On Two Problems of Divine Simplicity

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I. INTRODUCTION

The doctrine of divine simplicity claims that there is no ontological composition in God of any sort, whether of matter and form, or of essence and accident, or of this attribute and that attribute considered as ontologically distinct. The doctrine is a traditional part of Christianity and Judaism, and can be argued to be a reasonable development of the monotheistic ideal of seeing a single entity at the root of reality. Thus Maimonedes (1956: Part I, Chapter 50) wrote that ‘[t]hose who believe that God is One, and has many attributes, declare the unity with their lips, and assume plurality in their thoughts’, which he said was as bad as the case of Christians with their doctrine of the Trinity. While I disagree that the doctrine of the Trinity would violate the basic ideals of monotheism, Maimonedes may be right that the denial of the doctrine of simplicity would. However it is not my point here to argue for the doctrine of divine simplicity, but to defend it against two major objections.

For, divine simplicity, like the complementary doctrine of the Trinity, does lead to intellectual difficulties. I want to consider two objections in particular, and argue that thinking in terms of an account of divine simplicity that was introduced by Graham Oppy (2003), and later independently developed by Bergmann and Brower (forthcoming)¹ as well as Pruss

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¹ See also Brower (forthcoming in Faith and Philosophy), where he points out similar ideas in Wolterstorff (1991).
(2003), shows that the contradictions thought to inhere in these paradoxes can be avoided. The two problems I shall consider are not the only ones the doctrine faces, but they seem particularly problematic.

The first problem is that it appears incomprehensible how we can meaningfully predicate different attributes of God, such as ‘perfect mercy’ and ‘perfect justice’ which will be my stand-ins in for any pair of prima facie distinct attributes. For, according to the doctrine of divine simplicity, when God has attributes $A$ and $B$, then God’s being $A$ is ontologically identical with God’s being $B$. The difficulty is that under such circumstances ‘mercy’ and ‘justice’ seem to lose their ordinary language meaning and since our linguistic usage is based on ordinary language, it becomes meaningless to use the terms about God. This is the ‘multiple attributes’ problem.

The second problem comes from noting that the doctrine of divine simplicity entails that in some relevant sense God has no intrinsic accidental properties. Here, an accidental property of $x$ is simply a property that $x$ could lack. I need to emphasize that my use of the word ‘property’ is entirely that of ordinary language—I am neither affirming nor denying a Platonism about properties. I do not have a definition of an ‘intrinsic property’, but we can get a rough and ready understanding of what is meant when we think about paradigm cases such as the lump of coal’s containing such-and-such a number of carbon atoms or Fred’s being in horrible pain, as contrasted with extrinsic properties such as John’s being taller than Fred, Bush’s being President, and so on. Now, if God had an intrinsic accidental property $A$, then $A$ would be a property that in some possible world God lacks. But God plainly has at least one non-accidental property, such as being God or being good. We could then ontologically distinguish God’s having $A$ from God’s having $B$, because the one occurs in all worlds where God exists and the other does not, contrary to divine simplicity.

The problem now is that, contrary to the above argument, God does seem to have intrinsic accidental properties. Although God has created this world, he could have created another—or none at all. But willing one thing rather than another seems to be an intrinsic property, and if God’s willing that this world exist is something he did not have to do, then it seems to follow that God has an accidental intrinsic property. Similarly, God believes that Napoleon lost the Battle of Waterloo. But had Napoleon won, God would not have believed it. Since believing a proposition seems an intrinsic property, it seems to follow that God has an accidental intrinsic property.

I will not solve the two problems in the sense of showing how it is that it is possible for God to be merciful and just, capable of having willed different

² For instance, Bergmann and Brower (forthcoming) discuss, and I believe resolve, the ‘category problem’, that God then becomes identical with a property.
things and capable of having believed different things while being simple. I think the full solution would require a vision of God’s essence. But, in Section II.1, I will give a truthmaker-based account of divine simplicity and throughout the paper shall give some reflections that puncture the notion that the multiple attributes and accidentality problems show a contradiction between divine simplicity and various attributes of God.

II. MULTIPLE ATTRIBUTES

II.1. Truthmakers and the general issue

The doctrine of divine simplicity had better not say that mercy and justice in general are one and the same property. For that would make the claim that a friend of ours had exhibited more mercy than justice in some situation self-contradictory. Rather, the claim has to be that God’s mercy and God’s justice are the same ontologically.

What makes it be true that Socrates is just? Surely it is something about Socrates, something that we might reasonably denote by ‘Socrates’ justice’, i.e., ‘that in virtue of which Socrates is just’. It is, perhaps, a virtue that Socrates has, or maybe an activity he always engages in. Socrates’ justice is not the same as Plato’s justice, because if they were the same, then the same thing would make it be true that Socrates is just as would make it be true that Plato is just. But if that were so, then it would seem to follow that, necessarily, if Socrates is just, then that in virtue of which Plato is just exists, and hence Plato is just. Socrates’ justice, then, is a truthmaker of the claim that Socrates is just, where a truthmaker is that in virtue of which a proposition is true.

