RECONSIDERING DIVINE SIMPLICITY

A Thesis
Submitted to Dr. Scott Henderson
Luther Rice Seminary

In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Apologetics

By
Chris Morrison
AC8793
December 8, 2011
OUTLINE

I. INTRODUCTION........................................1

II. CHAPTER ONE........................................8

III. CHAPTER TWO........................................48

IV. CHAPTER THREE.......................................82

V. CHAPTER FOUR.........................................131

VI. SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY...............................157
INTRODUCTION

Divine simplicity was one of, if not the, foundational doctrines concerning the nature of God during the medieval period. Its importance is clear in that it is the first issue Aquinas treats in his *Summa Theologica* following the existence of God. Yet despite its preeminence, Eleonore Stump has rightly called it “the strangest and hardest to understand” medieval doctrine and “one of the most difficult and perplexing tenets of classical theism.”¹

Put simply, the doctrine claims that in God there is no composition of any kind. That is, God is not composed of matter and form, potentiality and actuality, essence and existence, etc. He has no accidental properties and all of His attributes are identical with one another and even Himself. This controversial position was held in large part because it seemed the necessary result of ideas such as God as the maximally perfect or necessary being.²

It appears that the conception of God as absolutely simple has fallen out of favor with modern day theologians and philosophers. Objections have arisen concerning its coherence, lack of biblical support, and difficulty maintaining consistency with the biblical language about God. This last area seems to have received the most attention recently. If God is simple, then certain other controversial doctrines are necessarily entailed, including absolute immutability, impassibility, and timelessness. These views, in turn, have important ramifications on how one thinks about issues such as God’s sovereignty, free will (both human and divine), the nature of His responses to man, omniscience, the problem of evil, etc.

Modern approaches to these and other challenges have necessitated the rejection of divine simplicity. To take only one example, Plantinga’s “possible worlds” language has been central in some answers to the evidential problem of evil (as opposed to the logical problem). One may argue that out of all possible worlds, this one, for reasons known only to God, has the optimum balance of good and

---

evil, and thus, this is the one God chose to create. Yet this position implies potency in God, which is expressly rejected in classical theology.

The strength of these objections can be seen in that several Catholic thinkers have called for a reassessment of the doctrine, even though various official pronouncements of the Roman Catholic Church expressly affirm it. In light of all this, the question to be asked is simply whether or not the doctrine is true. Is there any reason to hold it, and can objections against it be sustained?

The objective of this study is to provide a clear rationale for accepting the viability of the doctrine of divine simplicity, especially in light of the objections put forward by scholars as such as William Lane Craig, J. P. Moreland, Jay Richards, Charles Hartshorne, Alvin Plantinga, Richard Swinburne, and others.

As there are several versions of simplicity, this study will focus on the version most discussed in the literature, namely, the Thomistic version. In chapter one,

---

5 See ST Ia.3.2, where Aquinas says, “God is pure act, without any potentiality.”
analyses of Aquinas’ main texts on the matter will be used to set up the doctrine and make necessary distinctions. Special attention will be given to the rationale provided for accepting the doctrine as true—specifically, how the *Prima Vía* (that is, the “First Way”) entails not only God’s existence but also His simplicity. The main Thomistic argument is then supported by a key historical argument based on God’s sovereignty and aseity.

Chapter two explains the main objections raised against simplicity. Most of these objections come from evangelical Christians (e.g., William Lane Craig). Yet evangelicals have been forced to take seriously the challenge presented by process philosophy, namely, that it—rather than classical theology—presents a more “biblical” view of God. For instance, while evangelicals have been concerned with safe-guarding omniscience against open-theism, they seem to have been willing to sacrifice a

---

Unfortunately, a detailed study of the impact of process philosophy on modern evangelical thought is far outside the scope of this study. Yet, as the objections in chapter two and their subsequent responses in chapter three imply, it may well be that process philosophy has had a deeper impact on evangelical thinking than perhaps is appreciated.
strong view of immutability in their replies.⁸ Yet this entails a rejection of a Thomistic view of simplicity. As such, the proponent of simplicity must also deal with objections from process philosophers if he is to make an adequate case for classical theology.

Chapter three offers responses to the objections presented in chapter two, and in doing so, presents several additional independent arguments for the basic components that undergird the notion of divine simplicity. Moreover, such refutations serve to refine and clarify the doctrine as a whole and how it relates to the modern debate. For instance, it is argued that those objections relating to passibility seem to be based on a desire for a more anthropic deity; that those relating to incoherence point to different ontological commitments; that those relating to omniscience and temporality seem to consistently beg the question, etc.

