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Book Review: God Without Parts: Divine Simplicity And The Metaphysics Of God's Absoluteness

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God without Parts: Divine Simplicity and the Metaphysics of God's Absoluteness, by James E. Dolezal. Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2011. xxii + 240 pages. ISBN: 9781610976589 \$29.00 (paper), \$9.99 (Kindle).

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This book is a good and useful addition to the literature on the Doctrine of Divine Simplicity (DDS). In it, Dolezal argues that it is only by affirming the DDS that divine absoluteness is possible. Dolezal writes:

[O]nly if God is "without parts" can he be "most absolute." It is this argument that forms the central thesis of this volume: *Simplicity is the ontologically sufficient condition for God's absoluteness.* (2, italics in original)

To argue for this central thesis, he begins, in the first chapter, by presenting historical evidence for the doctrine, as well as contemporary criticisms of it by its leading contemporary opponents. In the second chapter, he spells out the traditional meaning of the DDS, as well as the perennial metaphysics (e.g., the act/potency distinction) through which the DDS is classically presented. The following chapter, chapter 3, provides doctrinal motivations for the DDS, in particular, the doctrines of divine aseity, unity, infinity, immutability, and eternity. In this chapter, Dolezal argues "that it is the DDS that supplies the strength of absoluteness in each of these doctrines. Without simplicity these dogmatic claims would not be sufficient to distinguish God absolutely from his creation" (67). The fourth through sixth chapters each considers some entailments of the DDS with respect to certain aspects of God. Chapter 4 considers God's absolute existence; chapter 5 considers God's absolute attributes; and chapter 6 considers God's absolute knowledge and will. Finally, chapter 7 focuses on a particularly vexing problem for the proponent of DDS: If God is absolutely the same in every possible scenario, how can it be that he is free, or that he freely wills to create in some scenarios but does not freely will to create in others?

In what follows I will present the main work of each chapter. Intermixed with these chapter summaries I will include evaluative claims. The preponderance of these claims will be negative, so I will take one more opportunity to reiterate here that this is a good book and a worthy contribution to the field.

In the first chapter, "Friends and Foes of the Classical Doctrine of Divine Simplicity," Dolezal presents the historical witness in favor of the view, as well as the contemporary arguments against it. Concerning the first, he focuses on patristic, medieval, and modern (especially Reformed and Catholic) expressions of the doctrine. The sections are short, about two pages apiece. They each provide quotations from a few representative big-name thinkers from the era in question.

Concerning the second part of the first chapter, Dolezal discusses in detail arguments against DDS from Richard Gale, Christopher Hughes, Thomas Morris, Alvin Plantinga, Ronald Nash, John Feinberg, J. P. Moreland, and

William Lane Craig. Dolezal does a good job here. Each thinker's objections are presented carefully, and some common presuppositions of the arguments are explicated, for instance, a presupposition that true predications of God (e.g., "God is wise") require there to exist entities not identical to God as part of their ontological analysis. The objections are not answered here. Rather, Dolezal returns to the objections in chapter 5, where he discusses different theories of the divine attributes.

The second chapter, "Simplicity and the Models of Composition," explains both what the DDS says God is, and what it says God is not. Dolezal begins with an exposition of the types of composition generally denied of God. Here he follows Aquinas closely. Dolezal provides a subsection of the chapter on each of the six types of composition that Aquinas denies of God in *Summa theologiae* 1.3.: God has no composition of bodily parts, matter and form, supposit and nature, existence and essence, genus and difference, or substance and accidents. Dolezal employs the traditional distinction between act and potency to express the different types of composition that God must not have, a fact that leads to a criticism of the book.

Dolezal uses the premise that God is pure act frequently in this chapter, and elsewhere. It is often employed as the non-conditional premise of a *modus tollens*; e.g., If God is composite, then there must be potency and act in him, but *God is pure act* (and so has no potency), therefore, etc. This premise is controversial and does a lot of heavy lifting in the book, and so one would expect it to be clearly defended somewhere before it is employed. But it is not. In fact, one finds Dolezal saying, after employing the claim that God is pure act for the majority of the second chapter, that "[s]uch radical actuality in God is established in Thomas's argument that in him there is no composition of essence and existence" (62). This sort of composition, though, is the final sort of composition discussed in the chapter. So for the majority of the reasoning in this chapter, one has to accept a contentious premise with no explicit argument in its favor.

