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DIVINE SIMPLICITY: A NEW DEFENSE

William F. Vallicella

The doctrine of divine simplicity, according to which God is devoid of physical or metaphysical complexity, is widely believed to be incoherent. I argue that although two prominent recent attempts to defend it fail, it can be defended against the charge of obvious incoherence. The defense rests on the isolation and rejection of a crucial assumption, namely, that no property is an individual. I argue that there is nothing in our ordinary concepts of property and individual to warrant the assumption, and that once the assumption is rejected, the way is clear to viewing the divine attributes as self-exemplifying properties whose self-exemplification entails their identity with an individual.

Among the entailments of the classical theistic doctrine of divine simplicity as found in Augustine, Anselm and Aquinas are such baffling claims as that God is identical with each of his essential properties; that these properties are identical with each other; and that there is no distinction in God between essence and existence. If true, the simplicity doctrine promises the theist considerable advantages: a possible way around the Euthyphro Paradox,¹ an explanation of why God is a necessary being,² and a premise for a short non-modal ontological argument.³ But not only does the doctrine promise these advantages, it also seems to be an inescapable logical consequence of the central theistic idea that, necessarily, God is the creator and sustainer of everything distinct from himself. This has been rigorously and persuasively argued by Brian Leftow.⁴ The argument in outline is that since God cannot create his own nature, and since everything distinct from God is existentially dependent on God, God is identical with his nature.

Unfortunately, however, the simplicity doctrine will strike many philosophers as it does Quentin Smith, who writes that "this doctrine is plainly self-contradictory, and its hold on some people's minds testifies to the predominance of faith over intellectual coherence in some Christian circles."⁵ And indeed it does seem self-contradictory to say that God, an individual, is identical with his essential properties, since this seems to imply that God is a property and hence not an individual.⁶ And so the simplicity doctrine seems to issue in the absurdity that God both is and is not an individual. It also seems to entail that God both has and does not have a plurality of properties.⁷



For if God by definition is omniscient, omnipotent, etc., then he has a plurality of properties; but if these properties are identical with one another, then he does not have a plurality of properties, but exactly one property. One might even argue that if this one property is simplicity, then God cannot possess the property of existence. Hence if God is simple, he does not exist, and if he exists, he is not simple!⁸

Although Leftow has shown that what he calls the Identity Thesis (the core of the simplicity doctrine) can be derived from the claim that, necessarily, God creates everything distinct from himself, he leaves largely undiscussed the question of the logical coherence of the Identity Thesis itself.⁹ If this thesis is inconsistent, no argument in its support can be sound. What is needed, then, is a direct assault on the consistency question.

My aim here is accordingly modest: not to argue for the truth of the doctrine, but to argue for its consistency. Even more modestly, perhaps, my aim is to show, *contra* Smith, Plantinga, and a host of others, that it is not *obviously* inconsistent or otherwise repugnant to the intellect. But before advancing to the positive task, we do well to examine a couple of extant approaches both of which in my judgment fail.

1. *The Approach of Stump and Kretzmann*

According to Stump and Kretzmann, the names of the divine attributes

...are all identical in reference but different in sense, referring in various ways to the one actual entity which is God himself or designating various manifestations of it. [Which is it? Different ways of referring to one thing, or reference to different things?] 'Perfect power' and 'perfect knowledge' are precise analogues for 'the morning star' and 'the evening star': non-synonymous expressions designating quite distinct manifestations of one and the same thing....'Perfect power is identical with perfect knowledge' does not entail that power is identical with knowledge any more than the fact that the summit of a mountain's east slope is identical with the summit of its west slope entails the identity of the slopes.¹⁰

This passage is confusing, employing as it does two distinct analogies that are dubious in themselves and not obviously compatible with each other. The Fregean analogy compares identity of properties with identity of individuals: the implication is that just as there is no problem in understanding how the morning star can be identical with the evening star once we distinguish the sense and reference of the relevant expressions, so also there is no problem in understanding how perfect power can be identical with perfect knowledge: you just distinguish the senses of these terms from each other and from their common referent. The senses are distinct, but the referent, God, is one and the same. Presumably, the senses of "perfect power" and "perfect knowledge" are the properties perfect power and perfect knowledge, respectively, which, we are told, are different manifestations of God. In Fregean jargon, they are

different *Darstellungsweisen*, modes of presentation, of one and the same thing. But this implies that the two divine attributes in question are *not* identical, but as distinct as the senses of “morning star” and “evening star.” The point is that the Fregean gambit *requires* the distinctness of senses in order to account for the informativeness of the identity claim; and so if the attributes in question are senses, they must be really distinct. If, on the other hand, the attributes are not senses but identical with each other and with God, then we need to be told what the distinct senses of “perfect power” and “perfect knowledge” are. If no answer is forthcoming, the Fregean analogy collapses.