Against all this, divine simplicity does seem entailed in both the views that God is metaphysically necessary and

---

⁸ See, for instance, Bruce Ware’s “An Evangelical Reformulation of the Doctrine of the Immutability of God,” Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society 29, no. 4 (1986): 431-446. Further, this is hardly surprising, given some evangelicals general disinterest in philosophy and heavy emphasis on the Bible for all information pertaining to God.
that He is maximally perfect. As such, chapter four briefly summarizes the arguments put forward in chapters one through three in attempt to show that divine simplicity still seems defensible. Further, it argues that the doctrine could be useful in providing a basis for arguing against many modern theological problems, such as Dawkins’ central argument against theism, its more robust Humean cousin, and the old and well known Euthyphro dilemma. Finally, before concluding the study, chapter four admits, considers, and suggests areas of research in the main weakness divine simplicity faces: its heavy reliance on Aristotelian/Thomistic metaphysical assumptions.

No study of this nature can hope to be the final word, and it is not intended as such. Nor is it intended to be exhaustive (although it does attempt to be expansive in its treatment of the subject). The goal, rather, of this study is simply to motivate Christians—and evangelicals in particular—to reconsider this vital part of their spiritual heritage.

Several people deserve special thanks for this work: Scott Henderson, who reviewed every word of the work and made several important suggestions and corrections; Jim Kinnebrew, for giving permission for the work to begin; Richard Howe, who first brought the issue to the author’s
attention, as well as provided him with his basic
philosophical training; and Gretchen Morrison, the author’s
wife, without whose support (and constant pushing!) the
project would never have been completed.
CHAPTER ONE

This chapter will lay out two positive arguments as to why one should adhere to divine simplicity. The first follows Aquinas’ First Way and concludes in a being of pure actuality, which, it is argued, entails divine simplicity. The second starts from the widely held belief that God exists independently of Creation, and therefore, must exist simply. Before either of these are examined, however, an important distinction must be drawn between actuality and potentiality, as it forms the basis of the first argument and has important implications in the second.

I. The Potentiality/Actuality Distinction

The basis of Aquinas’ entire metaphysical system can be found by studying the distinction between actuality and potentiality.\(^9\) Put simply, something is “in act” or has “actuality” according to how it exists, and it is “in potency” or has “potentiality” according to how it could exist. Aristotle coined the words *energeia* and *entelecheia* to describe form (in his famous form/matter distinction).

---

They were translated by Latin word actualitas, from which comes the English translation “act” or “actuality.” Seen this way, “act” implied a subject’s tendency toward “potency” (dunamis); thus, for instance, the act of mining requires a mine with the potential to be mined.¹⁰

The basic ideas can be better understood by seeing what Aristotle meant by the terms energeia and entelecheia. The root of the former is ergono (“work”). Since he was describing the way things can exist, the idea seems to be “being-at-work.” Thus, “actuality” can be an appropriate translation, so long as one forgets its English connotation of what a thing “really” is and focuses on the idea of “acting” or “working.” A rock may be said to be “in act” if it is “being a rock,” and to the extent it is “being a rock,” it has “actuality.”¹¹

Whereas energeia emphasizes the “act of being,” entelecheia is often translated as “perfection.” It is a combination of three words: en meaning "in," telos meaning "purpose," and echein meaning "to have." The idea is to

---


have within one's self one's purpose or end. As such, these purposes, inherent within a thing's form, "perfect" its matter\textsuperscript{12} in the sense of fulfilling or actualizing the thing's potential. For instance, the purpose of an eye is to see. As such, "seeing" is a formal element of the eye, and thus the "act" of seeing realizes (that is, brings into being) the potential of the eye to see.\textsuperscript{13}

In any case, while energea and entelecheia had their own specific connotations, there is no doubt that Aristotle also intended them to be interchangeable.\textsuperscript{14} Both emphasized different aspects of "the act of being." The former pointed to the act itself, and the latter pointed to what the act was for.\textsuperscript{15}

The word "potency" or "potentiality" comes from the Latin potentia, which translates Aristotle's term dunamis.

\textsuperscript{12} Assumed here is Aristotle's notion of hylomorphism, that is, the idea that material things consist of form and matter.

\textsuperscript{13} Joseph Owens, An Interpretation of Existence (Houston: Center for Thomistic Studies, 1985), 52.


