

Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 11 | Issue 3

Article 8

7-1-1994

On "Divine Simplicity: A New Defense"

Barry Miller

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

Recommended Citation

Miller, Barry (1994) "On "Divine Simplicity: A New Defense"," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 11 : Iss. 3 , Article 8.

DOI: 10.5840/faithphil199411353

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol11/iss3/8>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

ON "DIVINE SIMPLICITY: A NEW DEFENSE"

Barry Miller

I have two criticisms of Vallicella's "Divine Simplicity: A New Defense." One is that its argument for property self-exemplification fails because it ignores the distinction between "what" clauses employing first-level quantification and those employing second-level quantification. The second criticism is that his rejection of logically simple propositions stems from a failure to see that the argument for those propositions is based on a logical premiss, not a grammatical one.

Although I am as ready to defend the divine simplicity as is William Vallicella, I fear that, both in the body of his "Divine Simplicity: A New Defense"¹ and in its Appendix, there are misunderstandings that do not help our common cause.

No First-Level Property can be Self-exemplifying

In the body of the article Vallicella claims that some of the problems confronting the doctrine of divine simplicity stem from "the plausible assumption that a categorial chasm divides properties and individuals such that, necessarily, no property is an individual." His attempted solution is to deny that there is any such chasm, since in fact "some properties are identical with individuals" (p. 512), namely, those propositions "whose self-exemplification entails its identity with an individual." (p. 514) On this view, God's attributes would be properties of precisely that kind, and thus could rightly be said to be identical with him. Against this I shall argue that no first-level properties at all can be self-exemplifying, neither Vallicella's putative examples nor any others either.

To say that a first-level property is self-exemplifying is to say that it is a property of itself. But, since a property of a first-level property is a second-level property, this amounts to saying that a self-exemplifying first-level property is *both* a first- and a second-level property. Vallicella is undisturbed by this consequence, for his alleged examples of self-exemplifying properties lead him to conclude that "first- and second-level properties do not form mutually disjoint classes." (p. 517) Indeed, the properties of existence, self-identity, being a property, being self-exemplified, and being extended are all said to be self-exemplifying, for "existence exists, self-identity is self-identical, etc." (p. 514)



From what he says in the preceding quotation, it is safe to conclude that each of the following propositions would be regarded as an expression of property self-exemplification:

- "Existence exists"
- "Self-identity is self-identical"
- "Being a property is a property"
- "Being self-exemplified is self-exemplified"
- "Being unextended is unextended"
- "Being inanimate is inanimate"

As we shall see, no one of these propositions is an example of self-predication, nor therefore can any of them be an expression of property self-exemplification.

I begin by noting that each of the examples is of the form "Being F is F," and that for "being F" we can always substitute "what '____is F' stands for," with the result that the "Being F is F" becomes "What '____is F' stands for is F." Now, it is impossible to determine whether the second occurrence of "is F" functions as a predicate, unless we first attend to the ambiguity in the logical status of "what" expressions, as illustrated by "He became what his father had been before him" on the one hand and by "He rejected what I brought him" on the other. Each proposition invites the same query, "And what was that?" In the first case the answer might be "a writer;" in the second case it might be "a book." Thus far there might seem to be no logical difference between them. A difference does emerge, however, when we try to pursue our enquiries by asking the further question, "And which one was that?" In the first case there can be no answer, for there is no writer that a son and his father both are. In the second case there is an answer, e.g. "Wuthering Heights." The difference between the two "what" expressions, therefore, is that the first employs second-level quantification (quantification over properties) whereas the second employs first-level quantification (quantification over objects).

Dummett² has reminded us that we ought not be surprised by such ambiguity, for it occurs also in the everyday expressions "something" and "everything," each of which may involve either first-level or second-level quantification. In "There is something that Tom and Mary both train," our understanding of "something" depends on the appropriate answer to "What is it that they both train?" In one case it may be "Fido." But, if there is no one dog that they both train, it could be simply "dogs." In the first case the use of "something" would involve first-level quantification; in the second case the quantification would be second-level. Further examples of second-level quantification are "Unhappy is what all Rumanians seem to be" and "Underpaid is what Peter does not want to be."³ The gaps in "____is what all Rumanians seem to be" and in "____is what Peter does not want to be"

are to be filled not by a singular term, nor even by a first-level predicate, but by a first-level predicable.⁴ For just that reason, the logical form of these propositions is not one of singular term/1st-level predicate, but of 1st-level predicable/ 2nd-level predicate.

