The First Principle must be simple. This intuition was as ambiguous and controversial in the times of Aristotle and Plotinus as it remains today. Some ancient philosophers and religious writers rejected or ignored this intuition altogether; others accepted it with various qualifications. Plotinus, as this paper seeks to establish, made a landmark contribution to the history of philosophy by advancing the doctrine of divine simplicity in its strongest conceivable form. To speak Anselmically and somewhat anachronistically, for Plotinus, the First Principle is that which nothing simpler can be thought. In fact, precisely because the One is absolutely simple, the One cannot be thought at all, or rather cannot be cognized in the manner presupposing a duality between subject and object. According to the founder of Neoplatonism, nothing in the sensible world and in the intelligible world, can match the perfect simplicity of the One. Even the divine Mind (nous), as the repository of the eternal Forms, represents a perfectly unified plurality, rather than perfect simplicity. For this reason, the divine Nous must be the second hypostasis, which derives from and is ontologically subordinate to the One. For Plotinus, the simplicity of the first hypostasis admits of no qualifications. In contrast, most other philosophers and theologians variously qualified divine simplicity in order to account for other features of divine reality. The taxonomy of such qualifications is attempted towards the end of this paper. It should be emphasized that Plotinian simplicity is here examined on its own merits instead of being used as a foil for the different Christian explorations of this topic. Above all, I seek to demonstrate that the central metaphysical insight of the Enneads—that no composition whatsoever can be attributed to the First Principle—possesses remarkable coherence, elegance and simplicity (pun intended).

Plotinus’ Philosophical Context

Plotinus’ exposition of the principle of divine simplicity draws on a centuries-old discussion of the nature of the First Principle among the Greek philosophers. In this discussion, the claim that the First Principle is simple was not a universally shared axiom. Aristotle summarized the discussion thus:

As to the nature and number of the first principles opinions differ. The difference is greatest between those who regard them as corporeal and those who regard them as incorporeal, and from both dissent those who make a blend and draw their principles from both sources. The number of principles is also in dispute; some admit one only, others assert several.¹

¹ Aristotle, De anima, A. 2 404b-405a.
This lapidary characterization should make any contemporary scholar weary of confident assertions about the supposedly monolithic “Greek metaphysics” by which Christian thought had been allegedly corrupted or from which some Christian authors had successfully escaped. As I have argued at length elsewhere, unified “Greek metaphysics” is a figment of modern scholarly imagination: metaphysical debates among the Greek philosophical schools of late antiquity were as fierce as those over the fate of metaphysics in our time. (To expect less in this arena from the ancients is to disrespect them intellectually—a hubris typical of much modern thinking, but becoming less pronounced our side of modernity.) For example, in Stoic pantheism and materialism, the idea of divine simplicity was usually ignored and, by implication, rejected. Similarly, in the twentieth century, process metaphysicians have jettisoned the idea of divine simplicity with rather devastating consequences for their overall understanding of divine nature and divine action. In sharp contrast, the Platonists, conceived of the First Principle as incorporeal and as a rule correlated incorporeality with various types of simplicity. It is the Platonist and the Aristotelian philosophical streams that form the foundation of contemporary discussions of divine simplicity.

Aristotle credits the pre-Socratic philosopher Anaxagoras with the first intimation of the idea of divine simplicity. The Stagirite relates Anaxagoras’ views as follows:

He says that everything was mixed together except Mind, which alone was pure and unmixed. It follows from this that he recognizes as principles the One (which is simple and unmixed) and the Other, which is such as we suppose the Indeterminate to be before it is determined and partakes of some form. Thus his account is neither correct nor clear, but his meaning approximates to more recent theories and what is now more obviously true.

Aristotle interprets Anaxagoras’ characterization of the mind as “pure and unmixed” to be roughly equivalent to the statement that the mind is “simple and unmixed.” Other extant ancient authorities, independent of Aristotle, do not corroborate that Anaxagoras explicitly taught divine simplicity, although the idea that the Mind was “unmixed” in a sense of being different from the primordial undifferentiated mixture, appears in our sources consistently. It should be recalled that Aristotle speaks of his own divine Mind, or the Unmoved Mover, as “permanently simple.” Simplicity in Aristotle’s system also had an epistemological dimension: the first principles of all things had to be simple in the sense of being the starting point of explanation and knowledge for things more complex. It is likely that Aristotle “updated” Anaxagoras’ thought in a manner more congenial to his own ontology. Anaxagorean-Aristotelian divine simplicity can also be called noetic simplicity. This form of divine simplicity continued to be taught in the Hellenistic period by the Middle Platonists, including Philo and Numenius.