Furthermore, if there is an argument for the claim that God is pure act in that final section of chapter 2, it is not clearly marked. Three Thomistic arguments are given in that section for the claim that in God there is no composition of essence and existence, but none go further and establish, as Dolezal claims, that God is pure act. The second of those arguments includes the premise "but as pure act God cannot be subject to act-potency composition" and so, since it employs the claim as a premise, it cannot be an argument that non-circularly establishes that God is pure act (63). In addition, none of the three arguments is carried further to the conclusion that God is pure act, even if such an entailment could be drawn from the first or third argument given in this section. And so a fundamental thesis employed often in the book, that God is pure act, does not receive the support it deserves.

One final positive note about this chapter is that Dolezal draws heavily from the manual tradition, citing such important manualists as Peter Coffey,

Paul Glenn, George Klubertanz, John Noonan, and Louis de Raeymaeker. There is a wealth of argumentation and helpful illustration in the manuals written in the early and middle parts of the twentieth century. I am happy to see Dolezal drawing from these long-forgotten sources.

In chapter 3, "Simplicity and the Theological Rationale for Divine Absoluteness," Dolezal argues that each of the doctrines of divine aseity, unity, infinity, immutability, and eternity "requires that the orthodox Christian maintain a strong account of divine simplicity" (67). The general form of reasoning is that, for each of these five doctrines, we can ask, "but *why* is God that way?" And for each of these doctrines, Dolezal argues, the answer must be that God is that way because he is simple. It is God's simplicity, for instance, in virtue of which he does not depend on any others. For, were he to have some form of composition, he would be composed of parts, say, A and B. And were he composed of parts, then he would not exist *a se*. Rather, he would be *a A et B* (see pgs 71–72). Or, again, were God simple, he would not have any passive potency, since to have potency is to have some sort of composition—at least composition of potency and act. But if God lacks all passive potency, then he cannot change. And so, God's simplicity can explain his immutability (see pg 85). It is because he is simple that he is immutable, and because he is simple that he is *a se*. Dolezal argues in a similar fashion for the other three doctrines considered in this chapter.

Chapter 4, "Simplicity and God's Absolute Existence," focuses on the absoluteness of God's being. Dolezal writes, after citing Christopher Hughes and Anthony Kenny:

It is my contention in this chapter that to just the extent that these critics diminish the identity of God (including his essence) with his existence they diminish the absoluteness of his existence. Consequently, they also considerably weaken the argument for how it is that God can be the sufficient reason for the existence of the universe and its pluri-formity of perfections. (94)

In this fourth chapter, Dolezal provides Thomistic arguments for the identity of God's existence and essence, as well as arguments against the criticisms of those who deny such an identity. He also discusses the meaning of "*ipsum esse subsistens*," the claim that God is subsistent being itself. Finally, he argues against the univocity of being, claiming that God and creatures are of different ontological orders. In this third section, he warns of some dangers for Christian analytic philosophy. I think these warnings are based on a misunderstanding of analytic terminology.

One can see the misunderstanding on which his warnings are based by looking at his understanding of possible worlds. Dolezal writes:

What binds God to creation (and even to the rules of modal logic) for many Christian analytic philosophers is that he stands *with* man under the unifying umbrella of "the maximal state of affairs." Placing God and creatures together as so many facts within the actual world inevitably tends toward

ontological univocism . . . In this scheme God and man are now simply two facts within the *one* domain of being. (117; italics are original)

It appears from this quotation that Dolezal is understanding both God and individual humans to be facts, or states of affairs, which are then bound together to make one big maximal state of affairs. This, though, is not a standard view of possible worlds. Dolezal's footnotes in this section reference Alvin Plantinga, who, as an arch-proponent of Christian thought, the analytic method, and possible worlds semantics, is assuredly the best place to go for a discussion of the ontology of possible worlds from a Christian, analytic perspective. But on Plantinga's view, neither God nor any human is a fact. Similarly, Dolezal says of God in footnote 80 of this chapter that "If he freely chooses to create then he must pass from that world in which he doesn't create into another world." But, again, this understanding of passing from world to world is a misunderstanding of the possible worlds framework. Nothing moves or goes from one world to another on such a theory. It might well be that Christian analytic philosophers face a danger (if it is a danger) of being committed to a univocal notion of being, given the possible worlds semantics. But Dolezal's misunderstanding of the fundamental terms in the theory—such as "world" and "fact"—makes his criticism miss his mark.