On some views about truthmakers,³ if $T$ is a truthmaker for a proposition $p$, then anything of which $T$ is a part will also make $p$ true. If such a view of truthmakers is correct, then we should further specify that Socrates’ justice is the minimal truthmaker of the claim that Socrates is just, where a minimal truthmaker of a claim is one such that no proper part of it is also a truthmaker for that claim. Notice, further, that I am not committing myself to the controversial claim that every true proposition must have a truthmaker, or to the false claim that every true proposition must have a minimal truthmaker.⁴

³ For instance, see the seminal article of Mulligan, Simons and Smith (1984).
⁴ To see that the claim about minimal truthmakers is false, take a possible world that contains infinitely many horses, and consider for the proposition, $p$, that there are infinitely many horses. Any truthmaker for proposition contains an infinite plurality (or aggregate or mereological sum, depending on one’s preferred ontology or vocabulary) of horses. But any infinite proper sub-plurality of horses will do just as well as truthmaker for $p$. 

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I am not assuming here that Socrates’ justice is a self-standing quasi-substance. Socrates’ justice likely is a dependent being: as the medievals would say, its esse is inesse—Socrates’ justice exists precisely by Socrates’ being just. What I said so far should have been neutral between any forms of nominalism, trope theory or Platonism that have a chance at being right, since even Platonism should admit that, on the one hand, there is the property (or Form) of justice and, on the other hand, there is Socrates’ instantiating of that property.

Now consider Bob who is a rock and who is hot. Let us suppose that Bob’s heat just is the large amount of kinetic energy of Bob’s molecules. Bob is hot precisely because of this kinetic energy: whenever Bob’s molecules—identified as such—have a lot of kinetic energy, Bob is hot, and that it is hot just is that its molecules have a lot of kinetic energy. Bob’s heat is distinct, then, from the heat of a different rock, Jane, and very different from the heat of the sun, since the movement of Jane’s or the sun’s molecules is different from the movement of Bob’s molecules. There is an ontological basis for predicating heat of Bob: the movement of the molecules constituting Bob. It is this ontological basis for the predication that is ‘Bob’s heat’, and it is this ontological basis that makes it true that Bob is hot. Or so I think. But even if I am wrong that heat can be identified the kinetic energy of Bob’s molecules, nonetheless it will likely be true that there is such a thing as Bob’s heat, and if there is, it will no doubt be distinct from Jane’s or the sun’s heat.

The claim that God’s being merciful and God’s being just are identical is, I take it, the claim that the ontological basis for predicating mercy of God is identical with the ontological basis for predicating justice of God. Or, in the above terminology, it is simply the claim that God’s justice is identical with God’s mercy, i.e., that the same thing is the minimal truthmaker of the claim that God is just and the claim that God is merciful. And this does not entail that Cato’s justice is identical with Mother Teresa’s mercy, or even that Mother Teresa’s justice is identical with Mother Teresa’s mercy.

More generally, we can say that the doctrine of divine simplicity states:

\((*)\) All non-tautological truths solely about God or his parts have God as their minimal truthmaker.

It follows immediately from 
\((*)\) that God has no proper parts, since if \(A\) were a proper part of God, then \(A\) rather than God would be the minimal truthmaker of the claim that \(A\) exists. Bergmann and Brower (forthcoming)


\(6\) I say ‘it will likely be’ rather than ‘it is certainly’ because it might turn out that the concept of heat will have to go the way of phlogiston.
use essentially the same account to solve the category problem. For no untoward claims identifying God with a Platonic entity are made here. The truthmakers of claims like ‘x is just’ are concreta. God is God’s justice, but God’s justice is not something Platonic—it is simply the truthmaker of ‘God is just’.

II.2. Redundancy

So at least the doctrine of divine attribute simplicity, when properly formulated, does not result in an immediate collapse of the perfections of human beings. But there still might be another argument against God’s being merciful being identical with God’s being just. For if the two are identical, then it seems that a theologian repeats herself when she says that God is merciful and when she says that God is just. Thus, saying that God is merciful and that God seems to be just like saying redundantly that the Lionheart is brave and that the Lionheart is courageous. Our language may not collapse in general, but it would still collapse in the case of God. Since it is essential to theological language that we make multiple claims, such as that God is perfectly good and that God is all powerful, the claim that all of this language is redundant and we might as well limit ourselves to saying that God is, say, just, without mentioning power or goodness or anything else, is absurd.

