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SIMPLICITY MADE PLAINER: A REPLY TO ROSS

Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann

The authors try to show that many of the differences between Ross and themselves are only apparent, masking considerable agreement. Among the real disagreements, at least one is over the interpretation of Aquinas's account of divine simplicity, but the most central disagreement consists in the authors' claim that their concern was not with a distinction between the way God is and the way he might have been (as Ross suggests) but with the difference between the way God is necessarily and the way he is contingently. Finally, the authors argue that the concept of simplicity is indeed required for the solution of the problems discussed at the end of their original article.

Apparent opposition and underlying agreement characterize almost all of Professor Ross's comments on our "Absolute Simplicity" (*Faith and Philosophy* 2 [1985], pp. 353-382 and 383-391). Much of what he wants us to have said we do say, only not just as he wants us to have said it.

In the Introduction to his comments Ross offers a general criticism which informs several of his particular objections: He thinks our position unnecessarily weakens Aquinas's account of divine simplicity. But this is a misunderstanding. Ross has taken a wrong impression from our observation "In a sense, then, we are weakening the claims basic to the doctrine of simplicity" (p. 369). Those claims, which we derive from Aquinas, contain modal terms to which most philosophers will give too strong an interpretation. We weaken the claims only in the sense that we try to bring the currently standard interpretation of those terms into line with what we take to be Aquinas's understanding of them.

Ross's first particular objection concerns our use of the sense-reference distinction in introducing the concept of absolute simplicity. He thinks we are mistaken in claiming that "perfect knowledge" and "perfect power" are identical in reference but different in sense; we ought to have said that "they differ in reference, too, but not in referent" (Ross, p. 383). They differ in reference, as he puts it, because the one expression is used to refer to God's knowledge, while the other is used to refer to God's power; but their single referent is God. Nothing but terminology divides him from us on this issue. We speak of "non-synonymous expressions designating quite distinct manifestations of one and the same thing"



(pp. 356-357). It is that difference in designation which corresponds to Ross's "difference of reference," as he may indeed be acknowledging when he concludes this objection by saying "it is, I take it, the 'distinct manifestations' that are referred to" (Ross, p. 389).

Ross's attack on the misapplication of "Leibnizian identity" in discussions of divine simplicity, coming in the midst of criticisms of what we say, can easily be misread as an attack on our article. It isn't; he ends it by saying "I think we agree about that," and we think he's right. But the generalized attack is meant to prepare the way for one he does direct against our position as he sees it. The precise point of the criticism is hard to make out, but as it develops, we are described as proposing an unnecessary "retrenchment," as backing away from Aquinas's position. On the contrary, we try to show that what Ross calls our retrenchment *is* Aquinas's position, and that Aquinas is right to hold it. (At this point there does seem to be a real division between Ross and us, at least over the reading of Aquinas.) Ross's objection here stems from his claim that "The authors also accept that God would have been really different, had he done something else or nothing at all" (Ross, p. 385). But the position we are here said to accept is in fact one that we argue against at length, concluding the contrary of this position more than once—e.g., "Even if we should go so far as to say that with regard to some but not all of its objects God's will itself might have been different from what it is, this counterfactual claim shows us again only a logical distinction and not a metaphysical difference within the divine will itself" (p. 372).

Ross rejects our attempt to answer the question "why there is no real distinction between the divine nature and the logically contingent 'act of creating'" (Ross, p. 386). More precisely, he denies that we provide anything that could count as a reasoned answer, and he offers what he considers a better answer to the question. His answer has four parts. The first, third, and fourth parts seem to us to be clearly not relevant to the question why there is no real distinction in God if he has both contingent and necessary attributes. The second does seem relevant; it reads this way: "God's being as he chooses, from eternity, ... is not a *real* difference from a determinate 'would otherwise have been'" (Ross, p. 386). Ross is apparently arguing that God's being *F* although he might have been *G* doesn't count as a real difference in God just because *G* isn't determinate. But if *G* isn't determinate, what sense can be made of the claim that God might have been *G*? Second, and more important, even if we were to accept what Ross says here, is it really relevant to the question at issue? The distinction we're concerned with is not between the way God is and the way he might have been but rather *within* the way he is: between the way he is necessarily and the way he is contingently. Ross's better answer addresses the wrong question.

