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# SIMPLICITY AND FREEDOM: A RESPONSE TO STUMP AND KRETZMANN

William Hasker

One of the merits of Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann's defense of divine simplicity is their statement of difficulties.<sup>1</sup> Before resolving the various objections to the doctrine they formulate each objection as sharply and forcefully as possible, so that it will not be easy for anyone to bring forward a stronger version of it. But are their resolutions successful? In this discussion I will consider one group of objections, having to do with the compatibility of divine simplicity with divine freedom and with creaturely freedom and contingency. I will also consider a benefit which they claim from divine simplicity, consisting in the rehabilitation of the cosmological argument in the face of an objection urged by William Rowe.

My discussion of the difficulty revolves around two propositions which Stump and Kretzmann are forced to defend. After stating each proposition, I explain why they must defend it; this involves setting out the difficulty which the proposition is meant to resolve. Then I expound their defense of the proposition in question, followed by some critical remarks about the success of the defense and of the answer to the objection.

The first proposition is, that *there are actions of God which are freely chosen by him yet such that they occur of necessity and their performance is essential to God*. That some of God's acts are freely chosen is of course a fundamental proposition of theism. But the doctrine of divine simplicity entails that "the standard distinction between an entity's essential and accidental intrinsic properties cannot apply to God," so that "It is impossible that God have any intrinsic accidental properties" (p. 354). This formulation relies on the distinction between real, or intrinsic properties and Cambridge, or extrinsic properties; as an explanation of this distinction they say that "a change in x's extrinsic properties can occur without a change in x, while a change in x's intrinsic properties is as such a change in x" (p. 354). The reason why this distinction is needed is that "no entity, not even a mathematical or a divine entity, can be exempted from having extrinsic accidental properties" (p. 354). (This may however be a mistake; it can be argued that if all of God's intrinsic properties are essential so are all of his extrinsic properties. For let P be an intrinsic property of God's: then *knowing that God has P*, which intuitively ought to be an intrinsic property of God's,



will characterize God in all and only those possible worlds in which God has P, so that if the intrinsic property is essential to God so will the extrinsic property be essential to him. Later on, this point will turn out to be of some importance.)

So if God's performing a certain action is an intrinsic property of God's, it is also an essential property of his, and thus necessary rather than contingent. And if some such action is freely chosen by God, then we have an instance of our first proposition: an action which is freely chosen, yet necessary and essential to God. But how can this be? As Stump and Kretzmann say, "the doctrine of divine free choice can be construed as the claim that some of God's properties are properties he chooses to have" (p. 357)—but how can God choose to have properties which are necessary and essential to him?

In order to reconcile this we begin by clarifying the sense in which God's actions are said to be necessary. Those of God's actions which are freely chosen are not absolutely necessitated but rather conditionally necessitated—for instance: God's keeping his promise to Abraham is conditionally necessary, given that God has made such a promise, since God, being morally perfect, cannot break a promise that he has made. But it is not absolutely necessary; there are possible worlds in which God neither makes nor keeps such a promise.

This point about conditional necessitation does not by itself resolve the difficulty; instead, it points up at least two additional difficulties. First, an action which is even conditionally necessitated would not normally be said to be an instance of free choice; rather, it is a consequence of the necessitating event, which itself may (or may not) be an instance of free choice. But if *all* of God's actions are conditionally necessitated, where is there any room for free choice left? the second question is whether an action which is only conditionally necessary can be said to be essential to God. A being's essential properties are those which it has in all the worlds in which it exists. But there are possible worlds in which God exists but makes no promises to Abraham; indeed, there are possible worlds in which God creates no universe at all. So how can promising and creating be essential to God?

In order to clarify this we must investigate more closely the sense in which creating is said to be both necessary and essential to God. Stump and Kretzmann write:

That God's willing to create (or any other act of divine free choice) is conditionally necessitated is a consequence of God's eternity. Because God is timeless, no change in him is possible. If he does will to create, then, it is not possible for him to change and will not to create. Nor can it be supposed that it is open to God either to create or not to create and that he exercises his option to create, because of course this supposition also entails a change in God: that he is first in the state of neither

willing to create nor willing not to create and then is in the state of willing to create....Willing to create, then, is necessary to God, but only conditionally necessary, where the condition is the fact that he does will to create (p. 367).