To respond, I will construct a case where we have two distinct properties, $F$ and $G$, both of which are predicated of $x$ and both of which are predicated of $y$, with $x$’s being $F$ not identical with $x$’s being $G$, even though $y$’s being $F$ is identical with $y$’s being $G$. Let $F$ denote the predicate ‘is round-or-triangular’; let $G$ be the predicate ‘is red-or-triangular’. Suppose $x$ is red and round, while $y$ is neither, but is triangular. Then, $x$ and $y$ both are both $F$ and $G$. Moreover, $x$ is $F$ in virtue of its roundness while it is $G$ in virtue of its redness, and $x$’s roundness and redness are plainly distinct. On the other hand, however, $y$ is $F$ in virtue of its triangularity and this triangularity is also that in virtue of which it is $G$. Given the sense which we gave above to the expression ‘being $F$’, it follows that $y$’s being $F$ is identical with $y$’s being $G$, though $x$’s being $F$ is not identical with $x$’s being $G$ nor are $F$ and $G$ the same property.

This example shows two things. First, it gives further support to the previous section’s claim that there is nothing incoherent in saying that God’s justice is identical with God’s mercy while Mother Theresa’s justice is not identical with Mother Theresa’s mercy. Second, although in this case $y$’s being round-or-triangular is identical with $y$’s being red-or-triangular (and both of these are identical with $y$’s being triangular), it is nonetheless true that something different is said when we say that $y$ is round or triangular
from what is said when we say that \( y \) is red or triangular. Two propositions
can have the same truthmaker without being redundant.

This is just an opening gambit: the example is clearly gerrymandered.
A less gerrymandered case, and one very close to Aquinas’ (1920: I, 13, 5)
use of Aristotle’s account of focal meaning in the context of theological
language, would be the following. Take the predicate ‘healthy’, one of
Aristotle’s favourite examples (see, e.g., *Metaphysics* IV), also used by
Aquinas. Now, a body’s being healthy is identical with a body’s functioning
well as an organism. However, a food item’s, say a boiled egg’s, being
healthy in the typically relevant sense is not identical with the food item’s
functioning well as an organism. Rather, the food item’s being healthy is
identical with the food’s promoting the health of humans. Here, Aristotle
and Aquinas insist we do not have gerrymandering. ‘Healthy’ is not
being used multivocally, but there is a focal meaning of ‘healthy’, namely
functioning well as an organism, and derivative ‘analogous’ meanings such
as ‘promoting an organism’s being healthy’ (e.g., as applied to food)
or ‘being indicative of an organism’s being healthy’ (e.g., as applied to
urine). Likewise, Aquinas insists that a predicate like ‘wise’ is used in
the case of God in a focal sense but in a derivative sense in the case of
creatures.

Let us now go back to the justice and mercy case. A criterion of adequacy
for our understanding what it means to say that God is merciful is that
there must be something relevantly alike between God’s being merciful, say,
and Mother Theresa’s being merciful. Moreover, there must be something
relevantly similar between God’s justice and Mother Theresa’s justice.
Yet, if language is not to break down, then Mother Theresa’s mercy and
Mother Theresa’s justice cannot be relevantly similar. I will now show how
this can happen by telling a science-fiction story where a similar thing
holds.

II.3. The strange alien and analogy

Suppose I tell you there is a very strange alien about whom I have told
you nothing yet other than that it is very strange and that it *hears*. And
suppose I next tell you that it *feels*, tactiley that is and not emotionally. By
‘It hears’ I just mean ‘It has a sense of hearing’ and ‘It feels’ means ‘It has
a sense of touch’. I might then add: ‘I talked to the alien and it heard me.
I then touched its seventh appendage from the top, and it felt that.’ You
no doubt would understand what I have said. However, it is important to
note how limited your understanding would be. You would not be entitled
to infer that the alien had a tympanic membrane that was made to vibrate
by my speech, for instance. You might be able to infer that the alien has an
ear understood as nothing more than an organ of hearing, but it might be radically different from our organs of hearing.

When we use terms like ‘hears’, ‘feels’ or ‘ear’ across very different kinds of creatures, we are speaking analogically. What we say is true provided that there is something in that creature respectively and relevantly similar to hearing, feeling or an ear in more familiar cases. Now, sometimes the relevant difference between cases is sufficiently great that an understanding of that in virtue of which members of one group are *F* would not tell us anything about that in virtue of which members of another group are *F*. Thomas Aquinas calls such cases ‘equivocal predication’. In such cases, we might as well use different words in the two cases, though there might be a common origin of some sort. For instance, if our only understanding of ‘button’ came from clothing fasteners, a sentence like ‘Click on the close button on the screen’ would probably mean nothing to us. Of course, once we saw the screen, we might see a certain vague physical similarity between the buttons used for fastening clothes and the close button, but this physical similarity would not be sufficient to explain that in virtue of which the on-screen button counts a button (even those on-screen buttons that are vaguely ‘button-shaped’ are not buttons in virtue of the shape, but in virtue of clickability).