\textsuperscript{15} It should be noted that "the act of being" is not necessarily synonymous in Aquinas and Aristotle. While Aquinas agreed there is a sense in which form is act, he thought that being itself must be accounted for in terms of actuality. In other words, for Aquinas, all finite things are compositions of existence and essence, in which existence is the most basic way something is in act.
In both classical and Koine Greek, *dunamis* means “power” or “strength.” Given the notion of actuality defined above, Aristotle’s choice is easy to understand from two perspectives. If a thing has the power, ability, or capacity to do something, then it may or may not be doing it at any given time. As such, it is a “potentiality” of that thing. A closed eye is not seeing, but has the potential to see. This view follows upon Aristotle’s *entelecheia*.

On the other hand, if something has the power or capacity to be in this or that way, then one may say it has the potential to exist in this or that fashion. So Socrates’ skin may now actually be white, but it has the capacity, or potentiality, to be brown; and if it is actually brown, it may have the capacity or potentiality to be white. This view follows upon Aristotle’s *energeia*.

One of the most important applications of the actuality/potentiality distinction is that it provides the key to understanding how change is possible. A ball may be “in act” (that is, “actually”) insofar as it is red, bouncy, and made of rubber. It may be “in potency” (that is, “potentially”), however, in many other ways: it may potentially be blue if painted and gooey if melted. As Feser says,
If the ball is to become soft and gooey, it can’t be the actual gooeyness itself that causes this, since it doesn’t yet exist. But that the gooeyness is non-existent is not . . . the end of the story, for a potential or potency for gooeyness does exist in the ball, and this, together with some external influence (such as heat) that actualizes that potential – or, as the Scholastics would put it, which reduces the potency to act – suffices to show how the change can occur.\(^\text{16}\)

Here Feser raises an important point. Potentiality is a type of real existence, not merely possible existence. To use his example, while the gooeyness itself does not yet exist actually, it does exist potentially. But here confusion might arise, because one may equate “potentiality” with “possibility.” It is possible to imagine rubber balls doing things they don’t really have the potential to do (e.g., bounce to the moon). But for Aristotle and Aquinas, potentiality is rooted in the powers inherent in a thing according to its form or nature.\(^\text{17}\)

His example also highlights the fact that potentialities “are merely a necessary and not a sufficient condition for the actual occurrence of change. An additional, external factor is required.”\(^\text{18}\) If potency could actualize itself, one might wonder why a rubber ball does not spontaneously melt into gooeyness, or why it does not

\(^{16}\) Feser, 10.  
\(^{17}\) Ibid, 11.  
\(^{18}\) Ibid.
just begin bouncing at random. Rather, an external agent, such as fire, is required to actualize any given potency, and that agency must itself be in act. Thus, Aquinas says, “potency does not raise itself to act; it must be raised to act by something that is in act.”19 Following that, Aquinas’ statement that “whatever is moved is moved by another” necessarily follows, for motion itself is change, and change is the actualization of potentiality.20 Clearly, a ball cannot start itself moving. If a ball actually “here” has the potentiality to be “there,” that potentiality can only be actualized by an agent, such as a hand moving the ball, itself in the act of “moving the ball.”21

Aquinas further proves this by arguing that “it is not possible that the same thing should be at once in actuality and potentiality in the same respect, but only in different respects.”22 If a ball is actually round it can be potentially gooey, but it cannot be potentially round. Likewise, if it is actually gooey, it can be potentially

19 SCG I.15.3
20 In Phys VII.2.891
21 To complete the picture, it should be noted that the hand, as an agent in the act of moving the ball, prior to that act, had only the potentiality of moving the ball. Thus one sees that any cause and effect relationship necessarily involves one thing moving from potentiality to actuality and thereby reducing the potentiality in another thing to a similar actuality. Cf. ST Ia.4.2.
22 ST Ia.2.3
round, but it cannot be potentially gooey. Therefore, a thing cannot actualize its own potentiality, because that would require it to be both actual and potential in the same way at the same time. A ball with the potential to be here could not actually be here, because then it would not be potentially here; but if it cannot actually be here, then something else must move it from there to here.