It will not help to say that omniscience and omnipotence differ as concepts (“in the mind”) but are identical as properties (“outside the mind”), for even if this is true, it has not been explained how the properties can be identical with one another and with God. The problem is one of metaphysics, not of philosophy of language. The problem is to explain how God can be identical with his properties, not to explain how informative identity statements like “God is omniscience” and “Omniscience is omnipotence” are possible. Frege’s *Sinn/Bedeutung* distinction may help us with the latter problem; but it seems unavailing when applied to the former.

Whereas the Fregean analogy suggests that perfect power and perfect knowledge are distinct as distinct modes of presentation of one and the same thing = God, the slope/summit analogy suggests something quite different, namely, that the attributes are identical. This is of course more in line with what is needed. What the analogy is intended to suggest is that even if *F*-ness and *G*-ness are distinct, perfect *F*-ness and perfect *G*-ness can be identical, just as the slopes are distinct shy of the summit, but identical at the summit. But this analogy, although a neat representation of the identity of perfect power and perfect knowledge assuming the coherence of this identity, does nothing to *show* the coherence or refute the charge of incoherence. One might as well try to prove the consistency of the doctrine of the Trinity by producing a can of “Three-in-One” oil.¹¹ The intellect has exigencies of which the picture-loving imagination knows nothing.

2. Mann’s Approach

It is one thing to say that God is identical with each of his properties; quite another to say that he is identical with each of his property-instances. Mann’s way, derived from Aquinas, is the latter.¹² Accordingly, God is identical, not with omniscience, but with *his* (instantiation of) omniscience. And similarly with the other attributes. If we take this tack, we avoid the consequence that God is a property with all its supposedly absurd implications.

Mann has recently conceded to T. V. Morris¹³ that the property instance view faces a damaging objection: if God is (identically) an instance of a

property *P*, then God is dependent on *P* to be what he is, namely, an instance of *P*. The divine aseity is thus compromised. As Mann puts it,

It looks as though a simplicist is confronted with a dilemma. If he adopts the property instance view, then he violates the thesis that God exists *a se*. If he adopts the property view, then he is subject to the withering scorn heaped on that view by Alvin Plantinga.¹⁴

Mann would avoid the dilemma by grasping both horns. "What I propose is to identify God's omniscience with omniscience itself."¹⁵ In saying this Mann clearly evades Morris' objection, but at the price of abandoning the property instance approach in favor of the property approach. This lays him open to the Plantinga objection which the original property instance theory avoided.

Recall that Plantinga's objection was that God cannot be a property since properties, being abstract, are causally inert, whereas God as traditionally conceived is an agent. To handle this admittedly powerful objection, Mann isolates and rejects "...an unspoken assumption, namely, that properties are abstract objects, incapable of the personal attributes essential to a traditional conception of God."¹⁶ What they are instead, according to Mann, are "causal powers." The implication is obvious: "...if properties are causal powers and if God is a property, then he is a causal power."¹⁷

But what exactly is Mann's claim here? Clarity bids us distinguish among the following:

- (1) Properties are causal powers.
- (2) Properties have causal powers.
- (3) Properties confer causal powers on the things that exemplify them.

It would appear that (3) is what Mann has in mind:

P is a property of an object, *x*, only if *P*'s presence in *x* confers some causal power(s) on *x*. *P* and *Q* are the same property if and only if (1) *P* and *Q* confer the same causal powers on their objects and (2) whatever is sufficient to bring about an instance of *P* in an object, *x*, is sufficient to bring about an instance of *Q* in *x*, and vice versa.¹⁸

(3) has some initial plausibility.¹⁹ Suppose it is true. And suppose, even more charitably, that (3) and (1) express the same or logically equivalent propositions. How does this help Mann's project? How does it show that God, if a property, is not an abstract object bereft of causal efficacy? For causal powers are themselves abstract, hence causally inert. I have the power to run 5 miles in 40 minutes. But this power does not itself have the power to run 5 miles in 40 minutes. What Mann needs is something along the lines of (2): properties have causal powers. God's being a property would then entail that God *has* causal powers. (2), however, is independent of (1) and (3). And so even

if we grant Mann that all genuine (as opposed to what Mann calls mere “Notre Dame”) properties confer causal powers on their possessors, it does not follow that all genuine properties *have* causal powers. Of course, if the simplicity doctrine is coherent, then there is no difference between God’s being and having causal power(s), but the coherence of the doctrine is precisely what is at issue.

Thus the view that properties are or confer causal powers does not rescue the simplicity doctrine (in its property form) from Plantinga’s objection. So far, then, we have good reason to think the simplicity doctrine incoherent, and no reason to think it coherent.

3. *Property and Individual: An Untenable Dualism*

The doctrine of divine simplicity confronts us with a pair of questions: (i) How can God be identical with the properties he exemplifies? and (ii) How can the divine properties be identical with one another? If these two can be answered, the problem of how essence and existence can be identical in God should also be amenable to solution. But since this problem harbors special difficulties, its treatment will be reserved for a separate article.