But there are other cases where the predication is not equivocal but properly analogous, and where we do in fact understand what is being said, though our understanding is limited. Thus, even if we do not know anything about a Daphnia, not even that it is a crustacean, the claim that a Daphnia *eats* seems to have content. One has an understanding of what is said by analogy to familiar cases.

Moreover, while the concepts *univocal*, *equivocal* and *analogical* in the first instance apply to predicates, they also make sense in the case of properties. Roughly speaking, we can say that a property *P* is had univocally by *x* and *y* provided that *x* and *y* have *P* in the same way. In such a case, *x*’s having *P* and *y*’s having *P* are relevantly the same kind of thing. We can say that a property *P* is had equivocally by *x* and *y* provided that there is no relevant similarity between *x*’s having *P* and *y*’s having *P*. Disjunctive properties, like the one in Section II.2, provide a paradigm example. However, when there is a relevant similarity between *x*’s having *P* and *y*’s having *P*, the similarity being relevant at least in the sense that it is on account of this similarity that *x* and *y* both have the shared property *P*, we can say that we have a case of analogy. Much more needs to be said, but that would be a topic for another paper.

Let us then return to our alien. You still know basically nothing about it yet, other than that it is strange, that it has at least seven
appendages and that it hears and feels. Suppose I let you know one more thing: the alien’s hearing is the same as its feeling. If you were impressed by the argument that divine simplicity rendered our concepts incomprehensible as applied to God, you would have to say that when I added this additional bit of information, I have undercut your understanding of what I was talking about when I said that the alien heard and felt.

But I submit that the understanding is not undercut by my additional claim. Rather, the claim underscores how little you in fact knew about the alien just by being told that it hears and feels. Not only were you not allowed to infer that it had a tympanic membrane, but you were not entitled to infer that it had distinct organs of hearing and touch. It is worse than that: for when we say that the alien’s hearing is identical with its feeling, we are not just saying that both are done by the same organ, the way the tongue both tastes and partially articulates sounds. Rather, we are saying that there is but one activity in both cases.

Our understanding of God’s mercy and God’s justice is rather like your understanding of the alien’s hearing and feeling at this point in my description of the alien. There is a genuine puzzlement about how the two features can be the same. And this puzzlement in each case is due to the inability to go, look and see how the two features manage to be the same—whether in the case of God or of the alien. But we are not entitled to infer that it just cannot be so. We have a genuine puzzle, but we do not have a proof that the puzzle has no solution. And in the case of the alien, at least, with some imagination we might come up with an understanding of how one and the same organ with one and the same activity responds to tactile pressure and to vibrations of the air. In such a case, it might well be true that the alien’s hearing is the same as its feeling, and that its hearing is relevantly like our hearing and that its feeling is relevantly like our feeling, even though our hearing is not relevantly like our feeling. Moreover, we do not repeat ourselves when we say that the alien hears and when we say it feels.

III. ACCIDENTAL PROPERTIES

III.1. The general problem

Assume the entailment principle that if \( T \) is a truthmaker for \( p \), then that \( T \) exists entails \( p \). If we did not make this assumption,\(^7\) it would be easy to

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\(^7\) Those who say that what makes it true that Socrates was sitting is Socrates himself will deny the entailment principle.
defend the coherence of the claim that a simple God has intrinsic accidental properties. For it then might be that in one world the same entity is the truthmaker for the claim that God believes $p$ while in another world the very same entity might be the truthmaker for the claim that God believes not-$p$. If so, then God could have accidental intrinsic properties while yet himself being the minimal truthmaker for all propositions about him—it would simply be a contingent matter as to which propositions he is a truthmaker for—and we have understood simplicity in terms of truthmakers. The entailment principle, however, is deeply plausible, and so let us see if we can defend divine simplicity against the accidental property objection while assuming the entailment principle.

It seems like the truthmaker account is not only no help now, but sharpens the accidentality problem. Let $P$ be an intrinsic property. Then God is the truthmaker of the claim that God has $P$, since the claim that God has $P$ would be a claim solely about God. But the existence of the truthmaker entails the truth of the proposition in question. Hence, that God exists entails that God has $P$, and hence $P$ is an essential property of God. Thus, all of God’s intrinsic properties are essential, and hence none are accidental.

Given our account (*) of divine simplicity, the only solution is to bite the bullet and assert that the proposition that, say, God believes that $p$ has a truthmaker that not only includes God but must also include something contingent and distinct from God if we are to escape the entailment principle argument, and hence God’s having a contingent property is never a fact solely about God. The structure of a truthmaker-based response to the accidentality problem is now clear. It must be claimed that any correct attribution to God of an accidental property has as its truthmaker God and something contingent besides God, and hence the property is at least in part extrinsic. This appears to be a coherent claim.