A third observation one may draw from Feser’s example is that act and potency are so related that “absolutely speaking act is prior to potency.”23 If a round ball has the potential to be gooey, then the act of heat must first be applied to the ball, so that it will melt. Thus, harkening back to act as entelecheia, “a potential is always a potential for a certain kind of actuality.”24

Finally, it should be noted that, in accordance with the notion that something is in act insofar as it exists, nothing can exist and be purely potential. All existence requires some degree of actuality.25 On the other hand, something can be purely actual, with no potentiality at

23 SCG I.16.3
24 Feser, 12.
25 In Aristotelian-Thomistic metaphysics, since matter is always potential, one can speak of “prime matter” as being purely potential. But it is important to note that prime matter itself does not really exist, but only comes into existence once combined with a form, which can be, as has been noted, described as an act.
all. Yet most things—in fact, everything in the sensible world—are composites of actuality and potentiality. Things are what they are now with the potentiality to be in some other way. This is consistent with the notion that while matter cannot exist without form, form can exist without matter.

II. God’s Simplicity as Entailed by His Pure Actuality

In establishing God’s simplicity, it seems best to begin where Aquinas himself did. He called the first of his famous Five Ways the manifestior via, that is, the most manifest or obvious way, and likely considered it the most easily grasped. It is not surprising, then, that this appears to be his favorite argument, as he explains it in a number of his writings, at times rather elaborately.

The text of the argument, as presented in the Summa Theologica, is as follows:

The first and more manifest way is the argument from motion. It is certain, and evident to our senses, that in the world some things are in motion. Now whatever

---

26 Ibid.
28 In approximate chronological order: De Veritate 5. 2; Summa Contra Gentiles 1. 13; De Potential Dei 3. 5; In VIII Libros Physicorum Aristotelis 7, 8; In XII Libros Metaphysicorum Aristotelis 7; Compendium Theologiae ad Reginaldum 3 (Etienne Gilson, The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 3-5).
is in motion is put in motion by another, for nothing can be in motion except it is in potentiality to that towards which it is in motion; whereas a thing moves inasmuch as it is in act. For motion is nothing else than the reduction of something from potentiality to actuality. But nothing can be reduced from potentiality to actuality, except by something in a state of actuality. Thus that which is actually hot, as fire, makes wood, which is potentially hot, to be actually hot, and thereby moves and changes it. Now it is not possible that the same thing should be at once in actuality and potentiality in the same respect, but only in different respects. For what is actually hot cannot simultaneously be potentially hot; but it is simultaneously potentially cold. It is therefore impossible that in the same respect and in the same way a thing should be both mover and moved, i.e. that it should move itself. Therefore, whatever is in motion must be put in motion by another. If that by which it is put in motion be itself put in motion, then this also must needs be put in motion by another, and that by another again. But this cannot go on to infinity, because then there would be no first mover, and, consequently, no other mover; seeing that subsequent movers move only inasmuch as they are put in motion by the first mover; as the staff moves only because it is put in motion by the hand. Therefore it is necessary to arrive at a first mover, put in motion by no other; and this everyone understands to be God.

The argument can be outlined as follows:

1. Some things in the world are in motion.
2. Anything in motion is being put in motion by something else.
3. But this something else, if it is in motion, is also being put in motion by something else, and so on.
4. This series of things being put in motion by something else cannot be endless.
5. Therefore, there must be a first cause of motion which is itself unmoved; this we understand to be God.  

---

29 This schematic is a modified version of Craig’s. See his Cosmological Argument: From Plato to Leibniz (London: MacMillan, 1980), 161-162.
The first premise is that “some things are in motion.” This is empirically verifiable and evident to the senses. Put simply, it is the “observation premise.”\textsuperscript{30, 31} It is important to note, however, that Aquinas is not arguing that everything is in motion, but rather “some things” are in motion. Therefore, whether or not the argument turns out to be sound, no version of the standard “What caused God?” (or, in this case, what moved God?) objection is applicable. In fact, Aquinas’ argument will conclude in an unmoved mover, and thus, it is evident that not everything is in motion. In any case, for the argument to be valid, it only relies on the more obvious fact that some things are, in fact, in motion.\textsuperscript{32}

The second premise is that “anything in motion is being put in motion by something else.” This may be considered the theoretical premise that, along with the observational premise, gets the argument off the ground.\textsuperscript{33}


\textsuperscript{31} Given the nature of this premise, the First Way is by definition an \textit{a posteriori} argument. For an argument that all such theistic proofs necessarily fail, see Stephen Weber’s “Concerning the Impossibility of A Posteriori Arguments for the Existence of God” in The Journal of Religion 53, no. 1 (Jan., 1973): 83-98. His main argument will be discussed below.

\textsuperscript{32} Feser, 67.