A short way with (i) would be to say that God just is a property, in which case there would be no difficulty in understanding how he could be identical with properties. But this is counterintuitive in the extreme. Properties, although ingredients of the real, are *inert* ingredients thereof. They neither act nor react; they neither do nor suffer. Given that God is an agent, he cannot be a property unless (and this is an important qualification) he is a property that is identical with an individual. We can therefore agree with Plantinga when he says that “No property could have created the world; no property could be omniscient, or indeed, know anything at all,”²⁰ while disagreeing with his tacit assumption that no property is an individual.

Thus there is no easy answer to (i). God is in some sense an individual. If so, how can he be identical with his properties? The problem arises on the plausible assumption that a categorial chasm divides properties and individuals such that, necessarily, no property is an individual. But this might be an untenable dualism. It might be that some properties are identical with individuals. But to discuss this further we need to define our terms. Suppose we agree that

- (I) x is an individual iff (i) x exemplifies properties, (ii) x is not multiply exemplifiable, and (iii) x is not exemplifiable by anything distinct from itself;²¹

and

- (P) P is a property iff P is possibly such that it is exemplified.²²

Is (I) adequate? Call every individual other than God an “ordinary” individual, whether it be a continuant, set, event-token, or anything else that is not

a property or relation. Surely every ordinary individual satisfies clause (i). Clause (ii) is satisfied since ordinary individuals are not exemplifiable and *a fortiori* not multiply exemplifiable. For the same reason, every ordinary individual satisfies clause (iii). So (I) has no counterexample among ordinary individuals. Nor is God a counterexample to (I). So (I) rules *in* all individuals. But does it rule *out* all properties? Clause (ii) rules out all multiply exemplifiable properties, and clause (iii) rules out all properties *P* which are such that, if they are exemplified, they are exemplified by exactly one item other than *P*, whether in the actual world, or in all possible worlds. Thus clause (iii) excludes such properties as being the teacher of Plato, and being identical to Socrates. So (I) rules out everything normally considered to be a property. (Something exemplifiable only by itself is not normally considered a property.)

Turning now to (P), we can see that it rules out every ordinary individual, and rules in every property. So both (P) and (I) seem intuitively adequate: they capture what we mean by “individual” and “property” across the entire range of normal cases. But the (P)-(I) pair does not enforce a dichotomy between individuals and properties; admirably latitudinarian, it allows for some properties to be identical to individuals. For if a property *Q* were exemplifiable only by itself it would count as a property according to (P) but also as an individual according to (I). Such a non-multiply exemplifiable self-exemplifying property *Q*, if exemplified, would not be exemplified by anything distinct from itself, thus satisfying clause (iii) of (I). Such a property would be both a property and an individual. As such, it would have some of the characteristics normally associated with properties, and some of the characteristics normally associated with individuals. Properties, for example, are necessary beings but causally inert; individuals are capable of exerting causality. And so a thing that is both a property and an individual could be understood to be both necessary and causally efficacious.

No doubt the above definitions of “individual” and “property” have been constructed with an eye toward saving divine simplicity from the jaws of incoherence. But it doesn't follow that the definitions are merely *ad hoc* or epicyclic. I would say instead that the usual definitions, according to which, necessarily, no property is an individual, beg the question against divine simplicity. In so doing they represent an illicit extrapolation beyond what we can claim to know on the basis of the normal range of cases. They ought to be rejected in favor of the more modest definitions proposed here which capture everything that needs to be captured regarding the normal range of cases.

4. *Simplicity via Self-Exemplification*

Are there any properties identical with individuals? Let us first be clear that

- (4) Some properties are identical with individuals

is logically compatible with

- (5) No property qua property is an individual

and with

- (6) The property of being a property is distinct from the property of being an individual.

(5) and (6) are each undeniable; some sort of distinction between property and individual is a necessary feature of any conceptual scheme of which we can conceive. But it does not follow that no thing to which the concept *property* applies is a thing to which the concept *individual* applies.

Are there, then, any properties identical with individuals? Yes, every property whose self-exemplification entails its identity with an individual. Among these, I shall argue, are the divine attributes.

No doubt there are self-exemplifying properties. Examples include existence, self-identity, being a property, being abstract, being self-exemplifying, being unextended, being inanimate. A curious feature of such properties is that each is identical with one of the properties it has, namely, itself. (That there are such partially ontologically simple entities should soften us up for the idea that there is a wholly ontologically simple entity.) Existence exists, self-identity is self-identical, etc. But these are all *multiply* exemplifiable, and thus not candidates for the office of property whose self-exemplification entails its identity with an individual. Now consider omniscience. It is not obviously self-exemplifying (like the above examples), but it is not obviously non-self-exemplifying either (like the property of being married to Heidegger). And so the theist is not barred by logic or any canon of coherence from taking the view that omniscience is self-exemplifying. If it is self-exemplifying, then omniscience is omniscient; but not only that, omniscience = an omniscient *individual*. For it makes no sense to say that a property distinct from every individual is all-knowing. This would imply that some such properties are conscious. Although there is the property of being conscious, and the property of being an accusative of consciousness, the *subject* of consciousness, that which is conscious, cannot be a property, unless of course it is identical with an individual.