5 E.g., Diogenes Laertius, Lives of Eminent Philosophers 2.3.[6]. Cicero’s report in De natura deorum, I. 11. 26 that Anaxagoras taught an “uncovered and simple mind” is based on Aristotle.
6 Aristotle, Physics, VIII.6; cf. Physics, VIII.10.267b 25-26; Metaphysics, XII.7.1072a 32-34.
7 Aristotle, Physics, I.1.
8 Philo, Leg All. II.1,2; Numenius, fr. 11.11-14. By classifying Philo with the Middle Platonists (following John Dillon), I do not intend to imply that he was a very eclectic biblically-saturated thinker. On Philo, see H.A. Wolfson, Philo: Foundations of Religious Philosophy in Judaism, Christianity and Islam (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press,
Plotinus’ reception of Anaxagoras was crucially mediated by Aristotle, largely through the discussion in Alexander of Aphrodisias, Numenius, and Ammonius, on whose writings Plotinus lectured in Rome.9 Echoing the Stagirite, Plotinus states: “And Anaxagoras also, when he says that Intellect is pure and unmixed, posits that the First Principle is simple and that the One is separate, but he neglected to give an accurate account because of his antiquity.”10 Anaxagoras’ ideas come for a fair amount of criticism here and elsewhere in the Enneads.11 Closely following Aristotle’s account in Metaphysics, Plotinus emphasizes Anaxagoras’ failure to express himself accurately and at the same time attributes to this pre-Socratic philosopher a rudimentary idea of divine simplicity. It cannot be doubted that Anaxagoras’ teaching about the “pure and unmixed” nature of the Mind was an important building block in Plotinus’ much more developed and cogent account of divine simplicity.12

In Vita Plotini, Porphyry notes that his teacher “expounded the principles of Pythagorean and Platonic philosophy more clearly than anyone before him.”13 The Pythagorean Monad is a compound which consists of the limited and the unlimited, and as such is not viewed as simple.14 In his later years, Plato apparently moved closer to the Pythagorean doctrine, which counted the One (also by some authors called the Monad) and the Indefinite Dyad among the first principles.15 The identification of the One (Monad) with the Mind became a commonplace in Middle Platonism. Plotinus notably departs from this tradition, for his highest principle, the One, is not identified with the Mind, but is rather supranoetic, as will be discussed below.

Plotinus’ Account of Divine Simplicity

Plotinus dwells on the topic of divine simplicity and associated ideas of unity, multiplicity and composition with remarkable depth and tenacity throughout the Enneads. After arranging Plotinus’ discussions chronologically, following the chart in Porphyry’s Vita Plotini, I could not discern any significant development in Plotinus’ thought on divine simplicity. It is most likely that by the time Plotinus came to set his philosophy in writing, his views regarding the subject were more or less settled.

In his chronologically first treatise “On Beauty” (Enn. 1.6.1), Plotinus states that unlike corporeal things, God is “alone, simple, single, and pure,” but does not develop the idea. The manner in which this assertion is made implies that by the time of Plotinus, divine simplicity had become an established part of Platonic ontology. Next in chronological order is Enn. 5.9.3, in which Plotinus states the metaphysical principle that “all things that are said to exist are compounds, and not a single one of them is simple.” At Enn. 5.9.14, he asserts that the highest metaphysical principle must be simple and mentions an aporia of

