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SIMPLICITY AND CREATION

Timothy O'Connor

According to many philosophical theologians, God is metaphysically simple: there is no real distinction among His attributes or even between attribute and existence itself. Here, I consider only one argument against the simplicity thesis. Its proponents claim that simplicity is incompatible with God's having created another world, since simplicity entails that God is unchanging across possible worlds. For, they argue, different acts of creation involve different willings, which are distinct intrinsic states. I show that this is mistaken, by sketching an adequate account of reasons-guided activity that does not require distinct intrinsic states of willing corresponding to each possible act of creation.

I Introduction

According to many philosophical theologians, God is metaphysically simple: there is no real distinction among His attributes or even between attribute and existence itself. God's omniscience is not distinct from His omnipotence, which is not distinct from His necessary existence... which is not distinct from God Himself. Even those who affirm this thesis recognize that it is a hard saying. But the reflective theist will also recognize that, hard as this saying is, there are some fairly weighty considerations in its favor. One such consideration stems from the implications of the concept of absolutely necessary being. This concept not only underlies an important theistic argument, it is also, I believe, a necessary feature of a coherent concept of God, given its connection to a minimal understanding of God's sovereignty over all things.¹ The path some philosophers trace from necessary being to simplicity runs roughly as follows: for a being to exist of absolute necessity, there can be no contingent facts about its essential nature. Necessary existence cannot just happen to be conjoined with omnipotence in this being, for instance, because in that case there would be no possibility of explaining why these two attributes were coinstantiated. So there must be a tight unity to its nature, such that each of its attributes entails the others. The only intelligible way this might be is if the relation between "attributes" (including necessary existence) is that of *identity*. And if its essential nature is metaphysically simple, (it is further argued that) it cannot have any contingent intrinsic attributes, either.

I believe that this argument is resistible. In particular, while I accept the argument that a necessary being's nature must be tightly unified, I do not



see why this cannot fall short of the limiting case of simplicity. But that is not to say that I see how its nature could have the requisite unity while falling short of simplicity. It is a puzzling notion, and there are no obvious *strong* analogies to guide one's intuitions. Some will take this as evidence that the simplicity thesis is true, despite its perplexing character. I will not try to argue this matter one way or the other here. Instead, I merely want to consider one argument that has been given to discredit the simplicity thesis and to show that it is mistaken.

According to that argument, simplicity is incompatible with the possibility that God might have created another world (or not have created at all). The reason is that God's having created differently (or not having created) entails a corresponding difference in His intrinsic state. For He would have had to have decided or willed to have acted in that different fashion, and deciding to create one world necessarily differs, intrinsically, from deciding to create a very different world. So either God is not metaphysically simple or His creating this world is somehow bound up with His very being. And this last is both impious and absurd. I will rebut this reasoning by sketching a plausible model of God's intentional agency on (what the simplicity theorist will view as) the "naive" assumption that God is not metaphysically simple. I will then show that, surprisingly, this model can be modified in a way that leaves intact certain essential elements while making it compatible with the simplicity thesis.

II The "naive" model of God's intentional agency

A model of God's agency should show how creation issues from God in a way that is *explainable* in terms of a purpose or desire He had when acting. The issues involved in giving an account of intentional explanations are numerous and difficult. Accordingly, I claim to show only that there is a not obviously unworkable way in which this might go in God's case, the details of which must be developed elsewhere.² Though seemingly modest, this will be task enough, as the form of intentional explanation that is needed here is one which has been widely thought discredited in relation to human action. This has been a mistake, in my view, but in any case the most pressing problems for the application of the account to human action are empirical, not conceptual, and stem from assumptions concerning human beings and the wider natural order that need not be made in relation to a transcendent necessary being.

In recent philosophy, the most popular account of the way reasons explain human action is the causal theory of action. Broadly speaking, the causal theory holds that some bodily behavior of mine is an action only if it is a causal consequence, in an appropriate manner, of factors prominently including my having a reason to do so. Bodily movements that are not a causal consequence of reasons are mere movements (as with reflexive movements). Thus, an agent's *control* over his activity is taken to reside in the causal efficacy of his reasons. Now, many would suppose that this is not simply a correct picture of the way reasons explain human actions, but a conceptual truth about acting for reasons. To deny that certain of an agent's reasons cause his intentional action, such philosophers aver, would be to

render it utterly fortuitous from the standpoint of the agent himself.