It is worth noting at this point that medievals like Thomas Aquinas would object to the idea of God having any accidents, whereas this account attributes to God ‘accidental extrinsic properties’. This, however, may be a purely verbal distinction. To the scholastics, roughly speaking an accident was something inhering in, and not a part of the essence of, the thing of which it was an accident. Thus an accident in the medieval sense might even be an essential property in the contemporary analytic sense in

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8 I am not assuming here that divine simplicity entails the necessity of divine existence, and hence some of the formulations are somewhat more complex than they would need to be if we could assume that God exists necessarily. I do think that God exists necessarily, and this may in fact be entailed by divine simplicity, but that is a different issue.
which an essential property is one that an entity has in every world in which it exists (see Gorman 2005). The standard example is the human capacity for laughter. What I call ‘accidental extrinsic properties’ would not be counted as accidents (or properties for that matter) at all by the medievals.

At this point it is also worth recalling that I am attempting to formulate the present account in a way that is neutral between different accounts of properties. For instance, my story is at least prima facie compatible with an anti-Platonic view on which there are no properties, but we can posit them as a useful way of talking about predicates.

III.2. Divine believings and willings in general

Coherent though the claim that the truthmaker of contingent propositions about God always includes something other than God, it is counterintuitive in the cases at hand. The minimal truthmaker of the proposition that, say, Bob believes that $p$ is Bob’s believing that $p$, and analogously for willing. Now, Bob’s knowing that $p$ and Bob’s bringing it about that $p$ would go beyond Bob—they require that $p$ actually hold. But mere believing and willing do not seem to go beyond Bob. In fact, they seem paradigm instances of intrinsic properties.

However, there is nothing incoherent about supposing that some property might be intrinsic in the case of one entity and non-intrinsic in the case of another. Bob’s being-human-or-near-Jane is an intrinsic property of Bob if Bob is a man far from Jane. For the minimal truthmaker of the claim that Bob is human or near Jane is then Bob’s being human, which is found in Bob. On the other hand, if Rufus is a dog near Jane, then Rufus’s being-human-or-near-Jane is a non-intrinsic property of Rufus, since the truthmaker of the proposition that Rufus is human or near Jane is now something like the token spatial relation between Rufus and Jane. Here I am assuming that $P$ is an intrinsic (respectively, non-intrinsic) property of $x$ if there is a minimal truthmaker of the claim that $x$ has $P$ and that minimal truthmaker is $x$ or in $x$ (respectively, that minimal truthmaker includes something outside $x$).⁹

Granted, in this case it was once again a gerrymandered disjunctive property that showed the possibility of a property being intrinsic in one case and non-intrinsic in another. But as in the case of the multiple attributes problem, we can make use of the idea of analogy. When the

⁹ This is not a necessary condition for being an intrinsic property, since it does not apply to cases where there is no unique minimal truthmaker.
claims that $x$ is $F$ and $y$ is $F$ are analogical, there is nothing that surprising about the idea that being $F$ might be intrinsic to $x$ while being $F$ might be non-intrinsic to $y$. A substantive but controversial example might be teleological language understood in an Aristotelian way. When we say that one of the functions of a dog is to self-replicate, we are, on Aristotle’s view, attributing to the dog an intrinsic property. On the other hand, when we say that one of the functions of a computer virus is to self-replicate, we are attributing a non-intrinsic property, since the truthmaker of this claim about the computer virus includes both the virus and the intentions of the programmer. We are using the word ‘function’ analogically but not equivocally here.

Saying it is an extrinsic property of God that he has a particular belief or engages in a particular willing has substantial and controversial conclusions. It implies that radical content externalism is true of God’s beliefs and acts of will. That fact that $p$ is the content of one of God’s beliefs or willing is made true in part by the world. Now some content externalism seems innocent. Thus, suppose that on Earth the common colourless, tasteless, wet substance is $H_2O$, while on Twin-Earth it is XYZ. It is plausible that my brain and even my mind is in the same intrinsic state when I think about what I call ‘water’ as when someone like me on Twin-Earth thinks about what he calls ‘water’. Nonetheless, I am thinking about $H_2O$ and he about XYZ. Thus, thinking about $H_2O$ is not an intrinsic property of me, and thinking about XYZ is not an intrinsic property of him. These familiar essentialist considerations lead to a moderate content externalism.

But in the case of God’s beliefs or willing, this content externalism applies to all contingent propositions, not just the ones that involve natural kinds or $de$ $re$ particulars. This is odd, but not obviously self-contradictory. I will now proceed to discuss the cases of divine beliefs and willing, and attempt to make more plausible the externalist doctrine in these two cases. The account of willing shall be more satisfactory than that of beliefs, and I will begin with it.