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10 Plotinus, Enn. 5.1.9.1 (Armstrong 444: 43).
11 E.g., Enn. 2.4.7, where Plotinus criticizes Anaxagoras’ idea that matter contains all things “mixed together” in actuality, as opposed to the Aristotelian and late Platonic conception of matter as pure potentiality.
how the multiplicity of all things comes from that which is non-multiple, without, however, offering a resolution. Beginning to offer a resolution in *Enn*. 6.9.1, he observes that each individual thing, while it is compound, is also in some important sense “one,” and to the extent to which it is one, it participates in the unity of the One. More generally, the problem of how the absolute One generates non-ones in Platonism tends to be solved by ascribing to the One a causal power to emanate multiplicity without compromising oneness. (I suppose that panentheism, assuming it is a coherent position, is borne out of a fundamental intellectual discontent with the principle that all-transcending simplicity can be generative of non-simplicity and postulating, on the contrary, that “all-unity” produces “all-plurality.” Some panentheists want to have their simplicity and eat it too, when they hold that God both transcends the unity of all things and also somehow contains the unity of all things, where “contains” means different things for different types of panentheists.\(^{16}\))

As a general rule, Plotinus’ thought proceeds aporetically, by way of philosophical conundrums, rather than dogmatically. In his chronologically seventh treatise, *Enn* 5.4.1, Plotinus for the first time moves from assertions to an argument for the simplicity of the First Principle:

> For there must be something simple before all things, and this must be something other than all things that come after it. [...] For if it is not to be simple, outside all coincidence and composition, it could not be a first principle; and it is the most self-sufficient because it is simple and the first of all: for that which is not the first needs that which is before it, and what is not simple is in need of its simple components so that it can come into existence from them.\(^{17}\)

Non-simple things are composed, and composed things ontologically depend on their parts in the sense that if a part is removed, the thing is no longer what it used to be. Things that are composed of parts (whatever the nature of parts) could be explained by describing those parts, which in this case become epistemologically prior to the compound. Parts make and explain the compound. That which is first in the order of being and explanation cannot be preceded by its parts. Therefore, that which is first cannot be compound, but only simple in the strongest sense of the word. A similar argument could be found in the Middle Platonists,\(^{18}\) but Plotinus pushes the envelope in one very important way. The Middle Platonists fundamentally agreed with the Aristotelian

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\(^{17}\) *Enn*. 5.4.1

\(^{18}\) Albinus, *Didaskalikos*, 10: “God is neither a part of something else nor a whole having parts; [...] God is without parts because there existed nothing prior to Him. Parts are the elements of which a thing is composed and are prior to that of which they are parts. The plane is prior to the solid, and the line prior to the plane. Not having parts, moreover, God would be unmoved with regard to place and quality. If He were altered by another, that agent would be more powerful than He; if by Himself, He would be altered either for the worse or for the better; both hypotheses are absurd. From all of this it is obvious in any case that God is incorporeal. This can also be demonstrated from the following: If God were a body, He would be material and have a form, for every body is a composite of matter and accompanying form which resembles the ideas and participates in them in some way which is difficult to explain. It is absurd to suppose that God is composed of matter and form, for then He would be neither simple nor primordial. Thus God must be incorporeal. Again, if God were a body, He would be made of matter, either fire or water or earth or air or some combination of these. But none of these is primordial. Furthermore, He would be produced later than matter if He were material. Since all of these assumptions are absurd, we must consider God incorporeal. Besides, if He were corporeal, He would be corruptible, generated and
identification of the highest principle with the divine Mind (nous). For the Middle Platonists, in sharp
counter to the Stoics, the divine Mind was simple in the sense of being devoid of corporeal and psychic
parts. For Plotinus, this kind of simplicity was not good enough, because the Mind still admitted of
composition in at least two respects: first, the Mind was not above the distinction between being and
thinking, it perpetually made and integrated this distinction, inasmuch as it existed by thinking itself;
second, the Mind was also a repository of the intelligible paradigms of the material world, of the
Platonic forms.\textsuperscript{19} The fundamental point of Plotinus was that the Mind could not be the One \textit{tout court}.
The Mind is that which thinks and that which is being thought (\textit{Enn}. 6.9.2). Since the Mind contains,
thinks, and unifies the Forms, it can never be the One \textit{tout court}, but only the One-Many. On Plotinus’
understanding, Anaxagorean-Aristotelian divine simplicity is a lower-grade simplicity that is surpassed by
the absolutely simple First Principle. The One is absolutely simple in the sense of not admitting any
composition whatsoever: not only corporeal composition, which in the Platonist account is already
excluded at the levels of the Mind and the World Soul, but also hylomorphic composition, the intelligible
composition of multiple ideas, and the composition presupposed in the subject-object distinction. The
One engenders being and thinking, but it is not itself a being or a thinking entity. In this special causal
sense the One is “beyond being” (τὸ ἐπεξείτα ὄντος τὸ ἐν) in the sense of producing all being and
surpassing any form of multiplicity, including the subject-object distinction (\textit{Enn}. 5.1.10; 5.4.2). Plotinus
consistently defends this very strong, one could say “industrial strength” form of divine simplicity.

