being colored, given that it is by nature colored. There is no other color-of-*it* that is actual for its-being-red to be really distinct from, either.

The basic expression involved in the divine simplicity is not the necessary identity of a two-name assertion “a = b,” but the real sameness of the actual red of a thing with the color of the thing, the squeak of a door with the sound of it, the rumble of a coach with the sound of it, and so forth. That’s real sameness. “That’s the sound, color, choice...of it.” It is logically contingent, even if, say, the violin’s sounding that way is a natural necessity and there is no other *determinate* real possibility for its sound. It is the sameness of God’s knowing (as power), with his knowledge (as act), the sameness of his omnipotence with what he does, and of his freedom with what he chooses.

It is not the suppositional necessity of his choosing the world that defeats a real distinction between being free and acting in a particular way. It is the absence of a potency-act relation between God's freedom (being) and God's choice.

God's choosing is not related to his freedom as realization to capacity. There is no such dualism in God. It is related, analogously, as determinate to determinable. (I say analogously, because a meaning-relevant truth-condition in some contexts is that the determinates form a *finite*, disjoint, accessible array; here they do not.) Thus God's freedom SUBSISTS<sup>5</sup> in what God does. (NO MATTER WHAT HE DOES). God's necessary being, his freedom, cannot, therefore, be really distinct from what God ACTUALLY does, no matter what that might have been. Even the actual divine election, as I said, compared to some imagined alternative, is not "really distinct" from "it."<sup>6</sup>

"The necessity of the Creator and his act of creating does not preclude contingency in what is created" (p. 367) can only be true by amphiboly: by "necessary" 's having two senses, one, "absolute necessity" as it combines with "Creator" and the other, "suppositional necessity" as it combines with "his act of creating." Zeugma.

So I conclude that suppositional necessity has nothing to do with explaining divine simplicity and that it is not so that God's simplicity consists, for Aquinas, in "two sorts of necessity without a real distinction" (p. 371). That is a consequence of God's simplicity, not what accounts for it or constitutes it.

There is no reason to retreat from Aquinas' position to a relativised notion (p. 371). Aquinas' insistence upon the sameness of EVERYTHING in God is not the assertion that no matter how things had been, the REAL truth-condition for everything true of God would have been the same as it is *actually*. No; the real truth-condition for everything that *would* have been true of God *would* have been the same for everything true of God, in each case, but not, logically, the same as in any other case. Yet there is no determinate "would-have-been-instead" and no "is really different from," either.

The notion that God has "no unfulfilled potentialities" is qualified not to imply that God has fulfilled potentialities. Otherwise, one might imagine God's freedom to be an ability fulfilled by his free act, and therefore, distinct from it. I feel sure the authors agree (cf. p. 370).

To recapitulate, the real color of a thing (I assume for this that colors are real) is really the same, for the time the thing is so colored, as its being-colored; there is no *other* reality. The sound of the door IS its squeaking, slamming, or whatever it does. So, God's act is to his freedom as determinate to determinable and not as fulfillment to capacity, or as exercise to ability. There is no way, then, for there to be a real distinction between God's necessary being and God's contingent acting, whatever its content.

That's what needs to be said: "no relation of potency to act between A and

B, (where A and B are present in one subject),” entails “no real distinction between A and B in that subject.” My adding the “determinable-determinate” account only glosses Aquinas to make clearer how the contingent but actual in God is “really the same” as the necessary, and how that would have been so, no matter what. So God’s simplicity is “trans-world” and absolute. But the *de re* truth condition for all God’s attributes is logically distinct under counterpossibilities.

It does not, I think, represent Aquinas to say “we cannot accurately say that God could have willed not to create” (p. 368). God is, from eternity, a being ABLE to have done otherwise; God, creating, is a being able not to: that ability subsists in what he does, just as, in our limited way I am able, doing as I am, to do something else, (even after the time for doing it has passed). God, not having created, would be rationally distinct, but not really distinct from God as he is, and not really different.

The paper offered to show, I take it, that a conceptual difference is *all* that obtains between the nature and the free creative act of God. The analysis did not go far enough to show that, or in the direction Aquinas took. To accept the proposed “weakening” is just to concede what the opponents have claimed: that Aquinas’ doctrine of divine simplicity cannot be defended. As far as I can see, it can.

Throughout the paper “necessary” and “contingent” occur in two word-families that are not rigidly segregated. Senses of “contingent” in which, for instance, God can make things contingent (as will as make contingent things) and in which God cannot be contingent or have contingent attributes, are not systematically contrasted.

I agree with the objective, to replace the *perspective* of a “combination” of “necessary” and “contingent” realities in God that *presents* us with a composition we are supposed to explain away. Rightly, they want a perspective that presents the conceptual composition of a simple thing for what it is. As I think I have shown, Aquinas achieved that.

4. *The Applications.* I have the same objection to the first three applications: simplicity is not necessary to establish consistency among the attributes; nor is it sufficient; even more, it is *inconsistent* with co-essentiality of *all* God’s “properties” because “having chosen otherwise than he might have” is a necessary attribute that, no matter what, requires a content logically distinct from the content required for a ‘choice-otherwise’. If the former is essential, the latter cannot be.

