Divine Simplicity and Reading Scripture: Exodus 3:14 and God as Being-Itself

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Introduction

For much of Christian tradition, Exodus 3:14 has been understood as God’s self-identification with “being-itself”, and hence as a source for the doctrine of divine simplicity. However, recent linguistic studies have rendered the ontological reading of 3:14 as “I AM THE ONE WHO IS” less plausible, in particular by arguing that the Hebrew is most faithfully rendered as “I AM WHO I AM” or “I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE.” There have been a number of responses from theologians and philosophers of religion, and in this paper I contribute to the task of re-articulating the connection between Exod. 3:14 and divine simplicity.1 By “divine simplicity” I mean the claim that God is not composed in any way. God does not have physical parts and is not spatially extended. Neither does God have metaphysical parts, as if God is “made up” out of more basic components or categories.2 One of the most radical forms of divine simplicity also insists that God is not composed of subject and existence or of essence and existence. God is perfectly identical to the divine act of existence. Yet, even this radical form is entailed in the denial that God has metaphysical parts. If there are no metaphysical categories more basic than God, then in God the distinctions between these categories break down and what the categories express converges extensionally.3

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1 E. L. Mascall, Existence and Analogy: A Sequel to “He Who Is” (London: Longmans, Green & Co, 1949), 12–15, suggests that though the precise wording of Exod. 3:14 does not readily permit the more ontological interpretation, the latter can be developed out of the broader Old Testament witness to the uniqueness and power of God. Even more recently, Katherine Sonderegger has proposed yet another way of reading Exod. 3:14 in line with the doctrine of divine simplicity in terms of the perfect identity of subject and object in God’s action and self-disclosure. Katherine Sonderegger, Systematic Theology, Volume 1: The Doctrine of God (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 210–23, also 80–82. Though I am sympathetic with Mascall’s and Sonderegger’s approaches, they also have limitations. Mascall’s approach requires sweeping—and therefore highly contestable—generalizations in OT theology. And Sonderegger’s approach does not relate directly—or at least explicitly—to the traditional connection of divine simplicity with Exod. 3:14 as formulated by the church fathers.

2 For an extended discussion along these lines, see James E. Dolezal, God without Parts: Divine Simplicity and the Metaphysics of God’s Absoluteness (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011).

3 I insist that the convergence is only extensional and not intentional, at least to the extent that the categories as we use them do not become synonymous. Or, in Thomistic language, there is always a distinction between the res significata and the modus significandi; see Gregory Rocca, “The Distinction between Res
I propose reading the self-designation in 3:14 within the broader scene of Exod. 3:1–14. First, I present my narrative reading of Exod. 3:1–14 and find three questions present within the narrative that are significant for metaphysical discussion of the divine being. Namely, I argue that the text as a whole elicits questions of God’s incomparability, intimacy, and ineffability. Second, I present the traditional concept of divine simplicity in discussion with these three questions. I argue that the form of divine simplicity presented in dialogue with Exod. 3:14 can be seen as in part a gloss on the perfect compatibility of God’s fiery presence in the burning bush with God’s transcendence. While this reading of Exod. 3 does not logically necessitate the doctrine of divine simplicity as I am articulating it, it does permit it. Further, the doctrine of divine simplicity and Exod. 3:1–14 are, in this reading, mutually illuminating.

**Call and theophany: reading in context**

Moses encounters the burning bush while tending his father-in-law’s sheep. By appearance alone he does not seem to regard it as holy or theophanic but simply as a curiosity. He wonders why the bush remains unconsumed by the flame. Only after God addresses Moses from within the bush does he come to regard the whole situation as theophanic. God explains that Moses is on holy ground, in the presence of “the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” (v6 NRSV). After this introduction, God proceeds to commission Moses to the task of confronting Pharaoh and leading the Israelites out of Egypt.

To God’s call, Moses offers a series of objection questions, notably asking “who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?” (v11) and “If I come to the Israelites … and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” (v13). God’s self-designation, I AM WHO I AM, is given as a response to Moses’ objections. Consequently, the significance and meaning of this name is related to what kind of objections Moses is raising. Two observations arise: first, Moses is concerned in his first objection about his status in relation to Pharaoh. In order to evade the call God is extending, Moses eludes to his own insignificance vis-à-vis Pharaoh. Andrea Saner notes that this should be

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4 In putting it this way, I am in partial agreement with Brueggemann who calls this less a theophany than “voice to voice encounter”. However, I see the “voice to voice encounter” as precisely what enables Moses to recognize the theophany. Cf. Walter Brueggemann, “Exodus 3: Summons to Holy Transformation,” in The Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Classic and Contemporary Readings, ed. Stephen E. Fowl (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 157.
troubling to the reader, for Moses’ language echoes a common OT sentiment about the relative unworthiness of a human before God (e.g., 2 Chr 2:5; 2 Sam 7:8; Ps 8:5; Ps 144:3), though Moses is here using such language about Pharaoh. Moses seems to be thinking within a quantitative power continuum. As a murderer and expatriate, Moses is relatively low on the continuum. God’s response does not attempt to convince Moses that he should think better of himself, but, on the contrary, shifts the emphasis away from Moses’s relative power to God’s own self: “I will be with you” (v12).