I am inclined to cast Plotinian simplicity in the admittedly anachronistic Anselmic terms of “that
which nothing simpler can be thought.” Anything less simple, insists Plotinus, is ontologically
subordinate to the absolutely simple One. Plotinian simplicity does not admit of composition of any kind
whatsoever. Plotinus’ insistence on the fact that the First Principle cannot be a repository of the Forms
has been aptly called the “Principle of Prior Simplicity.”\textsuperscript{20} While much of Plotinus’ argument is not new,
it would be a misreading to reduce Plotinus to his influences. Plotinus certainly argued and developed
the strongest form of divine simplicity with unmatched depth and tenacity.

This understanding of divine simplicity, despite its austere elegance and beauty, also presents
Plotinus with a serious, possibly even insurmountable, epistemological difficulty: how can the One be
known, if all knowledge presupposes a distinction between thinking and that which is being thought,
which distinction, as Plotinus insists, is surpassed in the One? Plotinus returns to this difficulty in several
places and his answer is rather subtle. For example, at \textit{Enn}. 6.9.4, Plotinus observes that since the One
transcends all differentiations characteristic of being, the knowledge of the One cannot proceed by
steps, by way of discursive reasoning (\textit{dianoia}). This point would be readily conceded by earlier
Platonists, who also held that the divine is grasped in a moment of immediate intellectual apprehension
or intellectual intuition (\textit{noesis}). Plotinus’ predecessor, the second-century Middle Platonist Albinus, was
particular insistent on this point. But for Plotinus even this higher form of cognition is not adequate for
the One. According to Plotinus, the One is apprehended by means of “presence superior to knowledge”
(\textit{Enn}. 6.9.4). Minimally, Plotinus means that the mode of cognitive contact with the One surpasses all

\textsuperscript{19} The Aristotelian Mind also appears to have admitted of \textit{hylomorphic} composition, since Aristotle speaks of \textit{hyle
noete}, which is the passive aspect of the thought-forms in the divine mind. See \textit{Metaphysics}, 1037b11.

known forms of knowledge, including sense-perception, ratiocination, and even intellectual intuition. At Enn. 6.9.8, he explains that the One is not an external object of thought, but is present and united to the thinker in a manner analogous to how the thinker is present and united to his thought. Yet it seems that an analogy drawn from mental life is good enough for the Mind’s presence to itself, but is not good enough for supramental reality. Hence, Plotinus speaks of the One as being endowed with hypernoesis, superknowledge, or knowledge surpassing all ordinary modes of knowing. Plotinus’ point seems to be that the One is not deprived of rationality in the way non-rational entities are, but rather transcends rationality. Hypernoesis seems to be an apophatic step up from the scholastic idea that God knows all things in the mode peculiar to God alone. Still, the nature of this peculiar mode of knowing remains rather obscure. The operating epistemological principle appears to be negative: something like hypernoesis needs to be asserted of the One so as to emphasize that the One transcends both non-rational beings and beings possessing rational self-awareness of all kinds. (Plotinian hypernoesis may be helpful in understanding a rather enigmatic phrase of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite in Mystical Theology that God is known by unknowing. The phrase is usually interpreted as the highest form of apophasis. But it is also possible that Dionysian unknowing is indicative of the highest form of knowledge that, according to Plotinus, surpasses direct intellectual apprehension or noesis. On this interpretation, to know God by unknowing translates into knowing God in the most God-like manner, namely, apophasis turned into hypernoesis).