III.3. Willings

My account of willing is mainly based on O’Connor (1999), and a version of it has also recently been defended by Jeffrey Brower (forthcoming). Start by considering how libertarian free will—which I will just call ‘free will’—might work. If Curley freely chooses to take the bribe, then, let us assume, there is some time at which it was causally possible that he not take the bribe. Moreover, there is a time after which this is no longer causally possible—the choice has been made. Let $t_0$ be the earliest
time with the property that after $t_0$ it is no longer causally possible that Curley not take the bribe. There is such a time. Before this time, Curley’s rejection of the bribe is causally open and after this time it is causally closed.

Moreover, I will assume that this time $t_0$ is associated with Curley’s decision to take the bribe. The decision happens at $t_0$. This is an assumption that might not hold, for it might be that $t_0$ is a time prior to the decision to take the bribe, a time at which Curley makes some other earlier libertarian-free decision, for example a decision to do whatever it takes to get ahead financially, which causally necessitates that he eventually make a causally determined decision to take the bribe. In that case, if we are to count the bribe-taking as free, it must inherit its freedom from the freedom of that earlier decision. But if we are to avoid a vicious regress, we will come to some decision with the property that the decision is made precisely at a time $t_0$ such that after that time some deed is causally determined as far as Curley is concerned and before it it was not. This might not in fact be the decision to accept the bribe, but for simplicity I will assume it is.

Thus, at $t_0$ there is a branching. Before $t_0$ it was possible for Curley still to reject the bribe and after $t_0$ this was no longer possible. There are now two models of free will. On the first model, one accepted by Nuel Belnap (email communication) among others, at $t_0$ the branching has not yet happened: it is still causally possible for Curley to reject the bribe. It is only at $t_0 + \delta$ (for every $\delta > 0$) that this is no longer possible. The time $t_0$ is the last time at which matters are still open. On the second model, at $t_0$ the branching has already happened: $t_0$ is the first time at which matters are no longer open. Since I am only trying to make plausible the possibility of divine willings having a radical content externalism, I will stick to the first model, since it seems at least to be a possible model.

Thus, Curley is deciding at $t_0$, but it is not yet true at $t_0$ that he has decided. Let $S$ be Curley’s state at $t_0$, i.e., the conjunction of all of Curley’s purely intrinsic properties at $t_0$ (or, if we wish, the conjunction of all purely intrinsic properties occurrent up to and including time $t_0$). This state $S$ occurs both in the actual world where Curley takes the bribe and in a possible world where he refuses it. Fix such a possible world where he refuses it and call it ‘the alternate world’. Now, at any moment of time $t_1$ after the decision time $t_0$, the actual and the alternate worlds have already diverged. Curley has already done something: something he

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10 This kind of derivative freedom is important in Kane (1996). It is likely also necessary for resolving the problem of how the blessed in heaven can be significantly free even though unable to sin.
is morally responsible for. Perhaps his hand has not yet reached out for the money; maybe his enraged voice has not begun to refuse the bribe. He is at $t_1$ in a state such that he is set to take or is set to refuse the bribe. (I am simplifying by assuming temporizing is not an option.) A deed has been done before $t_1$: his will has set into motion a causal chain leading up to the taking or the refusing of the bribe. Now the important thing to note is that the cause of the two different causal chains, the one in the actual world and the one in the alternate world, is the same as concerns intrinsic properties. For the cause is Curley at $t_0$ in state $S$. Since this state contains all of Curley’s intrinsic properties at $t_0$, and these are the same in the actual and the alternate world, it follows that we have one and the same person in one and the same intrinsic state being in one world responsible for setting into motion one causal chain and in another, another.

But this seems to severely undercut the objection to divine simplicity based on the contingency of what God chooses. For we now see that one and the same person in one the same state could be in a position to initiate either of two incompatible causal chains. Moreover, note that Curley’s actual deciding was at $t_0$. During the deciding itself there was no difference in his intrinsic properties between the actual and the alternate worlds. The difference only appeared extrinsically to the decision, though as a result of the decision.

Of course the analogy is imperfect. After time $t_0$, Curley does have different intrinsic properties between the actual and the alternate worlds. But at this point he does not have different intrinsic properties qua chooser, but qua one who had chosen; for at any time after $t_0$ the choice has already been made. Moreover, the difference in these intrinsic properties appears mainly due to the fact that we humans execute our actions through the use of our bodily and mental components, which are put in different states depending on the choice and through which we interact with the physical world. This need not apply in the case of a being that has an efficacious will, one that directly affects external reality, without any internal mediating states.