A consideration of an example Ross uses to elucidate his answer helps to show

the answer's inappropriateness. Imagining something—call it NC—that is by nature colored and that must by nature choose what color it is, he says that NC's being red isn't really distinct from its being colored. Why not? Apparently, as Ross sees it, just because there is a "real sameness of the actual red of a thing with the color of the thing" (Ross, p. 386). We certainly wouldn't challenge that sameness in general, but the question he and we are addressing arises from noticing, as regards NC and things like it in relevant respects, that although the thing *must* be colored, it *needn't* be red. Pointing out that *as a matter of fact* NC's being colored just *is* its being red does nothing to dispel our conviction that there is a real difference between NC's being necessarily colored and NC's being contingently red.

At least twice during his examination of our analysis and defense of the concept of simplicity, Ross complains about our use of modal terms, claiming that we don't clearly distinguish their senses (e.g., Ross, pp. 387 and 388). But in our article we do examine just such distinctions and explain which sense we are relying on (e.g., pp. 360-e61 and 367-369), and when we use modal terms without such specified senses, we think the context clearly indicates the intended sense.

The concluding section of Ross's comments addresses our applications of the doctrine of simplicity. He begins his criticism of our applications by denying that simplicity is needed to resolve the problems of essential goodness and of omnipotence and impeccability. We do introduce these problems as "closely connected" with our main problem regarding simplicity and free choice, but we say only that "the development of the doctrine [of simplicity] and the resolution of its difficulties provide grounds on which to resolve" those closely connected problems (p. 375). We do not say that the doctrine of simplicity itself is needed to resolve those problems, nor do we ourselves include a discussion of them among our applications of the doctrine.

But Ross also has criticisms of the two applications we do make in Section 8. On his view simplicity is irrelevant to the Euthyphro paradox, for which, he thinks, all that matters is that God's goodness is *essential* to him (Ross, p. 389). Here he is mistaken, though; for the voluntarist, too, can maintain that God's goodness is essential, if he means by this that whatever God wills is good simply in virtue of the fact that God wills it. So adherents of theological objectivism (TO) and adherents of theological subjectivism (TS) can agree that God's goodness is essential to him. Furthermore, Aquinas's view (cited approvingly by Ross) that "the divine nature, the very being of God, is the standard of moral law" (Ross, p. 389) entails but is not entailed by the claim that God's goodness is essential to him; and so the two are not interchangeable, as he suggests. An adherent of (TO) who maintains merely that God's goodness is essential would not thereby be provided with a basis on which to deny that God's goodness

conforms to an ultimate standard extrinsic to himself. To maintain Aquinas's view, then, as we argued in our article, requires the doctrine of simplicity, according to which God's willing is identical with his nature.

In our concluding application of the doctrine of simplicity to Rowe's discussion of the cosmological argument we say that "it is possible for a logically necessary, omnipotent being to will that certain entities or events be contingent" (p. 377). In commenting on this passage Ross says (1) that we're equivocating on the modalities, (2) that Rowe is (but we aren't) talking about an explanation which necessitates the explanandum, and (3) that in any case simplicity, again, has nothing to do with it (Ross, pp. 389-390). We disagree with him on all three counts. (1) In our claim the modalities are explicitly logical. (2) Rowe maintains that there cannot be a contingent fact C which is explained by a necessary fact N. Let C be the fact that there is a contingent entity, where by "contingent" we mean logically contingent. Then C is explained—necessitated, in Rowe's sense of "explained"—by a logically necessary fact, the fact that God exists. (3) As for the involvement of simplicity, perhaps it can be seen more clearly by beginning with an ordinary, unreflective distinction between God's existing and God's willing. On that basis C is *not* explained by a necessary fact but only by a combination of a necessary fact (that God exists) and a contingent fact (that God wills C). But once simplicity has been introduced, God's willing cannot be really distinguished from his being, which is necessary. It is in that way that the doctrine of simplicity is crucial to our claim that C—a logically contingent fact—is explained by a logically necessary fact.

We're grateful for Professor Ross's comments. In our reply we've tried to show that many of the differences between him and us are only apparent, and we hope to have helped our underlying agreement to emerge more clearly.

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