Plotinus also gestures in the direction of the unitive and mystical knowledge of the One, which presupposes a concommitant change in the human mind directed at the contemplation of the One. This unitive knowledge becomes possible for the mind duly purified of all material images and in doing so becomes perfectly simple, to the extent to which it is possible for the mind to become simple. One comes to know the One by means of ineffable union with the One. Such a union becomes possible as the human self sheds the body and everything involved in corporeality and multiplicity. At Enn. 6.9.11, Plotinus describes this experience as ecstasis and haplosis, that is, of going out of oneself and of simplifying oneself. In the phrase that is as famous as it is misunderstood, mystical knowledge of the One is “the flight of the alone to the Alone” (Enn. 6.9.11). In order to cognize the One the human mind must become like the One to the extent to which this is possible. To sum up, the knowledge of the One is cathartic, ecstatic, and unitive.

Related to the epistemological problem are linguistic and ontological aporias. Can Plotinus sustain his “industrial strength” version of divine simplicity without falling into performative contradictions? If any kind of descriptor of the One introduces duality into the discourse about the One, can the One be described or named at all? Do not such naming and describing presuppose multiplicity that makes any discourse about the One a discourse about things around the One (as Platonists sometimes speak), or produced by the One, but not about the One itself? Furthermore, can the One be described as having particular properties or not? Plotinus’ answer to the last question seems to be affirmative. At Enn. 5.5.10, he speaks of the One as possessing infinite power (dynamis), but clarifies that it is not spatially infinite. It is likely that Plotinus rules out spatial infinity in order to avoid a composition that is entailed by spatial extension. The predication of infinity to the One was a departure from Plato, for whom infinite was not an attribute of the Good.  

21 See e.g., Aquinas, Summa Theologiae I.14.6.  
22 On the infinity of the Plotinian One, see John Rist, Plotinus, 25-29.
While I do not see any obvious contradiction in asserting both Plotinian simplicity and infinite divine power, Plotinus’ account could have been stronger had he explained how precisely those two attributes were compatible. Plotinus also does not investigate whether the notional distinction of attributes, such as infinite power and perfect goodness, leads to the (notional) multiplicity in the One. Given that Plotinian simplicity excludes any multiplicity, even notional distinctions would seem to be unacceptable as proper descriptions of the One.

Plotinus also describes the One as perfect because “it seeks nothing, has nothing, and needs nothing, overflows, as it were, and its superabundance makes something other than itself” (Enn. 5.2.1). The image of “making something other than itself” by overflowing is one way in which Plotinus gets at the problem of how the One generates many. The image of overflowing is suggestive of a spring that always remains exactly as it was (Enn. 3.8.10), or of fragrance, which spreads its smell without being diminished (Enn. 5.1.5). Plotinus postulates that this is a timeless and uninterrupted activity, a function of the One’s perfect goodness, infinite power, and superabundance. The much-maligned theory of emanation was clearly a major advancement over the theories of uncaused cosmos, or the theories of divine organization of matter. Plotinus’ theory of emanation shares with the Christian doctrine of creatio ex nihilo the premise that God does not produce out of anything external to himself. It is usually urged that the theories diverge when Plotinus understands emanation as a necessary outflowing of divine nature, whereas many Christian authors teach that creation is a function of divine will. While this divergence is undeniable, the interpretation of what it means for a supremely benevolent being to create freely very often approaches Plotinus’ images of overflowing divine benevolence, or self-effusive goodness (bonum diffusivum sui), as the medieval divines put it, following Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite.

While these connections run deep, one should not rush to dress Plotinus in a Christian garb. The historical Plotinus did not have flattering things to say about Christian theologians, although his main target appears to have been a group of influential (or at least rather vocal) Roman Gnostics. Plotinus regarded Gnosticism as a kind of Platonism cretínisé. The Gnostics, in Plotinus’ judgment, engage in deliberate obfuscation and babble pretentious nonsense (some continental philosophers spring readily to mind as Gnostici rediviti, but charity demands that they should not be mentioned by name). The intellectual climate of Plotinus’ school was precisely the opposite: “The kind of philosophy we pursue is characterized—apart from all its other positive effects—by simplicity of character and pure thinking. It pursues what is venerable, not what is arrogant” (Enn. 2.9.14). The utterly simple One can be cognized only in utter simplicity and purity. The problem is that humans are not simple, but possess the uncanny ability to become worse than they are (Enn. 3.3.4). Simplicity in this sense, as finely captured by Pierre Hadot, is equivalent to moral integrity and intellectual honesty.