So the necessity of God's actions is derived from the immutability of God's will, which is in turn a consequence of the divine timelessness. Still, there are possible worlds in which God does not create, so how is creating essential to him? The answer to this is found in the fact that the notion of essential properties with which Aquinas (and therefore also Stump and Kretzmann) is working is different than our modern notion:

The fact that [Aquinas] maintains views entailing both that there is no contingency in God and that God's status as creator is not a feature of God in every possible world strongly suggests that he does not conceive of contingency in terms of differences across possible worlds generally but, rather, in terms of branching time-lines emanating from a single possible initial world-state. And so we propose taking Thomas's 'essential,' 'necessary,' 'accidental,' and 'contingent' to refer to modalities that can be determined by inspecting some subset of possible worlds consisting of the branching time-lines emanating from a single possible initial world-state—an initial state-set, we will call it (p. 369).

In Thomas, then, we have a whole family of modal concepts, defined in terms of sets of possible worlds which branch out from the same initial state. Henceforth I shall refer to these as *I-modalities*, to distinguish them from ordinary or *O-modalities*. And when Aquinas says that creating is essential to God, we are to understand this as meaning that it is I-essential: that is, that given the actual initial state of the world, which includes God's intention to create, it is I-necessary that God creates and I-impossible that he should not create, in spite of the fact that there are possible worlds (i.e., O-possible worlds) in which he does not create. And so consistency is preserved.

But what is meant, given all this, by the claim that God is free with respect to creating or not creating the universe? Stump and Kretzmann answer as follows:

Because God is eternal and consequently absolutely immutable, we cannot accurately say that God could have willed not to create. But because God's willing to create is not absolutely necessary [i.e., it is not O-necessary], we can correctly say that it might have been the case that God willed not to create (p. 368).

Here, then, we have Stump and Kretzmann's defense of the first main proposition. Is the defense successful? It should be noted, first of all, that their position

involves a particular view concerning the relationship between a timeless being and events in time. An initial state-set of possible worlds can be represented by a diagram which begins on the left with a point representing the initial state, and branches out to the right into the various alternative world-lines. If these worlds contain a timeless being, that being's "eternal now" could be represented by a circle at the top of the page. This circle, of course, will not intersect any of the time-lines, since the "eternal now" is not identical with any moment of time. Stump and Kretzmann's view, however, amounts to drawing a line, as it were, connecting the circle representing the "eternal now" with the point representing the initial state. That is to say: nothing can occur in any of the time-lines leading away from that initial state, which is inconsistent with the contents of the "eternal now"—for instance, with something which God immutably wills to be the case. This view about the relationship of time and eternity is essential to Stump and Kretzmann's case—and its consequences, as we shall see, are momentous.

It is also of interest here to note a comment they make about their own solution: "In a sense...we are weakening the claims basic to the doctrine of simplicity" (p. 369). It seems to me that this is very true: the claim that there is nothing accidental or contingent in God is indeed seriously weakened when it is stipulated to mean only that there is nothing which is I-accidental or I-contingent, though there may be (and in fact are) a great many of God's properties which are O-accidental and O-contingent. To be sure, Stump and Kretzmann could reply that it is Aquinas' doctrine of simplicity which they are expounding and, since the I-modal concepts are the ones Aquinas employs, no actual weakening is involved; rather, the appearance of weakening arises because of our original misunderstanding of Aquinas in terms of modern (or O-) modal concepts. Nevertheless, a question remains concerning the coherence of the doctrine of simplicity as they construe it. If the doctrine of simplicity cannot tolerate there being I-contingent properties in God, how can it tolerate O-contingent properties in him? If on the other hand O-contingent properties are compatible with simplicity, why not I-contingent properties as well?

The part of Stump and Kretzmann's paper which is most relevant to this is 7(ii), "Two sorts of necessity without a real distinction," in which they argue that "the difference between absolutely and conditionally necessitated acts of will does not constitute a metaphysical difference in God's nature" (p. 371). They state that "God wills himself and everything else he wills in a single immutable act of will" (p. 371), and that the unity of this single act is not compromised by the differences in the objects of that act according to which some of them are absolutely and others only conditionally necessitated. It is difficult for me to arrive at a conclusion with regard to the success or failure of this argument.<sup>2</sup> I do, however, note the following point: the argument as they