This is not at all obvious, however. I will assume without argument here that the notion of causation rests on a notion of causal *capacities* as ontologically basic. (Causal capacities are not reducible to patterns of actual or counterfactual regularity, nor are they explainable in terms of occurrent relations among universals.)³ Once one recognizes that this is so, there is no conceptual bar to the thought that the way in which capacities are manifested or exercised may differ in important and general respects. We have come successfully to treat impersonal objects and systems of objects “mechanistically”, i.e., to understand them as having the basis of *their* capacities in their underlying natures - their chemical, physical, or genetic constitutions and dynamical structures - and as manifesting these powers in observable effects *as a matter of course* in suitable circumstances. On this broad conception, circumstances prompt the exercise of such a power by, e.g., stimulating a latent mechanism to action or by removing inhibitors to the activity of a poised mechanism. The causal theory of action extends this mechanistic paradigm to human agency by treating the state of having a reason to act as partly constituting a mechanism of this kind, requiring only the right sort of occasion to give rise to an action of the corresponding sort.

How might a contrasting, non-mechanistic picture of God’s agency go? There are various complicating issues here, and thus my treatment will be quite sketchy. On the naive model, God’s activity in generating a contingent order is to be thought of, in the first instance, as the direct causing of an internal state of intention that a particular determinate state of affairs obtain. This is not, importantly, to be treated as an elliptical expression for there being some prior state in God that brings about, in *mechanistic* fashion, His coming to have the intention. Rather, the intention is irreducibly a product of God as a free agent. This implies as a corollary that the causal power that is manifested in such a case is of a different sort from the mechanistic variety describable by mathematical functions from circumstances to effects (or from circumstances to ranges of effects, in cases of probabilistic, rather than deterministic, causation).

I won’t discuss further this contentious notion of personal or agent causation. I will assume that the reader will grant that it is a coherent basic concept, whatever one’s view on its application to human beings. In its application to God, the explanatory framework it will engender is roughly this: Let it be supposed that God has some purpose *P* and recognizes that creating contingent order *C* would satisfy *P*. Suppose further that He subsequently (at least in some causal/explanatory order of priority, if not a temporal one) generated an intention whose content is *that C obtain in order to fulfill P*, and that *C*’s obtaining is itself an immediate product of that intention. In such a circumstance, I claim, the core activity and its product are perfectly well explained by reference to God’s purpose and His belief that *C* would satisfy it, without any assumption that the activity was necessary given the explaining purpose and belief (collectively, “reason”), or even that they made it probable. The explanatory connection comprises God’s having exercised a capacity to freely act for a purpose together with the two-fold *internal* relation of the prior reason to the effective intention—they have a *common* core content (*that C satisfies P*) and the intention directly *refers* to the

reason. In short, to understand why God freely generates this intention, one need only identify its reasons-bearing *content*. This contrasts with a mechanistic model of intentional action on which an agent's purposes or desires and beliefs explain the choice, or formation of an intention, solely in terms of an external, causal relationship to it. But it is readily understandable in its own terms.⁴

III Intentional Explanation and the Simplicity Thesis

Can the basic model of God's intentional agency just sketched be *amended* to accommodate the simplicity doctrine? At first sight, this seems patently hopeless. An essential feature of that explanatory framework is the fit of content between prior reason states (such as purposes and beliefs) and the agent's ultimate decision, or intention to act here and now. If God's willing this particular order of things is contingent, then it might have been different. This contradicts the absolute simplicity thesis, as it implies that an aspect of God's intrinsic nature in this world - His state of intention that our world obtain - might have been different, though God Himself would still have existed, which implies that God is distinct from this actual state of intention.

Thomas Aquinas recognized that the simplicity thesis had striking consequences for the understanding of God's creation, when he spoke of the creation relation as "real for creatures," while "unreal [or merely notional] for God." If God strictly *is* His utterly simple nature, then, in Himself, He must be utterly unchanging across all *possible* circumstances. There might have been any number of different contingent orders, and in each such case, the contingent reality would have causally depended on God. Yet God Himself would have been intrinsically the same. That is the point of speaking of the creation relation as being merely notional for God: for unlike all cases involving natural causes (including purposive, free agents), God's causal influence does not require any intrinsic change on God's part.