The aim of Plotinian philosophy is to explain the most intricate things in the most lucid way possible, honestly addressing, rather than evading the difficulties (Enn. 2.9.14). Like Plato before him, Plotinus is driven by the intellectual eros to get to the bottom of each philosophical problem, to exhaust the speculative powers of human intellect in exposing and resolving philosophical difficulties. Over the

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23 Augustine was especially attentive to the importance of safeguarding divine simplicity and argued for a closer link between divine substance and divine will: “God’s will belongs to his very substance,” De civitate Dei, XI.x (12).

24 This is one of the central themes of Pierre Hadot’s Plotinus or The Simplicity of Vision, trans. Michael Chase (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).
centuries, Plotinus has proven to be such a satisfying read because he faithfully adheres to the Aristotle principle that to explain something is to carry one’s analysis to the simplest elements, rather than to obscure the things that are simple. While it takes Plotinus several treatises to explain just what he means by the First Principle, nevertheless, by virtue of being absolutely simple, the One precedes all things both in the order of being and in the order of understanding.

Types of Divine Simplicity: A Preliminary Taxonomy

Thus far we have considered just two types of divine simplicity: Plotinian or absolute simplicity and Anaxagoran-Aristotelian or noetic simplicity. Plotinian simplicity admits of no composition whatsoever; Anaxagoran-Aristotelian simplicity admits of noetic-ontological distinction, as well as the differentiation-in-unity of the intelligible Forms, and of no other type of composition.

All other types of divine simplicity are weaker by comparison, in the sense of including a composition inherent in noetic simplicity and then some. The vast majority of Christian theologians ascribe some kind of self-knowledge to God and, therefore, tend to assume that God is more like the self-thinking Mind of the Middle Platonists than he is like the “hyperthinking” Plotinian One. (The fact that many influential Christian theologians then proceed to explicate divine self-thinking in terms approaching Plotinian “hyperthinking” does muddy the waters quite a bit.) In post-Nicene Christian theology the simplicity of God is further weakened by the insistence that the three divine hypostases are ontologically equal, thus introducing what could be called a hypostatic composition into the First Principle. This form of composition has caused many orthodox Christian theologians to assert variously qualified causal priority of the Father over the other two hypostases, all the while insisting on their ontological equality. In this case the question whether asymmetrical causal relationship entails ontological subordination remains largely a matter of definition, or more precisely, redefinition. In other words, the Trinitarian relations are so defined that despite the Father’s being the principium (if, strictly speaking, not the causa) of the Son, the Father is said to be ontologically equal to the Son. While it could be argued that such a position provides the best fit with revelation, such a fit is achieved at a price of modifying the causal categories, which in other contexts do entail subordination. Even acceptable non-subordinationist causal relations introduce a form of causal composition into the Godhead, thus weakening simplicity.