What now are we to say about the logical form of Vallicella's examples, all of which can properly be understood as "What '____is F' stands for is F," e.g. "What '____exists' stands for exists" and "What '____is a property' stands for is a property?" It might have been tempting to think that the second "is F" is being predicated of the referent of "what '____is F' stands for," i.e. that the proposition's logical form is singular term/1st-level predicate. Let us therefore apply to it the same test as we applied to uses of "something." That is to say, let us consider what questions might legitimately be asked in response to "Tom and Mary are what '____is F' stands for." We might ask "And what is that?," to which the answer is simply "F," e.g. "insensitive" or "a human being." But here the questioning must end, for there can be no answer to "Which human being?" or "Which insensitive?" Clearly, therefore, this use of "What '____is F' stands for" involves second-level quantification, which means that the proposition "What '____is F' stands for is F" is of the same logical form as "Underpaid is what Peter does not want to be." The latter is of the form 2nd-level predicate ("underpaid")/1st-level predicable ("____is what Peter does not want to be"). Similarly, "What '____is F' stands for is F" is of the form 2nd-level predicate("what '____is F' stands for")/1st-level predicable("____is F").

Furthermore, because the second-level predicate is not "____is F" (but merely *includes* that expression), there are no grounds for saying that the one expression is being used as a first-level predicable in one place but as a second-level predicate in another. Once the logical form of Vallicella's examples is exposed, therefore, they prove not to be examples of self-predication at all, and hence are not expressions of property self-exemplification either. The doctrine of divine simplicity is indeed defensible, but not by denying the absolute difference between first- and second-level predicables, nor by affirming the possibility of property self-exemplification.

Logically Simple Propositions

In addition to taking issue with Vallicella on property self-exemplification, I have difficulty with his reasons for rejecting the argument for the possibility of propositions that are logically simple in the sense of having no *sub*-propositional parts. This is the topic he addresses in the Appendix.

Vallicella is under the impression that my argument for logically simple propositions is to be rejected for making a purely grammatical point rather than the logical one it purports to make. This, however, is to overlook the fact that the argument is not based on the absence of verbal or grammatical parts in either of the two main propositions I considered, viz. the German

"Es klappert" and the Romanian "Fulgură." On the contrary, it is based on the absence of referring expressions. In the case of "Es klappert," although the only possible candidate for a referring role was "es," the context showed clearly that it did not refer to anything at all.⁵ This is not a grammatical point, for "referring expression" is not a grammatical category but a logical one. So here was one proposition containing no referring expression, nor any other *logical* part either. In the case of "Fulgură" there was not even a possible candidate for a referring role - no pronoun, no suffix, no prefix, nothing at all except the verb stem. Again, therefore, we have a proposition with no logical parts. Although I do think that other propositions like "Es regnet" or "It is raining" are also logically simple, nothing whatever turns on that particular claim, for either "Es klappert" on its own or "Fulgură" on its own would have sufficed to show that logically simple propositions are not impossible.

Besides objecting to the argument for logically simple propositions, Vallicella has difficulty with their truth-value. Indeed, he thinks it is unclear not only how those propositions could have any truth-value but also how "any intellect like ours could grasp a proposition devoid of logical parts." (p.522) This rather puts the cart before the horse, for one thing we do know is that Romanians have not the slightest difficulty in knowing the truth-value of "Fulgură" (and many other propositions of like form) nor any difficulty in grasping it. Similarly in regard to Brentano's use of "Es klappert." Those facts cannot be altered by showing that the propositions are logically simple.

University of New England, Australia

NOTES

1. *Faith and Philosophy*, vol. 9 (1992), pp. 508-25.
2. M. Dummett, *Frege: Philosophy of Language* (London: Duckworth, 1973), pp. 67-69, 214.
3. *Op. cit.*, p. 216.
4. Following Geach, I distinguish between a predicable and a predicate. A predicable is an expression which merely *can* be predicated of something; it is a predicate when it *is* predicated of something. Thus, "_____ is red" is a predicable in "Whatever is red is visible," but a predicate in "This sports car is red."
5. "Es klappert" occurs in the sentence "Grossmutter, da ist eine Maus drin! Hört wie es klappert! da ist eine Maus drin" (Grandmother, there is a mouse inside! Hark at the rattling (or how it rattles)! There is a mouse inside!) in a novel by Clemens Brentano. Here the "es," being neuter, cannot refer back to the feminine "eine Maus." Consequently, it cannot be a referring expression, but has to be construed as merely a grammatical filler.