Similarly for the other divine attributes. Since there is no contradiction in holding that omnipotence is self-exemplifying, there is no logical inconsistency in the view that omnipotence is omnipotent, and hence identical to an omnipotent individual. Still, it might be thought absurd to suppose that a property can have causal efficacy. But there is no absurdity if the property in question is identical to an individual. Indeed, if omnipotence is omnipotent, then it *must* be identical with an individual given the plausible assumption that properties distinct from individuals are causally inert.

This allows us to say that each divine attribute is identical to some individual. Of course, it doesn't straightaway follow from this that each attribute is identical to the same individual in a way that would insure the identity of the attributes with one another. But it does follow if the divine attributes are necessarily coextensive. So one can, without contradiction, hold that there is one individual = God with whom each attribute is identical. And then, given the transitivity of identity, it would follow that the attributes are identical with each other.

The argument, then, is this:

- (7) Each divine attribute, as both self-exemplifying and such that its possessor cannot be non-conscious, is identical with some individual or other.
- (8) Necessarily, the divine attributes are coextensive.

Therefore

- (9) There is exactly one individual with which each attribute is identical.

Therefore, by Transitivity of Identity,

- (10) The attributes are identical with each other.

No doubt some will reject (8) by invoking the putative possibility of a being who has one or more of the divine attributes without having them all, e.g., a being who is omniscient but not omnipotent, or vice versa. But it is not clear that this is a genuine possibility. Consider the following argument which makes use of the characteristic S4 axiom of modal propositional logic, to wit, "Nec p → Nec Nec p:"

- (11) If (8) is false, then necessarily, (8) is false.
- (12) Possibly, (8) is true.

Therefore, by Modus Tollens,

- (13) (8) is true.

This argument appeals in its minor premise to the intuition that it is possible that the divine attributes be *necessarily* coextensive. My opponent's intuition, however, entails that it is *impossible* that the attributes be necessarily coextensive as the following argument shows:

- (14) Possibly, the attributes are not coextensive.
- (15) Necessarily, (14) (from (14) by characteristic S5 axiom: "Poss p → Nec Poss p").
- (16) Impossibly, -(14) (from (15)).
- (17) It is impossible that the attributes be necessarily coextensive (from (16)).

Since my opponent's intuition entails the questionable (17), I am justified in holding that it is possible that the attributes be necessarily coextensive, which, via (11), entails that the attributes are necessarily coextensive. At least I am as justified in rejecting, as my opponent is in accepting, (17).

The divine attributes, therefore, are both necessarily coextensive and, by the argument (7)-(10), identical with one another. Note, however, that the reason for saying that they are identical with one another is not that necessarily coextensive properties are identical — Mann's view, which is false — but that each divine attribute is identical with an individual, and the individuals are identical with one another.

5. The Divine Attributes as Haecceities

Having argued that the divine attributes are necessarily coextensive, we must now confront the different question of whether they are multiply exemplifiable. Is it possible, for instance, that there be two or more omniscient, omnipotent, omnibenevolent, etc. beings? If this is a genuine possibility, it rules out divine simplicity.²³ But given the soundness of the foregoing argument (7)-(10) for the identity of the divine attributes with each other and with God, it follows that it is not a genuine possibility. For suppose the divine attributes are exemplified by two beings. Given that each is identical with its attributes, it would follow by Transitivity of Identity that each is identical with the other, which contradicts the supposition. Hence the divine attributes are not multiply exemplifiable.

It follows that each divine attribute is a haecceity. Thus omniscience is the property of being identical to the omniscient being. Given that omniscience is self-exemplifying, it follows that the property of being identical to the omniscient being is identical to the omniscient being.

We have now attained the modest goal of this paper. It remains to consider some objections.

6. Is it Coherent to Suppose that the Divine Attributes are Self-Exemplifying?

You say that there is no contradiction in holding that omnipotence is self-exemplifying, but arguably there is. Omnipotence is the first-level property of being all-powerful. First-level properties are properties of individuals. But if omnipotence is self-exemplifying, it is a property of a property, which contradicts the assumption that omnipotence is a first-level property.