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26 Remarkably, at *Enn*. 2.4.7, Plotinus comes to an arresting conclusion that matter as such is also simple in the sense of being devoid of the multiplicity of Forms and not being a hylomorphic compound. In contrast to the absolutely simple One that generates all things, matter is pure passivity and potentiality, which is receptive of Forms, rather than generating Forms. One might call this type of simplicity *hylic* (suggestions for more mellifluous ways of expressing the same point are most welcome!) To my knowledge, the point is original to Plotinus, since for Plato and later Platonists matter possesses infinite potential divisiveness, not simplicity.
27 The point is made with a special insistence in John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1997).
28 Lately, Michael Rea and some others have proposed to construe hypostatic composition along the lines analogous to a hylomorphic compound using the metaphysics of relative identity. See Jeffrey E. Bower and Michael C. Rea, “Material constitution and the Trinity,” *Faith and Philosophy* 22, no. 1 (January 1, 2005), 57-76. Plotinus would have rejected this form of composition at the level of the One, although he does entertain a hypothesis that “intelligible” matter is present in the Mind.
Similarly, the claim that God possesses energies or activities, paired with the equally strong insistence that these energies are “uncreated,” which gained significant backing in Byzantine Orthodoxy after Gregory Palamas, also may be understood, at least on the surface, as introducing a different sort of composition, which could be called energetic composition. The objection that the insistence on the uncreated character of the divine energies violates divine simplicity and amounts to a covert form of pantheism has haunted Palamism ever since. Defending the Palamite distinction, Vladimir Lossky observes: “The idea of the divine simplicity—at least in the manner in which it is presented in the manuals of theology—originates in human philosophy rather than in the divine revelation.” While such dismissive claims establish very little and explain even less, Lossky’s ad hoc antipathy towards philosophy is widely shared in theological literature. In contemporary practice, such rhetorical denunciations of philosophy often amount in theology to a rather presumptuous acceptance of this or other fashionable social, political, moral, hermeneutical, or epistemological theory with distortive consequences for the theological enterprise as a whole.

A more fruitful way of stating the same problem would be to find a common ground between the elements of perfect being theology on the one hand and the record of revelation on the other hand. In this scheme, the elements of perfect being theology are meant to guard theology against idolatrous distortions and to provide the best available framework for revelation. Just how exactly the philosophical considerations are to be checked against revelation and just what precisely revelation brings to enrich, refine, and correct those considerations will remain perpetually contested.

Other Orthodox theologians have addressed the above mentioned objection to Palamism by insisting that the distinction between the divine essence and divine energies is designed to safeguard rather than compromise divine transcendence and simplicity, by locating unified multiplicity at the level of energies, rather than at the level of essence, which thereby remains absolutely simple and unknowable in the strong Plotinian sense. Moreover, divine essence in Palamas’ theology has been compared to a “receding horizon,” which is causally related to its energies, rather than directly identified with them. On this view it would be necessary to posit a sphere of entities that belong neither to the divine essence, nor to creation, but occupy an intermediary place. Just how this new mediating sphere is related to the “one mediator between God and mankind” (1 Tim. 2: 5), Christ, requires further articulation.

It is widely recognized that serious, although perhaps not insuperable difficulties emerge when God is said to be identical with his attributes—a claim that could be found in Aquinas and other

33 One might point to Dumitru Staniloae’s development of the connection between the divine logi of creation with the hypostatic divine Logos along the lines suggested by Maximus the Confessor. See Staniloae, The Experience of God: Orthodox Dogmatic Theology (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2011), vol. 3.
While the claim is intended to safeguard divine simplicity, the unintended result seems to be an evacuation of divine attributes of their ontological, although perhaps not notional distinctiveness. An important variation on this theme is a claim that divine simplicity requires an obliteration of distinction between potency and act in God, with the result that God is conceived as *actus purus* (pure act). On my interpretation, this claim means that God is immutably active in a way that surpasses the potency-act dichotomy in created things. The broader question is how to reconcile the divine action *ad extra* of any kind with a condition that God is simple. We seem to be back to the set of difficulties similar to the one that emerges in the case of Palamite energetic composition.

These difficulties cause me to believe that a modicum of intellectual humility is in order in the accounts that confidently purport to settle the matter of divine simplicity once and for all. While I do not know what divine simplicity of the best kind looks like, I have established in this paper that the strongest conceivable version of simplicity is the one taught by Plotinus. But, as we have seen earlier, Plotinian simplicity leads to serious epistemological and referential difficulties; at the same time, the weaker versions of divine simplicity would appear to make the living God less than the simplest First Principle, by introducing a form of composition. In such dire straights, I am tempted to exclaim with Ovid: *o divina simplicitas, "nec sine te nec tecum vivere possum!*"35

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34 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* Ia.3.3; *Summa Contra Gentiles* I.38; also Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, XI.10; Anselm, *Proslogion*, 18.

35 “Thus, I can neither live without you nor with you,” Ovid, *Amores*, III.xi.39. The original addressee was apparently Ovid’s female lover, not a divine attribute. I trust that our discussion will alleviate some of my mental anguish, while emotional toil is to be left to poets.