In the fifth chapter, "Simplicity and God's Absolute Attributes," Dolezal returns to the objections raised in the first chapter. He considers four different interpretations of divine simplicity and how they would answer the objections, eventually arguing in favor of a truthmaker account of divine simplicity. Dolezal follows the work of Jeffrey Brower closely here. His presentation of the multiple accounts of simplicity and their responses to the objections is a clear exposition of the problems and the potential solutions available. This chapter includes the replies to the objections carefully raised in the second half of the first chapter. The second half of the first chapter and the majority of the fifth chapter are best read together. And when they are read together, they are, in my estimation, impressive.

One difficulty that Dolezal faces in this fifth chapter, as in the fourth, is a misunderstanding of the inner workings of a philosophical theory. His presentation of truthmaker theory is faulty at points. For instance, he writes

Some will undoubtedly detect circularity in the claim that God is the minimal truthmaker for himself. But inasmuch as we are talking about the absolute final reason for God's existence and essence, and given God's creation of the world *ex nihilo*, the sufficient reason for all created being, this is exactly what one should expect. (163)

We should not, though, expect circularity here. For this is a misunderstanding of truthmaker theory. God himself is not a truth-bearer, and so he is not the sort of thing that requires, or could even have, a truthmaker. What requires a truthmaker is not God himself, but the proposition (or statement, or assertion, or thought, etc.) "that God exists." There is no

more circularity in claiming that God makes it true “that God exists” than there is in claiming that Bob makes it true “that Bob exists,” or, in general, for any x , that x is a truthmaker for the proposition that represents the existence of x . Again, as in the previous chapter’s discussion of possible worlds, Dolezal has some problematic misunderstandings of the metaphysical machinery posited by his interlocutors.

Chapter 6, “Simplicity and God’s Absolute Knowledge and Will,” is a discussion of the difficulties that DDS raises for understanding how God can know or will contingent things. If God is simple in the strong sense the DDS proposes, then in no possible world is anything about God any different than it is in this world. In every world, what we might loosely call his “internal states,” or “metaphysical makeup” is exactly the same. (Loosely because if DDS is true, God has no states—plural—and no makeup.) But then how can he know or will different things in different worlds?

Consider a scenario in which God does not create, or creates, but doesn’t create Moses. Moses, while very important, is not a *necessary* being. In such a scenario, which surely is something God could have brought about, God does not know “that Moses exists.” No one could know that in such a scenario, since in that scenario the proposition “that Moses exists” is false, and knowledge requires truth. But then how does a defender of DDS explain how it could be that the omniscient God knows different things across different worlds at different times? How can God’s knowledge state differ across worlds while God is necessarily the same simple thing in all worlds?

Dolezal follows Aquinas closely in this chapter, both in the exposition of the difficulties and in their resolution. God knows contingent truths by knowing his nature exhaustively, and knowing all the myriad ways in which he is imitable. As Dolezal writes,

God knows these non-divine things in knowing himself and inasmuch as he is identical with his act of self-knowledge he is identical with that act by which he knows all creatures, both actual and possible. This knowledge of creatures through himself has been explained as God knowing the imitability, or participability, of his essence. (169)

As for the question of contingent willing, contingent creation, and God’s freedom to create contingently, this is a question Dolezal saves for the last chapter, to which I now turn.

The seventh chapter, “Simplicity and the Difficulty of Divine Freedom,” is a discussion of how a simple God can be free to do otherwise than he does. At one point Dolezal states the problem as follows:

We are still faced with the fact that there seems to be something in God that is less than absolutely necessary, namely, his will to create this particular world. Surely, critics contend, this indicates at least one area in which divine simplicity subverts divine absoluteness, namely, the absoluteness of his freedom. God’s ontological absoluteness appears to be endangered if one insists that God is not free in his act of willing the world. (209)

Dolezal considers the responses of Norman Kretzmann, Jay Richards, and Eleonore Stump. He rejects Kretzmann's solution because Kretzmann, he claims, gives up a strong account of God's freedom; he rejects Richards' solution because Richards, he claims, gives up a strong account of the DDS. Stump's view fails, claims Dolezal, because her view requires that God be different across worlds, and this is contrary, says Dolezal, to the doctrine of God's being *actus purus*.