This is no objection to my theory. A first-level property is one that can be meaningfully predicated of individuals. (Thus being red is first-level, being numerous is not.) But it does not follow that no first-level property is also a second-level property. Existence, self-identity, being inanimate, being unextended, being spatially unlocatable, are each both first-level and second-level

properties. Cartesian minds and extensionless points are unextended, but so are properties. Cartesian minds, unlike extensionless points, are spatially unlocatable, but so are properties. Omnipotence as self-exemplifying, then, is both first-level and second-level. The objection collapses once it is realized that first- and second-level properties do not form mutually disjoint classes. Note also that if the objection were sound, it would prove too much, for it would prove that no first-level property is self-exemplifying, which is contradicted by the examples just given.

At this point the objector may just insist that omnipotence, omniscience, etc. are not self-exemplifying. She may even announce that these are “analytic truths” on the strength of the claim that no property is powerful or knowledgeable. But this would be but to genuflect before the dogma, already rejected, that no property is an individual. So it would appear that the objector can do no better than to beg the question against us.

7. *Modal Uniformity and the Supervenience of Omniscience*

If God is identical with his properties, then they are “modally uniform:” there can be no distinction between essential and accidental properties of God, which is to say, all such properties are essential.²⁴ This of course presents a problem: we want to say, among other things, that God contingently created this world, that he might have created a different possible world, or no world at all. If so, it cannot be the case that God is identical with the property of having created this world. For that would entail that, necessarily, God created this world.

Here is a second form of the difficulty. Although God is essentially omniscient in that he knows all the conjuncts of whichever conjunction of propositions happens to be the conjunction of all true propositions, he is not essentially such that he knows the conjunction of all truths. For this conjunction is contingent, containing as it does such contingent propositions as *Kasparov succeeded Karpov as world chess champion*. Simply put, the content of omniscience might have been otherwise. Hence God cannot be identical with the property of knowing the conjunction of (what in fact are) all truths.

These problems are sidestepped easily enough. The simplicity theorist need not hold that God is identical with all his properties; he need only hold that he is identical with all his essential properties. Thus we cannot accept the Augustinian idea that a simple being “is what it has” (*quod habet hoc est*) without qualifications.²⁵ For taken full strength, it implies that a simple being has no accidental properties. The property of having created this world, however, is arguably an accidental property of God, and thus not a property with which God can be identical. The same holds for the property of knowing the conjunction of all truths.

Having said this, we immediately confront another difficulty. It has been suggested (e.g., by T. V. Morris²⁶) that omniscience is a property that supervenes on infinitely many properties like *knowing that Fischer beat Spassky in 1972*. As Morris defines it, "If a property *F* supervenes [upon] a property *G*, then an instance of *F* essentially depends on there being some instance of *G* in association with which it exists, in the sense that no instance of *F* could exist unless some underlying instance of *G* existed simultaneously."²⁷ If so, God cannot be omniscient without having infinitely many properties. This problem is avoided, in part, if simplicity is construed as the doctrine that God is identical with his essential properties. Then we need not say that God is identical with the contingently had property of *knowing that Fischer beat Spassky in 1972*. But there are also such properties as *knowing that $7 + 5 = 12$* , *knowing that 7 is prime*, etc. and these are such that God has them in every possible world, hence they are "essential" to God in one standard use of this term. If God is identical with such properties, then either he is infinitely many properties, or they are but one property. Neither disjunct is acceptable. They clearly cannot be one property, for they are not even coextensive.

This forces a further clarification. The claim that God is identical with all his essential properties admits of two interpretations depending on how we construe "essential." On the "standard" possible worlds interpretation, *P* is an essential property of *x* if and only if *x* has *P* in every world in which *x* exists. Couple this with a liberal view of properties, and the result is that the following count among my essential properties: being such that $2 + 2 = 4$, being a sparkplug if a sparkplug, and so on. It is easy to see that each individual has nondenumerably many such essential properties. Thus there is a sense in which each thing has an "infinite essence." But this should give us pause. What do truths of logic and arithmetic have to do with my essence or nature?

Thus it is natural to distinguish between essential properties as defined above, and a proper subset of these which might be called quidditative properties. Accordingly, being sentient, being human, being rational would be among my quidditative properties, whereas being such that $2 + 2 = 4$ and its ilk would be among my merely essential properties. There is surely some sort of distinction here. In the case of God, omniscience would count among his quidditative properties, while *knowing that $7 + 5 = 12$* would be among his merely essential properties. The distinction is perhaps as follows. Quidditative properties are such that everything that possesses them does so essentially. (This lays down a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition for a property's being quidditative.) *Knowing that $7 + 5 = 12$* , in contrast, is had essentially by God, but only accidentally by Mann. Hence it is not a quidditative property.

Given the distinction, the simplicity theorist need only hold that God is identical with his quidditative properties.

Accordingly, God is identical with omniscience, but not with the properties upon which omniscience supervenes. In sum, God is identical with his nature, but not with his trivially essential properties (e.g., the property of being such that $2 + 2 = 4$), or with properties like the property of knowing that $2 + 2 = 4$, or with his accidental properties (e.g., the property of having created this world, the property of being believed by Plantinga to be non-simple).