To see a model of this, suppose that Cartesian dualism holds of Curley (I do not think it actually holds of humans, but the notion of its holding appears perfectly coherent). Then it is at least conceivable that the way Curley’s decision worked was that at $t_0$ his immaterial will did something which affected the state that his physical body was in at every time after $t_0$. Now, imagine that God smote Curley in the actual and alternate worlds by annihilating his soul at all times after $t_0$, while leaving the body intact. Then, perhaps, the body would still have been affected by the choice that the will had made at $t_0$. Moreover, at no time would Curley be in a different
intrinsic state between the actual and alternate worlds, since by what we said before, he would not be in a different intrinsic state up to and including $t_0$, and after $t_0$ he would not be in any intrinsic state since he would not exist—only his body would.

Thus, at least if the libertarian story on which at the decision time $t_0$ the branching has not yet happened is coherent, there is no obvious intrinsic contingency implied in God by the fact that he could have willed otherwise. The content of what he willed is constituted at least in part by what was in fact brought about.

III.4. An objection

Let me now consider a remark that I have heard attributed to Brian Leftow: that God creates creatures explains the existence of the creatures, and hence the existence of creatures cannot be a part of the truthmaker of the claim that God creates creatures. Now, if this remark is correct, it is a serious objection to the account of the preceding section. For on that account the claim that God willed to create, say, horses is in part constituted by the existence of horses, and hence the existence of the horses is a part of the truthmaker of the claim that God willed to create horses.

This objection depends on the principle that the truthmaker of the explanandum cannot be a part of the truthmaker of the explanans. But that principle is false. That Jones wrote a book about cats explains why that book about cats exists. Yet a part of the truthmaker of the claim that Jones wrote a book about cats is that very book which he wrote. The explanation of a proposition is a proposition that removes the mystery about why the explanandum holds. The mystery about why there is a book about cats is dispelled by the claim that Jones wrote a book about cats, even though that book is a part of truthmaker of the explanans. One might, of course, alternately claim that what explains why there is a book about cats is that Jones willed to write a book about cats or that Jones tried to write a book about cats. And these are, indeed, fine explanations as well. But so is the explanation in terms of Jones actually having written the book.

III.5. Divine beliefs

God is essentially omniscient. Given a proposition $p$ such that (a) it is possible that both $p$ is true and God exists and (b) it is possible that both $p$ is false and God exists (if God exists necessarily, then any contingent proposition will satisfy (a) and (b)), God believes the proposition if and only if the proposition holds. Hence, if $p$ holds, it is an accidental property
of God that he believes $p$, and if $p$ fails to hold, then it is an accidental property of God that he does not believe $p$. If God has no intrinsic accidental properties, the content externalism implied by this seems radical.

Here the best I can do is offer an analogy to a theory of mind that is almost surely false of humans, but that at least prima facie seems coherent, and so perhaps an analogue for God is coherent. Take a naïve form of Descartes’ theory on which my mind’s eye contemplates phenomena (feels, touches, etc.) as if they were appearing on a screen in front of my mind’s eye, and where my mind’s eye is wholly distinct from the phenomena it contemplates. It is the difference in the phenomena that individuates the state of feeling hot and the state of feeling cold. One state involves my mind’s eye standing in a relation of contemplation to a feeling of heat and the other involves its standing in that relation to a feeling of cold. But now observe that the difference between these two states seems to be extrinsic to my mind’s eye: it consists in a difference between the feels, and the feels are not a part of the mind’s eye. The mind’s eye is not intrinsically modified by the things it sees. Maybe, then, God is related to the world the way such a Cartesian mind’s eye is to its phenomena.

There is an alternate solution, a version of which was recently defended by Jeffrey Brower (forthcoming in Flint and Rea), and this is Thomas Aquinas’ identification of God’s knowing and believing. In the previous section I have argued that one can make sense of divine willings given divine simplicity. Suppose we simply say that God’s knowing that $p$ just is God’s willing it that $p$, at least for positive propositions $p$. ¹¹ After all, by virtue of intentionally producing a state of affairs an agent has ‘intentional knowledge’ of that state of affairs. It is essential that the willings here be productive acts of will, not just desires. The disadvantage of this account is that, as Brower notes, it requires compatibilism. For suppose that Jones mows the lawn. Then God’s knowing that Jones does this depends on God’s willing that Jones do it, and hence Jones is determined by God to mow the lawn. Only if such determination is compatible with free will can we then say that Jones freely mows the lawn.

Brower argues that his account is required by the doctrine of aseity which says that God is entirely independent of everything other than himself.