\textsuperscript{33} McDonald, 121.
Yet this premise is not immediately evident and must be demonstrated. Thus, Thomas reminds the reader that “motion is nothing else than the reduction of something from potentiality to actuality.” As Owens puts it:

Only through something already in act can movement and its term be brought into being. Why? No reason is given in the text of the argument. Only an example is offered. Something that is actually hot, like fire, makes wood be actually hot. To make wood be in that accidental way is to move it and alter it. Movement is accordingly explained in terms of the imparting of accidental being. That is what it meant for St Thomas.

34 It should be noted that, by motion, Thomas does not simply have in mind a change in location. For him, there are four categories of change (mutatio): substantial, quantitative, qualitative, and local. Of these, only the last three are properly considered motion (motus). Substantial change is the coming into or going out of being of a substance. As such, it is not really motion, since motion suggests a change in something that actually is. Thus, any change in quality (as in a change of color), quantity (as in a change of size), or location (as in a change of place) is an example of motion.

35 Owens, Elementary Christian Metaphysics, 344.

36 This raises what Craig calls “undoubtedly the most controversial issue surrounding the first way,” (Cosmological Argument, 163) namely, whether one ought to interpret Aquinas' argument physically or metaphysically. Some interpreters, such as Joseph Owens and Etienne Gilson, insist on the latter on both exegetical grounds and on the idea that Aquinas' conclusions are too strong for a simply physical interpretation. Craig, insisting that Thomas is strictly following Aristotle, finds the entire metaphysical interpretation simply unintelligible, for Thomas himself thought that the composition of essence and existence applies only to things, not processes (ibid., 171-72). Certainly, if the First Way is interpreted metaphysically, then the conclusion that God exists—and more specifically the nature of this God—will be more robust. Following the purely physical interpretation, Craig himself thinks it concludes only with an incorporeal First Cause. Space and
Thus, the second premise should be understood according to the actuality/potentiality distinction, in which any thing’s potentiality must be reduced by something other than itself. Thus, Craig, in basic agreement with Owens above, says

What [Thomas] wants to prove is that anything in change is being actualised by a being already actual. . . . Causing change is actualising some potential, and this can be done only by something already actual.\(^{37}\)

This understanding is important, for some have taken the nature of Aquinas’ example of fire and wood and thought he was arguing that any effect must pre-exist in its cause. While one could answer this objection by an appeal to what Aquinas called the “principle of proportionate causality,” according to which “whatever is in an effect must somehow be in its cause, but where this allows that the cause might have the relevant feature ‘virtually’ or ‘eminently’ rather than ‘formally,’”\(^{38}\) it is more likely that he simply wished to assert the more obvious fact that potentiality does not scope do not permit a detailed analysis of this debate. Suffice it to say that while there is good evidence that Owens’ interpretation is right, it still seems that a weaker, purely physical interpretation yields stronger results than Craig allows. Thus, his line of thinking will be followed, for if his physical interpretation yields strong conclusions, then much more would Owens’ and Gilson’s.


\(^{38}\) Feser, 68.
reduce itself to actuality. Or put simply, whatever is only potential is not the cause of anything (and certainly not itself!), so the cause of any change must be actual.

From this, the third premise follows easily, that "this something else, if it is in motion, is also being put in motion by something else, and so on." For if something cannot put itself into motion, then it follows that it must be put into motion by something else; but then, that something else must also have been put into motion, etc.39

---

39 Here enters Lobkowicz' rarely discussed objection. He argued that Aristotle, and by extension Aquinas, only proved that everything moved by something is moved by another. Yet that is different from proving that everything is moved by something. Lobkowicz thinks there are things that are moved by nothing other than themselves (e.g., rain drops). Thus, Aristotle cannot prove that everything moved is moved by another unless he proves that everything moved is moved by something, which he thinks Aristotle did not prove, but only assumed. To this, Aquinas can respond by arguing that Lobkowicz has not fully appreciated the fact that no movement, whether natural or violent, can be self-instantiated. Thus Aquinas says,

Because, therefore, what is in potency is naturally moved by something which is in act; but nothing is in potency and in act with respect to the same thing; it follows that neither fire nor earth nor any other thing is moved by itself, but by another.

The fourth premise, that “this series of things being put in motion by something else cannot be endless,” requires demonstration. Aquinas defends it briefly by saying that if the causal series were infinite “then there would be no first mover, and, consequently, no other mover; seeing that subsequent movers move only inasmuch as they are put in motion by the first mover.” Unfortunately, many scholars have mistaken Aquinas’ objection of an infinite regress of causes in two ways. First, some take him to be arguing against an infinite regression of temporal causes. On this view, Thomas would be saying that a causal chain like a child’s being born to her mother, who was born to her mother, who was born to her mother, and so on, is impossible. But that is not the type of causal chain Thomas had in mind. In fact, elsewhere, he explicitly says that reason alone cannot make a conclusion on that one way or another. Instead, he is speaking of a hierarchical chain, in which all events happen simultaneously. His own example is that of a hand pushing a staff pushing a stone.