Second, when Moses asks for a name, it is clear upon reflection that he is not actually worried about satisfying potential questions the Israelites might raise. Why this is likely not what was on Moses’ mind can be seen if we imagine what it would look like if Moses wanted a name simply to verify with inquisitive Israelites. For, if the Israelites were to ask for a name, they would want one that confirmed that it is in fact their God on whose behalf Moses was acting. But in that case, they would want a name they recognized and not a new name. However, God already offered the name they would recognize: “the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” Moses is not just asking for a name that he can give to the Israelites as if he genuinely thinks they will ask for one. The question is not about being able to prove that Israel’s God did in fact appear to him, and the reference to the Israelites is rhetorical. Rather, Moses is asking God for a name of power. Saner sums this up well:

the verse seems to present the question of under what name—what understanding of the nature of God—the Israelites will be able to trust. … For Moses inquires about the name of God, but he receives both a name and a statement of who God is. For both Moses and for the Israelites, the sending of Moses marks a new act of God, one that will require new and substantial trust.

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5 Saner, Too Much to Grasp, 118–19. She says, “I suggest that a good reader should be puzzled, and a bit troubled, by Moses’ question. True humility would require him to say something like, ‘Who am I that you should send me to bring out the Israelites?’” (119).
6 Additionally, Moses does ask in 4:1 about the possibility that the Israelites might want proof that it was truly their God who appeared to him. But why would Moses continue to question God with the same concern, especially considering that all the other questions raise distinct problems? For elaboration of this point, see Saner, Too Much to Grasp, 121.
7 Cf. Saner, Too Much to Grasp, 121–22.
9 Saner, Too Much to Grasp, 122.
This brings us to the name that God supplies:

“I am who I am.” He said further, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I am has sent me to you’.” (v14)

The name is given as a response both to Moses’ uncertainty in the face of Pharaoh and to his request for a name of power in which he and Israel can trust. A third point arises: God gives a name that is also seemingly the evasion of a name. In response to the request for a name of power, God offers a strictly first-personal self-reference, as if to say that the name and the power by which Moses is being sent is not something within Moses’ grasp—the name is not a token that Moses can comprehend and wield as he pleases. The name does not overcome God’s ineffability but in some sense betokens it.

**Incomparability, intimacy, and ineffability: divine simplicity and Exod. 3:14**

Based on the above reading, I suggest that the narrative elicits three questions about God’s self-naming: (i) How does God unsettle the quantitative power continuum between Moses and Pharaoh to validate Moses’ call? (ii) How does God’s self-naming address Moses’ concern about trustworthy power? And (iii) How is God’s self-naming discontinuous with typical acts of naming? My contention in this section is that divine simplicity can be used as a conceptual tool for attempting to think through the interpretive questions so raised. And I contend that simplicity does so in a way that draws the reader deeper into the text itself and not by abstracting from the text’s depiction of God, Moses, and Israel. The three questions concern God’s (i) incomparability, (ii) intimacy, and (iii) ineffability.

 *(i) Incomparability*

Notice what is at issue in the question of “incomparability”: Moses is tempted to interpret his ability to accomplish the task to which God calls him through a quantitative difference between his own power/ability/status and that of Pharaoh. God’s response, including the giving of the name in 3:14, shifts away from the quantitative comparison by promising God’s own presence to Moses. This suggests that there is something radically different about God that distinguishes him from the kind of continuum on which Moses and Pharaoh are separately placed. Might God’s promise of

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presence—as a disruption of Moses’ sense of relative weakness—display an utterly qualitative rather than quantitative difference between God and both Moses and Pharaoh? Perhaps if Moses can come to rightly perceive God’s ontological difference, then his perceived quantitative incommensurability with Pharaoh will pose no threat to God’s call. God’s incomparability is therefore the condition of the possibility of Moses’ sending and of the success of his mission.