Nevertheless, the idea that omniscience is supervenient may lead to trouble. For if God = omniscience, and omniscience supervenes on other properties, then God supervenes on other properties in a way that appears fatal to the divine aseity. But the simplicity theorist, although admitting that, necessarily, God is omniscient if and only if God knows every truth, is under no obligation to think of omniscience as supervenient. For he may think of it as supervened upon. God is omniscient not because he knows all truths; he knows all truths because he is omniscient. God's knowing that p , q , r , etc. thus depends or supervenes upon God's omniscience and the truth of p , q , r , etc. There does not appear to be in this any threat to the divine aseity.

One final consideration. If God is omniscient, and omniscience entails being knowledgeable (in the sense that, necessarily, whatever is omniscient is knowledgeable), does it follow that God is identical with being knowledgeable? If it did, I would exemplify God by virtue of exemplifying knowledgeable — a bizarre result. This outcome is easily avoided if we realize that omniscience does not entail being knowledgeable in a way that will cause a problem. For if being knowledgeable = being *imperfectly* knowledgeable, then omniscience most assuredly does not entail being knowledgeable. On the other hand, if being knowledgeable = being *perfectly* knowledgeable, then the entailment holds, but without the bizarre result. For nothing distinct from God is perfectly knowledgeable. Perhaps knowledgeable may be viewed as a genus of which perfect and imperfect knowledgeable are species. But such generic knowledgeable is plausibly construed as disjunctive: x is knowledgeable (rational, powerful, etc.) if and only if x is either perfectly or imperfectly knowledgeable (rational, powerful, etc.) Hence there are no generic *properties* of knowledgeable, power and rationality to give rise to difficulties. As D. M. Armstrong has compellingly argued, disjunctive "properties" are not genuine properties.²⁸

8. Conclusion

Although much more needs to be said, what has been said suffices to deflect the main accusations of incoherence. This is a good thing for theists, since as Leftow has shown, the simplicity doctrine is entailed by the central theistic belief that, necessarily, God is the creator and sustainer of everything distinct

from himself, together with the idea that God cannot create his nature.²⁹ The next step is to examine what it could mean to say that in God existence and nature are identical. This daunting task is wisely reserved for the sequel.³⁰

9. Appendix: Divine Simplicity and Logically Simple Propositions

Does God's absolute ontological simplicity demand that literal and religiously adequate God-talk consist, at least in part, of logically simple propositions? Barry Miller answers in the affirmative: the possibility of literal God-talk adequate to a simple God rests on the possibility of logically simple propositions such that, if there are no logically simple propositions, there can be no literal and religiously adequate God-talk.³¹ A logically simple proposition is one that lacks not only propositional components, but also sub-propositional components. Thus atomic propositions are not logically simple in Miller's sense, since they contain sub-propositional parts. A proposition of the form "*a* is *F*," though atomic, exhibits subject-predicate complexity.

What I shall argue, contra Miller, is that literal and adequate talk and thought about the simple God do not entail the possibility of logically simple propositions. This is a good thing, since, as I shall also argue, there are and can be no logically simple propositions. So I will need to show how logically complex propositions can be adequate to an Absolute that is simple. I thereby engage one of deepest questions in metaphysics: How can we say or think anything about the non-dual Absolute Reality without distorting it? Or are we in the Tractarian predicament of having to fall silent before that of which we cannot speak?

On the Complex Grasp of the Simple

Given that God is ontologically simple, God is identical with each of his attributes. But why must a proposition about the simple God be logically simple? Miller writes,

To have accepted the strict propriety of using a name and first-level predicates of God would have been to accept that there was a distinction to be drawn between the referent of the name and the attributes to which the predicates refer. We should therefore have had to admit that there was, after all, a distinction between him and his existence, and between him and his attributes, and thus that he was not absolutely simple. We had a choice — either to say that God was absolutely simple, or to say that he could have a name and receive first-level predicates that refer to real rather than to merely Cambridge properties. What we could not do consistently was to affirm both these positions together. It is not that we could not name God, though some superior being could: the fact is that not even God could name God.³²

Miller appears to be making two assumptions, both necessary for the validity of his argument. The first is that

- (1) No property is an individual.

The second is that

- (2) Names refer only to individuals; predicates refer only to properties.

It follows from (1) and (2) that anything that can be named is an individual and not a property, and anything that can be predicated is a property and not an individual; hence nothing simple can be named or have any property predicated of it. Literally true propositions about a simple God must therefore be logically simple. Complex propositions would import a false complexity into the divine nature.

But if God is indeed simple, shouldn't we conclude that (1) is false? We begin by noting that "God is simple" can be construed in three different ways.