¹¹ This qualification is needed if one does not want to say that God brings about evils. Negative claims would then need to be handled differently. For instance, God might know about the non-existence of Long John Silver’s leg not by willing that Silver lack a leg, but by willing some minor or major good incompatible with Silver’s having that leg, say the skin’s being closed up around the stump. Since I am not defending Aquinas’ account of divine knowledge, I will not develop this further.
For unless God produces the objects of his knowledge, he is dependent on them, even if his knowing the objects is an extrinsic property. In other words, Brower believes that the doctrine of aseity rules out the possibility of God’s having any accidental properties, extrinsic or intrinsic, unless God has brought about that feature of the world in virtue of which the properties hold.

This, however, is an unnaturally strong account of aseity. The doctrine of aseity says that God is entirely independent of anything other than himself. Dependence in respect of an extrinsic property is not real dependence, just as change in respect of an extrinsic property is not real change but Cambridge change. Extending aseity to extrinsic properties makes aseity entail complete sovereignty, the claim that every proposition \( p \) is entailed by what God wills in the productive sense of ‘wills’. For if some proposition \( p \) were not entailed by what God wills, then God would be dependent in respect of the extrinsic property being such that \( p \).

But such an extension of aseity appears excessive, even if Aquinas and some other medievals would accept it. Aseity is more naturally thought of as a denial of God’s having any real dependence on anything other than himself, and the further claim that every contingent proposition has its truth value determined by what God wills seems a separate claim, one that can be rejected by someone who denies that God has a real dependence on anything other than himself. A Platonist who believes that some mathematical entity (say, the empty set) is intrinsically independent of everything else surely asserts aseity of that entity even if she does not claim that all other entities depend on it. It might be that aseity in the weaker sense implies aseity in the stronger sense through some clever argument—but such an argument would need to be defended.

Aseity, then, is better seen as a claim about God being independent of everything else, not about every fact being determined by God. The defender of an account of divine knowledge that allows for libertarian free will on the part of creatures can accept divine aseity restricted to intrinsic properties and can also accept the weaker additional claim that everything other than God is dependent on God. For one can say that Jones’ mowing the lawn is dependent on God without saying it is determined by God.

### III.6. Final remarks on beliefs and willings

The attentive reader may note at this point that while I have been defending the idea that God’s believing or willing that \( p \) includes as its truthmaker something outside of God, I have said nothing about what that ‘something’ is. A natural proposal, though not the only possible one, is that the
'something' is nothing other than a truthmaker of $p$ itself. If so, then it becomes clearer why it is that $p$ holds if and only if God believes that $p$, as well as why $p$ holds if and only if God wills that $p$. Moreover, this proposal gives us a different, probably non-Thomistic, reason to accept Aquinas’ claim that God’s knowing something and God’s causing it are identical. For, if this proposal is correct, there is a single truthmaker for the claim that God knows that $p$ and for the claim that God wills that $p$, namely God plus a truthmaker of $p$.

### IV. CONCLUSIONS

If we understand divine simplicity as the claim that the minimal truthmaker of any claim solely about God and his parts is God himself, then it appears we can make coherent sense of the idea that divine attributes all collapse without endangering language. They collapse not in the language-endangering sense that one is saying the same thing by claiming that God is merciful as by claiming that God is just, but in the sense that the very same thing makes both claims true. Understanding how this works in practice almost surely requires a robust theory of analogical predication.

Likewise, once we recognize that a property might be intrinsic in the case of one entity and non-intrinsic in the case of another, we see that there is no immediate contradiction in a simple God having accidental properties such as willing that $p$ or believing that $p$, as long as these are not intrinsic properties in the case of God. Medievals like Aquinas would deny that God has accidental properties at all, but at least some of the disagreement here may be merely verbal. For these medievals certainly agree that there are contingent propositions about God, such as that God created horses, and the disagreement may simply consist in the fact that they might resist calling the non-intrinsic properties in question ‘properties’.

Nonetheless the idea that that God wills or believes that $p$ are not claims solely about God are hard sayings, especially since the defender of simplicity does not want to opt for a pantheistic account. I tried to assuage some of the hardness of the claim about willings by noting that a plausible account of libertarian free will would allow for cases in finite agents where willing that $p$ is at least partially constituted by events outside of the agent. The case of believings is harder, but a hint at an answer might be found in

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12 If negative propositions lack truthmakers, things are more difficult. It may, for instance, be that the claim that God believes not-$p$ where $p$ is a positive proposition is made true, then, by God’s perfection together with God’s believing $q$, where $q$ is some positive proposition incompatible with $p$. 12
content externalism and Cartesian theaters. This all, however, has to be understood in the way of offering analogies, since there is nothing exactly like God’s radical simplicity in the world. For, as Aquinas tells us, ‘goodness, which in God is simple and uniform, in creatures is manifold and divided and hence the whole universe together participates the divine goodness more perfectly, and represents it better than any single creature whatever’ (Aquinas, 1920: I.47.1).

REFERENCES