Already this begins to connect with divine simplicity. If God unsettles the quantitative power continuum internal to the creaturely plane of being, then God’s incomparability can be understood non-quantitatively. God is not a member of a quantitative series, hence God’s being cannot be described or defined in quantitative terms (except perhaps metaphorically). A non-quantitative incomparability would prima facie resemble simpleness—non-compositemess—for anything that is composed is quantifiable both in terms of its components and in terms of sharing in a genus within which it is in principle possible to be one in a numerical series. If God is depicted as unsettling the quantitative power continuum, and therefore somehow incomparable and non-quantifiable, then there is reason to further consider God in terms of simplicity.\textsuperscript{11}

(ii) Intimacy

The question of ‘intimacy’ is therefore already internal to the question of “incomparability”. Moses wants something that betokens the power of his call, and it is to this desire that God responds with the name I AM WHO I AM. In this light, I suggest that even if THE ONE WHO IS of the LXX is not the only legitimate translation of the Hebrew, it seems to be not only plausibly included in the semantic range of the original but also related to the request Moses is making. Moses asks for a name of power that validates his mission. From the fiery-but-not-consuming intimacy engulfing the bush, God announces just such a name, I AM WHO I AM—THE ONE WHO IS. The name signals a unique kind of power and presence. It expresses the One so radically other and yet intimately present to creation that there is no competition; the One whose “is”, whose being and life, is so infinite and unqualified—as Augustine and Aquinas say, the One who is “to be” itself—that this One’s presence to finite, particular creatures brings the creatures to radiance and perfection.

This connection comes to the surface in Augustine’s thought. In his reading, God the Creator who addresses Moses in the burning bush is “the one who is in the supreme degree” in contrast to creatures who do not possess being in the “supreme degree”. The relative difference in mode of existence is not a matter of quantitative variation in form or actuality, as if creaturely being is on a single continuum with God, for the whole scale of actuality and form is created by God. Rather, the difference has to do with the relationship between a subject (e.g., God or a creature) and existence. To say that God “is in the supreme degree” is to say that God, distinctly from creatures, has existence (esse) in the supreme degree, which means by identity rather than by reception or participation. In other words, God is identical to God’s existence, whereas creatures only exist by receiving existence from God. In this way, creatures are composite by virtue of their dependence on God for existence, whereas God is simple by virtue of perfect identity with existence. “Existence” here does not express a mere property a thing possesses but is the actuality of the being, that by virtue of which a being stands forth from nonbeing. If God is identical to the infinite act of existence itself—in Aquinas’ phrase, ipsum esse subsistens—then, as the Creator, God shares with others by gift what God is in God’s self. God’s intimate self-donation is that by virtue of which creatures are made actual. Because God perfectly “is”, God can be radically intimate to that which God brings into being.

Consequently, God’s incomparability and intimacy converge, at least in one way of thinking these categories. God is utterly incomparable, other than the quantitative series in which creatures exist. And this incomparability glosses God’s perfect “is”. Therefore, God can be perfectly present and intimate without competition with creatures. Janet Martin Soskice puts it nicely:

The God of the attributes is not far away but near, very near—and so Augustine is able to mix, willy nilly, and without embarrassment, the language of divine perfection with the language of [scripture], because all are terms of God’s intimacy with us. … The metaphysical attributes are not discarded, rather their meanings are only given in fullness through God’s self-disclosure—through revelation. For this

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God who acts in lived lives, whether that of the cosmos, of Israel, or Augustine, ultimacy and intimacy are one.\textsuperscript{13}

The non-competitive presence of God to Moses is precisely the assurance requested, promising that Moses will be acting with the proper power to fulfill God’s mission. Because of who and what God is—viz., the Creator of all who exists by perfect identity with God’s own act of existing—the “name of power” Moses asks for is simply an expression of God’s fiery presence to Moses. This presence ensures that Moses’ relative inadequacy against Pharaoh is subverted and that his call will be sustained by the One who is present in the name.

(iii) Ineffability

But now it may seem that any connection to the third question I drew out of the text has been rendered impossible, namely: How is God’s self-naming discontinuous with typical acts of naming? Do we not see in Exod. 3:14 a strange alliance of naming and of simultaneously evading being exhaustively signified by the name? Has this tension been collapsed by the direct appeals in the previous section to the identity between God and God’s act of existing—in effect penetrating beyond what is humanly knowable of God? In fact, I argue it is the reverse that is the case. Just such an identification between God and God’s existence is able to sustain the connection between the gift of God’s name and the ineffability of God. For, only that which exists within the series of other finite particulars can be grasped and fully known, tagged and categorized by genus and difference. But this is the case only for those things that receive existence but are in themselves not identical to existing. God, by contrast, is not so bounded but is simply the infinite act of existing, unqualified by any other beings or limits. Consequently, we have no possession of our language and knowledge of God, for God always exceeds what we can think and say.\textsuperscript{14}