---


41 See ST I.46 and SCG 2.38.
Aquinas believes that in this type of chain, each cause is actually an instrument of a First Cause. The hand is pushing the rock through the staff. But it is obvious that an infinite chain of instrumental causes would not cause anything, because they would not be instruments of anything. As Craig points out, without a First Cause, the other causes cease operating because the intermediate causes have no causal efficacy of their own. . . . The very fact, then, that there is motion implies that the series of movers cannot be infinite.\(^{42}\)

A modern example would be a train of boxcars. Unless there is an engine, none of the boxcars will move.

A second mistake is to take Aquinas to be arguing that there is no infinite regress, and therefore there must be a First Cause, as in the Kalam Cosmological Argument. But this is backwards, for Aquinas argues that because there is a First Cause, there can be no infinite regress. This is evident in the reasoning given above. Since causes in the type of causal chain Aquinas has in mind are basically instrumental, they presuppose a First Cause, and therefore, there can be no infinite regress.

From all this, the conclusion naturally follows: “Therefore, there must be a first cause of motion which is

\(^{42}\) Craig, *Cosmological Argument*, 174.
itself unmoved; this we understand to be God.” Before considering a few difficulties with this conclusion, Feser’s summary of the First Way is worth quoting.

As presented in the Summa Theologiae, the proof from motion goes as follows. We know from experience that “some things are in motion”. . . Now motion or change is just the reduction of something from potentiality to actuality. But “nothing can be reduced from potentiality to actuality except by something in a state of actuality”. . . By the same token, if that which puts something else in motion is itself moving, there must be yet something further moving it, and so on. But if such a series went on to infinity, then there would be no first mover; and if there were no first mover, there would be no other movers, for “subsequent movers move only inasmuch as they are put in motion by the first mover; as the staff moves only because it is put in motion by the hand”. . . It follows that “it is necessary to arrive at a first mover, put in motion by no other; and this everyone understands to be God.”. 43

Put this way, the argument is rather simple, and Aquinas is justified in calling it “the most manifest way.” The final problem, though, is the nature of this unmoved mover. Concerning calling this cause God, Craig says, “Philosophers of all faiths agreed at least on this point, that God is the one who moves the spheres that cause all sublunary change. Aquinas’s conclusion simply reports a fact.” 44 But certainly Thomas had more in mind, for he concludes each of his five ways using similar verbiage:

43 Feser, 65-66.
Therefore it is necessary to admit a first efficient cause, to which everyone gives the name of God. . . . Therefore we cannot but postulate the existence of some being having of itself its own necessity, and not receiving it from another, but rather causing in others their necessity. This all men speak of as God. . . . Therefore there must also be something which is to all beings the cause of their being, goodness, and every other perfection; and this we call God. . . . Therefore some intelligent being exists by whom all natural things are directed to their end; and this being we call God. 45

Since Thomas considered each of these proofs five distinct proofs, rather than a cumulative case 46, it seems that he would have had the same idea of “God” in mind in the First Way as all the others. Yet these others conclude in a God who is the first efficient cause, the metaphysically necessary cause of all existence, the cause of all perfections, and the final cause of all things, respectively. So it seems evident that Thomas thought his favorite argument did more than simply report the fact that, whatever else God is, everyone agrees He is at least that which moves the sublunary spheres.

Related to this is Scott McDonald’s objection that the First Way does not conclude in God at all without reliance upon the second or third ways. He asks, “Assuming that

45 ST Ia.2.3
46 This is a fact that Craig recognizes himself. He says, “Aquinas considered each to be a distinct and demonstrative proof of God’s existence.” (The Cosmological Argument, 159)
Aquinas can block a regress in the case of movers and things moved, why must the primary mover be not just unmoved, but unmovable?" He thinks that by the logic of the First Way alone, “it seems likely that there will be very many relatively uninteresting primary movers.” If McDonald is right, then even if Thomas was simply reporting a fact, he is still wrong, because mundane first causes (like people) were certainly not considered the mover(s) of the highest sphere.