Clearly, if we are to make sense of this, it cannot involve the idea that there is anything like a state of intention whose *intrinsic* nature would have varied in accordance with the state of affairs intended. Yet it just might be that the basic explanatory framework outlined above could, after all, be applied within a simplicity account by simply deleting the notion of a distinct, causally effective state of intention *that C obtain in order to fulfill P*, and substituting in its place C itself, i.e., the actual contingent order. The idea here is to treat the executive state of intention as an inessential middleman in the causal process of purposive agency. God doesn't form an intention to create our world and *consequently* do so, He creates the world directly. His activity *entirely* consists in a causal relation between Himself, who is unchanging, and the dependent, contingent reality. The role of matching the intentional content of logically prior reasons that a state of intention plays within our original model is taken over by the *concrete* reality at which those states are directed. Its nature, too, mirrors the intentional content of the explaining reason.

One might understandably worry at this point that this move makes the *cognitive* aspect of God's agency mysteriously alien, to the point that we've

lost our intuitive grip on the model. For on it, there's just (i) an agent with reasons for various possible creations, and (ii) a relation of dependency between that agent and the actual creation, such that the product might have been utterly different, and the agent utterly the same. Surely, one wants to say, at some point God has to decide, to intend, to will, or what have you that *this* particular creation be actualized.

But consider our *original*, and more familiar model. On that model, God has reasons corresponding to different possible courses of action, and then causes a state of intention corresponding to one, which state in turn causes the intended contingent order. That is: there is (i) an agent with reasons for various possible creations, and (ii) a relation of dependency between that agent and the actual *intention* (which results in the creation), such that the intention might have been utterly different, and the agent (until just prior to the intention in the order of explanation) utterly the same. Whatever mystery resides in conceiving the dependency between God and *creation* in the intention-less, simplicity-based model is perhaps equally present between agent and *intention* in the original model. But I would prefer to say that there is no mystery (here, at any rate) in *either* model. It only appears to be so if one misunderstands the role of an intention by thinking of it as the ultimate *locus* of personal agency — as a state in virtue of which all subsequent immediate effects are to be attributed to the agent as *His* effects, as aspects of *His* action. Within the broadly agent-causal account of which both models are particular versions, the locus of agency is not within some special kind of intrinsic *state*, but rather within the *exercise* of causal power in bringing about such a state (or an external state of affairs, as on the simplicity-based model).

If this is right, one might ask what the *function* is of discrete states of intention in agents who *have* them (such as ourselves). But the answer is obvious enough on a moment's thought: they are central to the *guiding* of actions within ordinary purposive agents. *Our* actions perforce involve enormously complex chains of microphysical events within and around us. The having of separate, content-bearing states of intention for each action is a way of harnessing such causal mechanisms within our bodies and environment, *often* triggering into action mechanistically-encoded, latent action routines - think of the unconscious completion of a complicated dance routine - and *always* guiding the *completion* of behavior through complex feedback mechanisms. Such functions are presumably unnecessary in God's case.

At this point, I should address a possible misunderstanding one might have concerning the model of God's agency I am proposing on behalf the simplicity theorist. It may seem that the model is committed to denying that willing is in any sense an attribute of God. This would be passing strange for an account of irreducibly *personal* agency and is contrary to the express claims of most simplicity theorists.⁵ Is it not commonly held that willing Himself is part of God's essence and that in willing Himself He wills created reality?

My account is compatible with these claims. First, my model has indicated nothing about God's intrinsic, simple nature other than its embodying reasons for creating each of those contingent orders that are possible. Let us suppose, then, that an involuntary willing of - a wanting or "appetite" for -

Himself, the supreme good, is an "aspect" of God's rich, yet metaphysically simple nature. Can we further speak of God as willing that this world exist, given that He has caused it to be? We can, although we must take care to understand just what such a willing *is* on the account. Unlike a human willing or decision that something be the case, it will not be or involve a *distinctive* intrinsic state of God. Recall the "naive" model of God's agency and suppose that it correctly captured the essential feature of human free agency. If so, we might naturally say that human decisions of this sort were the causally complex events of *the agent's causing an intrinsic state of intention that \emptyset* . The constituent intention would be distinct from other states of the agent and mark a change in the agent from his previous cognitive state. On the simplicity doctrine, God is not other than His simple, intrinsic state. So God's willing of this world will not involve such an internal change. Instead, it will be the circumstance of God's *creating the world* to satisfy some purpose. Had God created differently, the only difference would be in the contingent order, not in God. If we chose to speak in terms of a "relational attribute" of God, rather than of the state of affairs of His being causally related to the world, then we would say that God's willing this world is His being its creator - which, intrinsically, is nothing other than His essence of willing Himself.