A. It could be taken to mean that God transcends, while leaving intact, the property-individual dualism. Thus God would be neither an individual nor a property in univocal senses of these terms. This is Miller's approach.³³

B. On a second construal of "God is simple," God falls on one or the other side of the individual-property dualism. Thus Alvin Plantinga thinks that if God is identical with his properties, then God is himself a property, hence an abstract object, and therefore without causal efficacy.³⁴ But one might just as well argue that if God is identical with his properties, then the properties are one individual, hence concrete, and therefore causally efficacious. These arguments neutralize each other, forcing us to examine the assumption they both rest on, namely, that no property is an individual. The simplicity theorist is by no means compelled to say that God is a causally inert abstract object, for he may reject (1). But even if he, like Miller, accepts (1), he may avoid Plantinga's conclusion by saying that God transcends the dualism of property and individual. Plantinga has not refuted the simplicity doctrine.

C. Surely someone who maintains that the Absolute Reality is free of internal distinctions is not holding that it falls on one side of some distinction-pair. Plausibly construed, the simplicity claim is rather that God is neither an individual nor a property (thus transcending the individual-property dualism) or both an individual and a property. Miller's view seems to be that God transcends the individual-property dualism. The view defended above is the quite different idea that the dualism is untenable, that God is both an individual and a property.

If I am right in the main body of this paper, there is nothing obviously incoherent in the idea that the simple God is at once both a self-exemplifying property and an individual. We are now in a position to see that literal talk about a simple God does not require logically simple propositions.

Given that every self-exemplifying property is identical with at least one of its properties, it follows that the logical complexity of a proposition is compatible with the (partial) ontological simplicity of what the proposition is about. For example, the logical complexity of the proposition expressed

by "Self-identity is self-identical" is compatible with the identity of self-identity with itself, and thus with the partial ontological simplicity of self-identity. The literal truth of the proposition in question does not entail that self-identity is distinct from itself. Nor does the literal truth of "Existence exists" entail that existence is not existence. There is such a thing as self-predication. Thus there is no reason to think that logically complex propositions cannot be adequate to the wholly simple God. The literal truth of the proposition expressed by "God is omniscient" does not entail that God is distinct from omniscience, that God merely has or exemplifies omniscience, for "God" may be construed as referring to a self-exemplifying property that is identical with all its attributes.

It might be thought that the need for logically simple propositions could be avoided without the rejection of (1). One might say that God is a self-exemplifying property but not also an individual. This would obviate the need for logically simple propositions, but it does seem that Plantinga is right in holding that no mere property (i.e., a property distinct from every individual) could be an agent who created the world. So it seems to me that (1) should be rejected.

Are There Logically Simple Propositions?

I have just argued that philosophical theology has no need of logically simple propositions. What I will now argue is that, whether we need them or not, there are and can be no logically simple propositions (LSPs).

Since LSPs are not predications, they do not say something about something in the way that "*a is F*" predicates being *F* of *a*, or "*Fs exist*" predicates instantiation of the property of being *F*. So if a LSP is about a thing, it can be about it only in the way names are about individuals, or predicates are about properties. But neither names nor predicates have truth-values. Neither "Socrates" nor "...is wise" are true or false. So it is completely unclear how a LSP can have a truth-value.

It is also completely unclear how any intellect like ours could grasp a proposition devoid of logical parts, let alone believe or know such a proposition. To believe that it is snowing, for example, is to believe something logically complex, something formulatable perhaps by the sentence "Snow is falling." So even if there are logically simple propositions, they could not be accusatives of minds like ours. And if propositions are defined as the possible accusatives of belief and knowledge, then the point is stronger still: there cannot be any logically simple propositions.

Miller's examples of LSPs are all of them inconclusive. Consider the German "*Es regnet*" ("It is raining"). As Miller correctly notes, the "*es*" is grammatical filler, and so the sentence can be pared down to "*Regnet*," which is no doubt grammatically simple. He then argues:

Now there is no question of 'Regnet' being a predicate; for as a proposition it has a complete sense, whereas as a predicate it could have only incomplete sense. Hence, 'Regnet' and propositions like it seem to be logically simple.³⁵

I find it hard to avoid the conclusion that Miller is simply confusing propositions with the sentences used to express them.

From the fact that the sentence "Regnet" is grammatically simple, containing as it does neither a name nor a predicate, it scarcely follows that the proposition expressed by the sentence is logically simple. My point is sustained even if we acquiesce in Miller's usage, according to which a proposition is "...an expression to which truth values can be assigned..."³⁶ rather than the sense of an expression to which truth values can be assigned. My argument is then that the grammatical simplicity of an expression *E* does not entail the logical simplicity of the sense expressed by *E*. Miller admits that there is a distinction between grammatical and logical simplicity;³⁷ if so, it cannot be a sentence that is logically simple, it must be the sentence's sense, what I call the proposition and what Frege called "*der Gedanke*," the thought. Once this distinction is granted, a gap opens up that prevents a move from the simplicity of a sentence to the simplicity of its sense.