There are at least two ways to respond to McDonald. First, one can argue Aquinas himself recognized this difficulty and overcame it. In Summa Contra Gentiles 1.13.21, he admits, “Granted this conclusion—namely, that there is a first mover that is not moved by an exterior moving cause—it yet does not follow that this mover is absolutely unmoved.” While McDonald rejects Aquinas’ arguments in paragraphs 24-28 as appealing to proofs

---

47 McDonald, 146. McDonald may actually be overstating the problem. The word here translated “immovable” is immobile, which can equally be translated unmoved. Elsewhere, Thomas insists that the first cause is penitus immobile, that is, absolutely unmoved. In fact, it appears that “unmoved” may be the better translation, since “unmoved” is both easier to prove and has the benefit of being the more important philosophical idea. God is not unmoved because He is unmovable; rather, He is unmovable because He is the absolutely unmoved source of all motion.

48 Ibid., 147.
outside of the first way, the resources for a proper response can be found in paragraph 21. Commenting on the possibility that self-movers could be the absolute first mover, Aquinas says

But, on this basis, the same conclusion again follows. For it cannot be said that, when a mover moves himself, the whole is moved by the whole. Otherwise, the same difficulties would follow as before: one person would both teach and be taught, and the same would be true among other motions. It would also follow that a being would be both in potency and in act; for a mover is, as such, in act, whereas the thing moved is in potency. Consequently, one part of the self-moved mover is solely moving, and the other part solely moved. We thus reach the same conclusion as before: there exists an unmoved mover.

What is important here is Aquinas’ recognition that any self-moved mover “would be both in potency and act; for a mover is, as such, in act, whereas the thing moved is in potency.” When one considers souls and angels as first movers, this becomes apparent, for while such movers are incorporeal and therefore not subject to locomotion, they are still subject to motion in the broader sense Aquinas has in mind, namely, the reduction of potency to act. Even spiritual substances can change, in that they may be willing one thing now and another later. But this means that any such change must be actualized by still another being, and so on, until a first unmoved mover is reached.\footnote{Augros, 98.}
Yet following this reasoning, not only has Aquinas proved that there must be a First Cause, but further, this cause must be pure act. He states this clearly in ST Ia.3.1,

Secondly, because the first being must of necessity be in act, and in no way in potentiality. For although in any single thing that passes from potentiality to actuality, the potentiality is prior in time to the actuality; nevertheless, absolutely speaking, actuality is prior to potentiality; for whatever is in potentiality can be reduced into actuality only by some being in actuality. Now it has been already proved that God is the First Being. It is therefore impossible that in God there should be any potentiality.

In other words, the First Being (or First Cause) must be a being with no potentiality whatsoever, for if it had potentiality, it could be moved, which would require still another mover to put the supposed First Cause into motion.

Another response to McDonald is to further analyze the nature of the causal chain under consideration. The hand may move the staff, but the hand itself is moved by its muscles, which are moved by neurons, which are moved by the laws of physics, etc. Thus Feser argues that

to account for the reduction of potency to act in the case of the operations or activities of the hand, the muscles, and so on, we are led ultimately to appeal to the reduction of potency vis-à-vis the existence or being of deeper and more general features of reality; for “it is evident that anything whatever operates so far as it is a being” (QDA 19).\(^{50}\)

\(^{50}\) Feser, 75. (Italics original)
The only way to end this regress is to posit a being whose existence is not actualized by anything else, but simply is. Such a being would be, again, pure act. This approach should not be confused with Aquinas’ Third Way. Regarding the former, the Third Way is a proof from the contingency of things to a necessary being. While the First Way must conclude in a being of pure act as necessary to explain motion, that is not the same as concluding to a metaphysically necessary being to explain contingent existence.

It seems, then, that Craig’s interpretation of Aquinas’ conclusion is too weak, for if motion is understood as the reduction of potency to act, then the First Cause of motion, as argued above, cannot have any potency to be actualized, but must be in pure act. But if this is the case, Aquinas’ doctrine of simplicity as laid out in ST Ia.3 follows necessarily.

Immediately after proving God exists as the First Cause and whose nature is pure act in question two, Aquinas sets out in question three to examine God’s nature. However, he says, “because we cannot know what God is, but rather what He is not, we have no means for considering how
God is, but rather how He is not." The first thing he attempts to deny of God is composed of any kind of parts by denying that God is a body, that He is composed of matter and form, that He is distinct from His essence, that His essence is distinct from His existence, that He is contained in any genus, and finally that He has any accidental properties. While his arguments for each of these cannot be examined in detail, a few remarks are necessary. It should be noted that his first denial is closely associated with his first way. As already quoted above, if God is the First Cause then He is pure act, and can therefore have no potentiality, and therefore can have no body. For the same reason, God can have no matter, "because matter is in potentiality."