While deploying a different conceptuality than what is directly provided in scripture, this explication of God’s ineffability named through gift offers a compelling rendering of Exod. 3:14


\textsuperscript{14} See Soskice, “Gift of the Name,” 75: “To be a theologian, we might say, is always to stand under the primacy of the signified over the signifier … but at the same time to know the signified can only be named through gift.” She continues: “The naming of God can never be, without risk of idolatry a matter of simple denomination. Its foundation is gift—the gift of God’s self-disclosure in history (both Israel’s and our own)—and practice, the practice of prayer which is itself a gift.”
that connects with the questions discussed above as incomparability and intimacy. What Moses does not receive in 3:14 is a “name of power” that can be at his disposal, a name by which he can conjure divine power at a whim. Instead, he receives the name that only God could rightly use. Saner shows how this interpretation makes sense of the discourse between Moses and God. Her words are worth quoting at length:

God cannot be known as an ‘item in the universe’, but only as a subject who meets Moses in Midian and the reader in the text, pronouncing his own name. Thus, Moses’ perspective must again shift from concern about a name to give the Israelites to attention toward the reality of the God who is sending him, who addresses Moses directly. … in response to Moses’ concerns about his own weakness, YHWH reveals himself as the one who is able to carry out the task. YHWH’s self-disclosure as subject in verse 14 is precisely in opposition to Moses’ self-concern, because it draws Moses’ attention away from himself and into God’s “I”. Knowledge of YHWH will require Moses’ ongoing attention, because God does not describe himself according to a definition or by means of an object that can be mastered.¹⁵

This suggests that the name is a gift of God’s immanent activity within God’s people and a privileged act of self-naming as the fiery transcendence that can never be exhausted. Precisely because these are not competing aspects of God’s reality—as if immanence and transcendence were tensions in God’s being—God can call Moses and provide assurance for the task set before him. From this perspective it seems fitting to take 3:14 as gathering up all the questions and concerns Moses has raised against accepting God’s call and redirecting attention to the unique reality of God. Exod. 3:14 can then be taken as expressing a judgment about God’s simplicity insofar as the later concept of “simplicity” does in fact explicate the questions raised in the broader text.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Moses need not fear or be concerned about his relative humbleness before Pharaoh, because the God who sends him is utterly incomparable, unsettling the quantitative power continuum; is intimate, as the fiery presence who sustains and perfects all creatures and does so uniquely for those whom God sends; and is ineffable, beyond mastery or closure and entirely escaping human control. It has been my contention in this essay that divine simplicity is a

¹⁵ Saner, Too Much to Grasp, 125.
conceptual tool developed by Christian theologians to help the church recognize and follow the judgments made within this text. We are alerted to this pattern of judgments by questions that arise within the narrative itself. While I acknowledge that the narrative does not require or directly provide us with conceptual language like divine simplicity offers, I also suggest that as long as divine simplicity is disciplined by and directed toward such exegetical aims the category holds forth promise in our attempts to know the God who sent Moses and who sends the church. Simplicity helps us to attend to the trustworthiness of God.

I also believe that this reading can help the contemporary theologian and exegete retrieve premodern understandings of Exod. 3:14. I suggest that we receive premodern uses of 3:14 to ‘prove’ divine simplicity less as instances of naïve ‘proof-texting’ and more as metonymy, i.e., using this single climactic verse to stand in for a way of reading and interpreting the larger passage. For it is at least plausible to read the whole passage as eliciting questions about God’s trustworthiness in terms of incomparability, intimacy, and ineffability. If simplicity can really unite these three questions into a single conceptual tool, then it has done us a great service in continuing to recognize the fiery presence of the God who sends.

Finally, divine simplicity and the divine naming of 3:14 are mutually illuminating. Divine simplicity attempts to offer conceptual resources to help the reader grapple with the reality of God through the questions the text presents concerning God’s incomparability, intimacy, and ineffability. Simplicity helps to acknowledge the internal unity of the three questions insofar as they each arise within Moses’ struggle to trust God and receive the vocation to which God is calling him. Consequently, simplicity draws the reader deeper into the mystery of God’s self-revelation and being, involving the reader in learning to trust. But simplicity is also clearly given content and character through its contact with this passage. By reading them together, simplicity is shown to address our ethical and personal involvement with God, and hence it is not simply an abstract philosophical category. Contemplating who and what this God is has value in our struggle to trust the fire of God’s presence and action. We might sum it up this way: in God’s self-naming, God assures us that by virtue of God’s utterly simple perfection no other creaturely factor has the final say.