If the divine attributes in question are co-essential, they are consistent. That the attributes of an actual thing are “the same” *presupposes*, as a condition precedent, that they are consistent. That’s why simplicity cannot establish consistency, it presupposes it. Moreover, one cannot infer co-essentiality from

simplicity, at least not by any argument given. And, if I am right, we cannot so infer, because, if the determinable is essential, then the determinate must not be (unless we are talking about necessities of nature, e.g. that grass is green, as well as colored; I do not think that applies because such necessities of nature are, in my opinion at least, from the will of God, see note 4.) That has the result that in a being determinable by nature, simplicity entails non-co-essentiality among some attributes.

For example, simplicity is not needed (p. 375) to resolve an "apparent incompatibility of omnipotence and impeccability"; for, God need only be *essentially* almighty, (able to effect whatever is logically contingent in itself), and *essentially* good, for it to be inconsistent for him to bring about his own acting wrongly, whether or not the two attributes ("almighty" and "perfectly good") are really the *same*.

Similarly, to settle the "seeming paradox of essential goodness" and (i) impeccability and (ii) divine free choice, we need only observe that freedom, for Aquinas, is not "the ability to do right *and* wrong" (p. 358), and indeed, that, in some cases, what one does willingly is necessitated (p. 363). A being with the ability to act *rightly*, but without defect of knowledge or resolution, has no source for wrongdoing and is both free and impeccable (pp. 362, 363). Again it matters not to this argument whether the attributes are really the *same*, only whether they are essential. The notion of simplicity does not function in the explanations.

Two other applications come at the end. The first suggests, as did Aquinas, that the divine nature, the very being of God, is the standard of moral law. That avoids an arbitrary exercise of divine authority that could have had any outcome at all (voluntarism), or the oddity of God's adhering to some unexplained external moral standard. Again, to avoid those outcomes, whether God's nature, goodness and willing the right are the *same* is irrelevant, provided they are essential. (An aside that interested me: Wittgenstein was troubled in the opposite way, that saying "God commands it because it is right" may be more superficial than saying "It is right because God commands it." See Freidrich Waismann, *Ludwig Wittgenstein und der Wiener Kreis*, p. 115, cited by Janik and Toulmin, *Wittgenstein's Vienna*, p. 194, Simon and Scuhuster, NY, 1973.) Nevertheless, I agree that it does make an explanatory advance to be able to spell out how the being of God and the basis of morality are the same.

The last application says that because "it is possible for a logically necessary being to will that certain entities or events be contingent" there is a counter-example to Rowe's principle that "For any contingent fact C, the fact which explains it cannot be a necessary fact, otherwise, C would not be contingent." The objection to Rowe is out of context. It equivocates on "contingent." Rowe's principle concerns "logical" contingency, in contrast to logical necessity, and



concerns explanation of a kind that *necessitates* the explanandum, and is thus, an instance of the general logical truth that the necessary does not imply the contingent. (The argument originates at p. 299-301 of Ross, *Philosophical Theology*, Bobbs Merrill, New York 1969, Hackett, Indianapolis, 1980.) The authors (see pp. 369, 371-73), are using “contingent” in a way that involves “metaphysical contingency,” and “mode of their existence” (pp. 373-75), *as well as* logical contingency.

Moreover, Aquinas says, SG, I, 85, that God could not, by his will, have made “absolute necessity in things” and that contingency is required by the natures of the things God makes. This does not concern the *logical* notion involved in Rowe’s principle.... In any case, what role does simplicity have in this application?

*University of Pennsylvania*

## NOTES

1. They also say Aquinas does not conceive of “contingency” in terms of differences across possible worlds, generally, but in terms of branching time-lines emanating from a single initial possible world-state. (p. 369) (That might be so for a creature whose “otherwise” requires its actual being, but not for God who is, no matter what, and has no time-line.) So it is unclear whether they regard him as holding something very close to their “weakening the claims basic to the doctrine of simplicity” or as being in *disagreement* with their proposed refinement (p. 371).

2. Since the introduction of “absence of real distinction” seems to be a result of earlier commentaries, I think the commentators might have appreciated a more direct acknowledgement.

3. God’s nature is so-called by *analogy* in so far as it is the answer to “what is it?.” But it is not, as with “being a human” related to being as capacity to realization, or as replicable in distinct substances. There is nothing at all in God like that. The authors recognize this (p. 370).

4. I do not mean to imply that no *de re* possibilities and necessities fall within God’s will; just the opposite. See my “God Creator of Kinds and Possibilities,” forthcoming in a collection edited by Audi, R., and Wainwright, W., Cornell University Press and the detailed discussion of eternal truths and natural necessities in *Creation* forthcoming, Un. of Notre Dame Press.

5. I do not use “subsists” in Aquinas’ technical senses, but in a more everyday sense in which I’d say the ‘being colored’ of a red mark subsists in its being red. I do not mind “consists” here, as long as it is understood that it might have “consisted” in its being blue, say. So God’s freedom might have consisted in another choosing, instead. “Consists” in such contexts has to be understood, not as conceptual inclusion, but as “same reality.”

Anything, say a choice, a determinate, that in occurring, IS a thing’s having the determinable, say being free, and exhausts it in actuality because it is without successor or predecessor, is not really distinct from it.

6. If the conditions for a real distinction are properly stated for Aquinas (no mean feat), they

manifest that there can be no real distinction between how-God-is-but-might-not-have-been and *some-way-God-might-have been-but-is-not*. To say "God might have been different" is not to say there IS some *reality* from which God is really different.