In sum, there are conclusive reasons for rejecting LSPs, and no conclusive reasons for accepting them. And as shown in the preceding section, we don't need them anyway. The ontologically simple God can be adequately described by logically complex propositions.

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NOTES

1. Cf. Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, "Absolute Simplicity," *Faith and Philosophy*, vol. 2 (October 1985), p. 375. See also William E. Mann, "Modality, Morality and God," *Nous*, vol. XXIII, no. 1 (March 1989), pp. 83-99.

2. Stump and Kretzmann, p. 376.

3. See Brian Leftow, "Is God an Abstract Object?," *Nous*, vol. XXIV, no. 4 (September 1990), pp. 594-96.

4. Leftow, *op. cit.*

5. Quentin Smith, "An Analysis of Holiness," *Religious Studies*, vol. 24, no. 4 (December 1988), p. 524, n. 3.

6. Thus Alvin Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1980), p. 47: "...if God is identical with each of his properties, then, since each of his properties is a property, he is a property—a self-exemplifying property." Plantinga's view is endorsed by Thomas V. Morris in "On God and Mann: A View of Divine Simplicity," in *Anselmian Explorations* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987), pp. 99, 102.

7. Plantinga again: “. . . if God is identical with each of his properties, then each of his properties is identical with each of his properties, so that God has but one property.” *Ibid.*

8. Cf. Daniel Bennett, “The Divine Simplicity,” *The Journal of Philosophy*, 66 (1969), p. 634.

9. Leftow does, however, have something to say in rebuttal of Plantinga’s objections. Cf. Leftow, p. 593.

10. Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, “Absolute Simplicity,” *Faith and Philosophy*, vol. 2, no. 4 (October 1985), pp. 356-57.

11. This is a brand name. I don’t know if the product is still on the market.

12. William E. Mann, “Divine Simplicity,” *Religious Studies*, 18 (1982), pp. 451-71.

13. Cf. T. V. Morris, “On God and Mann,” in *Anselmian Explorations: Essays in Philosophical Theology* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987), pp. 98-123.

14. William E. Mann, “Simplicity and Properties: A Reply to Morris,” *Religious Studies*, 22 (1986), p. 352.

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.*

19. But only initially. What causal power does the property of being prime confer on the number 7? What causal power does the property of being multiply exemplified confer on the property of being soluble?

20. Plantinga, p. 47.

21. Definition born of kitchen-table dialectic with Quentin Smith. One consequence of this definition is that all impossible properties are individuals. But this does not present a problem since according to (P), there are no impossible properties.

22. It might be thought that such unexemplifiable “properties” as being both round and square would be counterexamples to (P). But it is open to us to deny that there are such properties. No doubt there is the predicate, “. . . is both round and square,” but we are not entitled to assume that every predicate expresses a property. Indeed, this assumption yields a contradiction. Consider the predicate, “. . . is non-self-exemplifying.” If there were a property of being non-self-exemplifying, then it either is or is not self-exemplifying. Clearly, if it is, it isn’t; and if it isn’t, it is. This contradiction shows that there is no property of being non-self-exemplifying. Hence not every predicate expresses a property. To say of a property that it is not self-exemplifying is simply to say that it lacks the property of being self-exemplifying, not that it has the property of being non-self-exemplifying. Cf. Roderick Chisholm, *The First Person: An Essay on Reference and Intentionality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981), pp. 5-6.

23. For if it were possible that there be two or more omniscient, omnipotent, etc. beings, then it would be possible that God not be identical with omniscience, which would contradict the necessity of the identity of God with his attributes.

24. See T. V. Morris, *op. cit.*

25. Cf. St. Augustine, *The City of God*, XI, 10.

26. See Morris, *op. cit.*, p. 109.
27. Morris, *op. cit.*, p. 109.
28. D. M. Armstrong, *A Theory of Universals: Universals and Scientific Realism*, vol. II (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), pp. 19-23.
29. As Leftow argues against Morris. Cf. Leftow, p. 588.
30. I am indebted to Chin-Tai Kim, Quentin Smith and two anonymous *Faith and Philosophy* referees for comments and discussion.
31. Barry Miller, "Analogy Sans Portrait: God-Talk as Literal but Non-Anthropomorphic," *Faith and Philosophy*, vol. 7, no. 1 (January 1990), pp. 63-84.
32. *Ibid.*, pp. 69-70.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 80: "...God is not an individual in any univocal sense of that term."
34. Alvin Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1980), p. 47: "...if God is identical with each of his properties, then, since each of his properties is a property, he is a property. ...No property could have created the world; no property could be omniscient, or, indeed, know anything at all. If God is a property, then he isn't a person but a mere abstract object. ...the simplicity doctrine seems an utter mistake."
35. Barry Miller, "Logically Simple Propositions," *Analysis*, vol. 34, no. 4 (March 1974), p. 125.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 123.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 125.