give it does not seem to depend in any essential way on the claim that those properties of God which are not O-necessary and O-essential are nevertheless I-necessary and I-essential. To put the matter differently, it seems to me that the argument would be equally successful (or unsuccessful) if it were used to support, not merely the claim that O-necessary properties can co-exist in the simple nature of God with those which are O-contingent but I-necessary, but the stronger claim that they can co-exist with properties which are both O-contingent and I-contingent. In order to test this, I suggest that the reader go through the argument, on pp. 371-3, and replace the words “absolutely necessitated” with “necessitated” and the words “conditionally necessitated” with “contingent.” So far as I can see, the force of the argument is unaffected by these substitutions.<sup>3</sup> If I am right about this, and if the argument is in fact successful, then the doctrine of divine simplicity may be able to dispense altogether with the claim that all of God’s acts are necessitated. But this would seem to be a rather radical modification of the doctrine of simplicity, and I doubt very much that Stump and Kretzmann will welcome it.

Let us now return to the question raised, and left unanswered, a few pages ago: Is the conditional necessitation of one of God’s actions consistent with that action’s being freely chosen? The most pertinent thing Stump and Kretzmann say about this is in the passage already cited: “But because God’s willing to create is not absolutely necessary, we can correctly say that it might have been the case that God willed not to create” (p. 368), which is to say that God’s not creating is logically possible. This is undeniably true. Normally, however, more is thought to be required for free choice, than that an alternative to the action is logically possible. The real issue comes down to this: What is it that determines that the universe and God are in one initial world state rather than another? Given the initial world state, all of God’s subsequent actions must be consistent with his intentions as they are in that state—but how does it come about that he has those intentions? Is *this* the result of a free choice on God’s part? It might seem that Stump and Kretzmann answer this question when they say, “which logical possibility is actualized and which logical possibility is left unactualized depends on nothing other than God’s will” (p. 369). But this is *not* a clear-cut answer to our question, because in their view there are many things which depend on God’s *will* which are nevertheless not instances of *free choice* on God’s part—for example, God wills his own perfect goodness, but he wills it of necessity and not as a matter of free choice (p. 364). So our question remains: Is the initial world-state something that is freely chosen by God, or isn’t it?

Suppose, first of all, that the initial world-state is *not* freely chosen by God. All of God’s subsequent actions are determined by that initial world state, so on this supposition it follows that God makes no free choices at all. It would still be true that alternative initial world-states, implying alternative divine

actions, are logically possible. But this is by no means enough for free choice on God's part.

Suppose on the other hand that the initial world-state *is* freely chosen by God. On this alternative the freedom of God's choices is immediately guaranteed—but how do we get the result that this choice of God's is “necessitated” and is such that, as they say, “we cannot accurately say that God could have willed not to create” (p. 368)? To say that God's actions are I-necessary is to say that they are necessitated *by the initial state of the universe*—but how can this have any bearing on the modal status of the choice of that initial state itself?

Stump and Kretzmann's answer to this is found, I believe, in the argument already quoted from p. 367, in which they say, “That God's willing to create (or any other act of divine free choice) is conditionally necessitated is a consequence of God's eternity.” But this argument suffers from a strange and debilitating flaw. The argument may be formalized as follows:

- |     |  |          |
|-----|--|----------|
| (1) | God is timeless.   | Premise  |
| (2) | God is absolutely unchangeable.  | From (1) |
| (3) | God wills to create.   | Premise  |
| (4) | It is not possible for God to change from a state of willing to create to a state of not willing to create.  | From (2) |
| (5) | It is not possible for God to change from a state in which he neither wills to create nor wills not to create, to a state in which he wills not to create. | From (2) |
| (6) | .....  |          |

Therefore,

- |     |  |                            |
|-----|--|----------------------------|
| (7) | It is not the case that God could have willed not to create. | From (3), (4),<br>(5), (6) |
|-----|--|----------------------------|

Line (6) is left open for the insertion of the missing premise, since it is obvious that the argument is not valid with only the premises that have been given. It is, furthermore, clear what the missing premise will have to be. Consider

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|-----|--|---------|
| (6) | If God were to will not to create, then either God would change from a state of willing to create to a state of willing not to create, or God would change from a state in which he neither wills to create nor wills not to create, to a state in which he wills not to create. | Premise |
|-----|--|---------|

If this is, indeed, the missing premise, then the inference from (3), (4), (5), and (6) to (7) is valid. But (6) suffers from a rather serious flaw—it is inconsistent with (1), the premise which asserts the timelessness of God! For if God is timeless, then a decision on his part not to create would not involve a change of either of the kinds considered in (6); such a decision would, rather, be a timeless act involving no change at all. The irony in this is that Stump and Kretzmann repeatedly affirm, throughout their essay, the timelessness of God's acts; so it is passing strange that in this passage they construct an argument which relies on the contrary assumption. Yet I can find no other way to construe the argument they have given us. But it is obvious that such an argument offers no support for their contention that God's decision to create is conditionally necessitated, and that God could not have willed not to create. And their failure to support this contention must be judged to be a serious flaw in their entire case.