Dolezal's considered response to this question of how a simple God can freely create is that it is a mystery. It is incomprehensible to us to see how it could be that a simple God is free. But, he claims, "the inability to say *how* it is that God is both simple and free does not necessarily obviate the fact *that* he is both" (212).

This is an unsatisfactory answer, in my estimation. The quotation is true—inability to explain how something is a certain way doesn't entail that it isn't that way. But this response does not give the objection the credit it is due. The objection is not merely the question, "how do you explain the freedom of a simple God?" Were that question all that the objector said, this response might be adequate. But Dolezal gives arguments to show that there cannot be a simple God who is free. For instance, he summarizes some of the argumentation he considers against a simple, free God in the following proof by cases:

Whether his will for the universe is free or necessary, then, it seems that the doctrine of divine absoluteness is doomed. If God's will is free then seemingly he must be composed of act and potency, and thus cannot be existentially absolute (which requires that he be eternally pure act). If his will for the world is absolutely necessary then his nature requires the world and thus God cannot be essentially absolute. For Christians, both of these alternatives are unacceptable. (210)

His response, which simply says that we can't explain it, but we know it is right, is inadequate to refute this argument. Something must be wrong with this argument according to Dolezal, though, because its three premises, together, entail the falsity of a central part of his project: the claim that God is most absolute. What the reader wants, and does not receive, is for Dolezal at least to attempt to show which premise fails and why.

Finally, a general point about the work as a whole. The book is written in two different styles. Chapters 1, 5, and 7 are written in a way that focuses primarily on problems and argumentation about those problems. That is, the focus seems to be getting the doctrine right, and defending it against the arguments of opponents, primarily contemporary analytic opponents. These chapters follow what one might call an analytic methodology.

Chapters 2, 3, and 6, however, are primarily exegetical work on the texts of Aquinas. Many sections of these three chapters begin with a claim that Aquinas gives, say, three arguments for the thesis in question. The section is then given over to paraphrasing those arguments of Aquinas. These chapters, for the most part, do not discuss contemporary objections

to the views in question. These chapters follow what one might call a historical method.

Chapter 4 is, in my estimation, the only chapter that brings these two methods together in a unified way. This non-uniformity of style might well make the book difficult for some readers. Those interested in the exposition of a Thomistic view of DDS might find one half of the book overly focused on contemporary, analytic arguments. Others interested in the analysis of the arguments might find the long sections explaining, but often not analyzing, Aquinas's arguments to be tiresome.

My own view, as someone interested in both these topics and methods, is that each part of the book does its useful share in making the general case that Dolezal intends to make in the text. Part of what one needs to do when resuscitating a maligned doctrine is show that it is, in reality, that very doctrine one is breathing life into. One has to show that it is resurrection and not frankensteinian devilry that one is attempting. But another part of saving the doctrine is showing that the wounds it has received are not hopeless. There is no use propping up the doctrine if the next argument will send it tumbling again. I think that Dolezal has succeeded in the former part, and, with the large exception of the appeal to mystery in the final chapter, has succeeded in the latter as well.

God's Final Victory: A Comparative Philosophical Case for Universalism, by John Kronen and Eric Reitan. Bloomsbury Academic, 2011. 240 pages. \$65.00 (hardcover).

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In *God's Final Victory*, Kronen and Reitan offer a comparative defense of a doctrine of universal salvation by critically challenging any form of a doctrine of hell that holds that some human beings will be forever separated from God. Their aim is to explain why a doctrine of universal salvation is more philosophically defensible and better philosophically fits with the most plausible understandings of core teachings of Christian tradition than any versions of hell. The book presents a comprehensive and up-to-date overview of the relevant philosophical and theological literature. No person who engages in the problem of hell and universal salvation will be able to dismiss the arguments made in this book.

What strikes me as exceptional is the presentation and attention to detail in unfolding the various versions of hellism and universalism in this book. Following a clear chapter 1 "Introduction," in chapters 2 through 4, Kronen and Reitan set their comparative case in favor of universalism by enumerating the various species of both doctrines of hell (DH) and doctrines of universal salvation (DU) respectively. They argue that defenders of each species of DH or DU can find support for their views in Scriptures.