In dealing with the simplicity thesis, we must be careful in this way to separate God's intrinsic from his relational properties. Otherwise, we might be tempted to say that even our amended model is not compatible with God's being the same regardless of what world He happened to create. For does He not have in our own world the inessential properties of *having created this world* and *having willed to create this world*? As we've seen, if the amended model of God's agency is correct, the presence or absence of these properties implies no intrinsic difference in God, no more than the presence or absence of the property *being ten feet away from Theaetetus* implies an intrinsic difference in Socrates.

A final matter I will briefly consider here is whether my simplicity-based model of God's purposive agency is compatible with the possibility that He might not have created anything at all. Norman Kretzmann has argued in the context of Aquinas's theological system that there is strong pressure to say that God must have created something or other, though it may well have been open to Him to create any of a number of contingent orders.⁶ The reason is that there is no plausible account of how an absolutely perfect God might have a *resistible* motivation - one consideration among other, competing considerations - for creating something rather than nothing. (It obviously cannot have to do with any sort of utility, for example.) The best general understanding of God's being motivated to create at all - one which in places Aquinas himself comes very close to endorsing - is to see it as reflecting the fact that God's very being, which is goodness, necessarily diffuses itself. Perfect goodness will naturally communicate itself outwardly; God who is perfect goodness will naturally create, generating a dependent reality that imperfectly reflects that goodness.

I find this claim highly plausible. Even if one rejected this claim, however, it is difficult to envision a coherent scenario in which God eternally chooses not to create. On my model, for example, God's positively willing

not to create requires His having some reason for not doing so. As Kretzmann asks, what kind of reason could that be? God could not benefit from that choice. One might suggest that rather than positively choosing not to create, God might have simply refrained from deciding one way or other. This is a familiar circumstance for human beings, who often have a motivation to uncover more relevant information, and sometimes stall in the hope that the choice will be "taken from their hands." But there can be no analogous factors in God. I am inclined, then, to judge that Kretzmann's claim is correct. Fully motivating this position requires showing that it does not compromise God's absolute independence of all things, but I will not pursue this here.

IV Conclusion

I have tried to show how the simplicity theorist can make out an account of God's contingent, purposive agency in creation. Even if I have been successful, an important worry remains about the apparent complexity of *reason states* on the second model. (On it, remember, God has any number of *distinct* reasons for creating a variety of different possible worlds.) This is just a special case of the more general worry about how to render intelligible the idea that simplicity is compatible with a "richness" of nature in virtue of which it is meaningful to speak of "(absolute) power," "knowledge," and a host of other attributes in relation to such a being. I will have to leave this very perplexing matter as an unresolved puzzle for the committed simplicity theorist - here I've merely tried to leave the simplicity doctrine in a little better shape than I found it.⁷

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NOTES

1. I have argued this point in an unpublished lecture, "The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Anselm?," which I gave at the University of St. Andrews in April 1997.

2. I develop an account of the model I will give in the text (in relation to human action) in my "Agent Causation," in T. O'Connor, ed., *Agents, Causes, and Events: Essays on Indeterminism and Free Will* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

3. Problems with reductionist approaches are well known and have been extensively discussed in the literature. The higher-order-relation-among-universals approach has been independently advanced by Fred Dretske, David Armstrong, and Michael Tooley. See "Laws of Nature" (*Philosophy of Science* 44, (1977), 248-68), *A World of States of Affairs* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), and *Causation: A Realist Approach* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), respectively. I argue against this type of account in *Causation and the Will* (unpublished manuscript).

4. Since Donald Davidson's essay, "Actions, Reasons, and Causes," various theorists of action have given a number of reasons to suppose that accounts of intentional explanation that do not appeal to the causal efficacy of the agent's reasons must fail. I cannot address these worries here. But I have done so at

length elsewhere. See my "Agent Causation" (cited in note 2).

5. See, for example, Thomas Aquinas *Summa Theologiae* Ia.19 and *Summa Contra Gentiles* I.72-86.

6. See most recently his Wilde Lectures, *The Metaphysics of Theism: Aquinas's Natural Theology in Summa Contra Gentiles I* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), pp. 220-225.

7. This paper was developed from a briefer discussion of its topic within a series of lectures I gave at the University of St. Andrews (in April 1997) under the heading *God and Ultimate Explanation*. I thank the audience on that occasion, especially John Haldane, Thomas D'Andrea, and Tim Kenyon, for their comments. The research and writing of that material was supported by grants from The Pew Evangelical Scholars Program and the Lord Gifford bequest at the University of St. Andrews.