The second major proposition Stump and Kretzmann must defend, is that *the conditional necessitation of God's acts of will is consistent with the existence of contingency and free choice in the objects of those acts*. The need for this proposition is obvious. It has already been affirmed that all God's acts are at least conditionally necessitated, and it is a basic tenet of theism that created beings (towards which many of God's acts are directed) are contingent and that some of them exercise free choice. But the difficulty is also obvious: Since "God wills that P" entails "P," it would seem that the necessitation of God's acts of will must pass over to the objects of those acts, which will therefore be necessitated in just the same way as God's acts themselves.

The basic answer to this objection is implicit in what has already been said, and is made clear in the following quotation from Aquinas.

Conditional necessity in a cause cannot result in absolute necessity in the effect. But God wills something with regard to creatures not with absolute necessity but only with the necessity that comes from a condition, as was shown above. Therefore, absolute necessity in created things cannot result from the divine will; but it is only absolute necessity that rules out contingency (SCG I 85; pp. 373-4).

That is to say: God's acts of will are I-necessary, but not O-necessary, and so the objects of those acts are also I-necessary, but this does not rule out their being O-contingent. This is true enough, but it makes Stump and Kretzmann's phrase, "Necessity in the will and contingency in its objects" (p. 373), seem rather misleading. It is true, on this view, that God's acts of will are necessary—that is, I-necessary—and that its creaturely objects are contingent—that is, O-contingent. But it is also true that the acts of will are O-contingent, and that the



creaturely objects are I-necessary. So the apparent contrast between the two, with respect to modal status, turns out to be illusory.

So the conditional necessitation of God's acts of will is consistent with O-contingency in creatures—but is it consistent with *free choice* in the creatures? Once again we are confronted with the same problem raised above: Isn't more needed for freedom of choice, than the mere logical possibility of alternative courses of action? The answer in this case, however, is clearer and easier than it is when we are considering divine action. A timeless God, perhaps, can make choices outside of time which determine the possibilities, and actualities, within time. But human agents cannot do this; they are limited to the alternatives as they exist within time as they make their choices. And if we accept Stump and Kretzmann's view about the relationship between God and time, these alternatives are quite limited—or rather non-existent. Take for example God's intention to keep his promise to Abraham.<sup>4</sup> This intention, obviously enough, entails the existence of Abraham, and so it entails that none of the persons who conceivably might have done something which would have prevented Abraham's existence (for instance, by causing one of his ancestors to die childless) could possibly have done so; their doing such a thing is I-impossible. But of course God has many more intentions than the intention to keep that promise to Abraham. It would in fact commonly be thought that, for each thing that does in fact happen God has a specific intention either to bring that thing about or to permit its being brought about by finite agents and to sustain their existence as they do so. But it is I-necessary, on Stump and Kretzmann's view, that things take place as God intends and knows that they shall take place, and I-impossible that they should take place otherwise. In fact, our notion of the branching diagram of world-lines emanating from a single initial world state will now have to be revised. If the timeless being in the diagram is the Christian God, there are no branching world-lines; there is only a single line, representing the only possible world which is consistent with the things intended and known by the timeless God in that initial state.

What we have come to here is of course the well-known problem of divine foreknowledge and human freedom.<sup>5</sup> It is often thought that the doctrine of divine timelessness offers a way to escape from this problem, and Stump and Kretzmann seem to endorse this view.<sup>6</sup> But this escape is closed off if we accept their view about the relationship of the timeless God to events in time. On that view, God does not, indeed, intend things or know things *in time*, but the consequences with regard to the possibilities that exist in time are just the same as if he did: whatever God timelessly knows and wills is from the very beginning I-necessary, and anything else is I-impossible.<sup>7</sup>

We turn, finally, to an advantage Stump and Kretzmann claim to derive from their view with respect to the cosmological argument. The form of this argument

which they have in view appeals to the principle of sufficient reason, which requires that every contingent fact should have a deductive explanation. William Rowe has recently argued that this principle is false; a crucial premise in his argument is

(R) For any contingent fact C the fact which explains it cannot be a necessary fact, otherwise C would not be contingent.<sup>8</sup>

To this Stump and Kretzmann reply:

As we have explained it here, the doctrine of simplicity entails that God is a necessary being all of whose acts of will are at least conditionally necessitated, and that among these acts of will is the volition that certain things be contingent. No matter what the modal status of God's conditionally necessitated acts of will may be, if it is possible for a logically necessary, omnipotent being to will that certain entities or events be contingent, as we have given some reason for thinking it is, then (R) is false (p. 377).

Stump and Kretzmann express themselves in this passage (and not only in this passage: see p. 374) in a way that suggests endorsement of an argument which is patently question-begging. It is undeniable that "God necessarily wills that E occur contingently" entails "E occurs contingently." But this observation has no force whatever when what is in question is the *consistency* of the claim that God necessarily wills contingent events. For the objection that must be met claims that "God necessarily wills that E occur" entails "E occurs of necessity." And *this* entailment is in no way canceled or invalidated by adding to the premise that E's occurrence is to be contingent—rather, that addition leaves us with an inconsistent premise and a contradictory conclusion.

It is possible, however, that Stump and Kretzmann do not intend to endorse this question-begging argument. For they have, indeed, given other arguments to show that God's necessitated acts of will can have as their objects contingent events. The main such argument is the one considered above, to the effect that God's acts of will can be I-necessary while their creaturely effects are O-contingent. And this, as we have seen, is indeed logically possible.

But how does this show Rowe's (R) to be false? In formulating (R) Rowe naturally had in view ordinary logical necessity and contingency—in our terminology, O-necessity and O-contingency. There is nothing whatever in his article to suggest that he had in view anything like our I-modal concepts. But if (R) is understood in this way, the situation Stump and Kretzmann have in mind—God's conditionally necessitated willing that certain things be contingent—is in no way in conflict with (R), for God's act of will, though I-necessary, is nevertheless O-contingent, just as (R) says it should be. So Stump and Kretzmann have not

refuted (R), and a cosmological argument which depends on the principle criticized by Rowe gets no help from them.

In summary, it seems to me that these considerations point to some serious weaknesses in Stump and Kretzmann's defense of divine simplicity. To be sure, the doctrine of simplicity may not be intimately related to the cosmological argument, and so the failure of their attempted rehabilitation of that argument may not be an especially serious problem for them. But the other problems noted here cut pretty deep. If the doctrine of simplicity cannot be shown to be consistent with human and divine freedom, then that doctrine cannot be accepted as part of the Christian conception of God.

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### NOTES

1. Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, "Absolute Simplicity," *Faith and Philosophy* 2 (October 1985): pp. 353-382). Page references in the text are to this article.
2. The main reason for this is my insufficient grasp on the notion of "real distinctions" in the divine nature. The closest Stump and Kretzmann come to a definition of this notion is on p. 354: "the doctrine rules out the possibility of components of any kind in the divine nature." But this leaves me in need of a definition of "component."
3. (The replacement cannot be made in the second paragraph on p. 371, but this is an expository paragraph which is not properly part of the argument.)
4. At times Stump and Kretzmann suggest that such specific actions in the world are extrinsic rather than intrinsic properties of God—and if so, they might not be I-necessary (see pp. 356, 366). Indeed, it is because of this possibility that they take as their primary example God's decision to create rather than to not create. They do not, however, formally commit themselves to the view that (for example) intending to keep his promise to Abraham is not an intrinsic property of God's. It seems to me that this view cannot be maintained; for a person to intend something simply *is* for that person to be in an intrinsic state which corresponds in a determinate way with the thing intended. And similarly with knowing. If God is not in an intrinsic state of intending to keep his promise, and knowing that he will do so, then God just does not know or intend this.
5. For a discussion of this, see my "Foreknowledge and Necessity," *Faith and Philosophy* 2 (April 1985): pp. 121-157.
6. See their "Eternity," *Journal of Philosophy* 78 (August 1981): p. 453f. In "Absolute Simplicity," p. 374, they indicate that they accept an incompatibilist view of free will.
7. For more on this see "Foreknowledge and Necessity," p. 129f.
8. William Rowe, "Rationalistic Theology and Some Principles of Explanation," *Faith and Philosophy* 1 (October 1984): p. 362.