Thomas’ denial of a distinction between God and His essence is further based on the proof that God is pure act, for if God has no matter, then He is pure form. He then

---

51 ST Ia.3
52 ST Ia.3.1
53 ST Ia.3.2
54 ST Ia.3.3
55 ST Ia.3.4
56 ST Ia.3.5
57 ST Ia.3.6
58 ST Ia.3.2
59 On Aquinas’ view, God is not the only being that is pure form. Angels are, too, yet that does not mean that they are pure act, for they are subject to various other kinds of potentialities later to be excluded from God.
compares the form of man ("humanity") with the form of God. Individual people are not the same as their humanity, but it is obvious that the idea of humanity itself includes the idea of being a body (all humans, after all, have bodies!). For Thomas, what differentiates between one person and another is the particular matter, the particular body, they have. But such is not the case in a being of pure form. With no body, there is nothing to differentiate two identical forms. Therefore, God is His own essence.\textsuperscript{60}

This leads to the most important denial of distinction in God: that of between His essence and existence. Again, he bases his argument on the idea that God is the First Cause and pure act. He says,

\begin{quote}
Whatever a thing has besides its essence must be caused either by the constituent principles of that essence (like a property that necessarily accompanies the species---as the faculty of laughing is proper to a man---and is caused by the constituent principles of the species), or by some exterior agent . . . Therefore that thing, whose existence differs from its essence, must have its existence caused by another. But this cannot be true of God; because we call God the first efficient cause. Therefore it is impossible that in God His existence should differ from His essence.\textsuperscript{61}
\end{quote}

In other words, if God is the First Cause, His essence cannot receive existence via efficient causality from

\begin{footnotes}
\item[60] ST Ia.3.3
\item[61] ST Ia.3.4
\end{footnotes}
anything else. But since His essence is identical with Him, then no distinction can be drawn between God’s existence and His essence. In other words, it is just God’s nature to exist. He is, therefore, the pure act of being.

Finally, Aquinas shows that there can be no accidental properties in God by the appeal to God’s pure actuality. For “a subject is compared to its accidents as potentiality to actuality; for a subject is in some sense made actual by its accidents. But there can be no potentiality in God.” In other words, accidental properties are what a thing may be (Socrates may be white, but he may later be brown; his color is accidental to him. His humanity, on the other hand, is essential and has no potency to change), but how something may be is potential, which does not exist in God.

Thus, Thomas argues that God is “altogether simple,” having no composition of any kind. Again, it is important to note that, for Aquinas, simplicity is directly entailed by conceiving as God as pure act.

---

62 No comments will be offered on the distinction of genus, simply because it is not particularly relevant for this study.
63 ST Ia.1.3.6
64 ST Ia.1.3.7
III. God’s Simplicity as Entailed by His Aseity

A second major argument (and some would argue, historically, the main argument\textsuperscript{65}) for divine simplicity is rooted in God’s aseity. It can be formalized as follows:

1. God is not dependent on anything other than Himself, and everything outside of God is completely dependent on Him for its existence.
2. Any composite being is dependent on something other than itself for its existence.
3. Therefore, God is not a composite being.

A. Definition of Aseity

Christian theologians and philosophers have historically affirmed God’s aseity (from the Latin \textit{a se}, “of one’s self”), which refers to the fact that He exists completely in and of Himself, independent of creation. This is not to say the God is self-caused, for the idea that anything, even God, is self-caused is self-contradictory, and therefore impossible. Rather, it means that God is

\textsuperscript{65} See, for instance, Alvin Plantinga, \textit{Does God Have a Nature?} (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1980), 28, where he argues that Thomas’ main reason for promoting simplicity was his commitment to God’s aseity. Others think God’s aseity flows directly from his perfection or goodness (see Brower, 4). The relationship between God’s perfection, simplicity, aseity, and role as first cause is complicated and cannot be discussed in detail here. It is enough to note that all of these are closely related, in which arguments can be made that some are entailed by others, or possibly each entails the others.
Grudem puts the issue succinctly, saying, “God does not need us or the rest of creation for anything, yet we and the rest of creation can glorify him and bring him joy. This attribute of God is sometimes called his self-existence or his *aseity*.“ Moreland and Craig point out that within the concept of aseity, then, there are two distinct but related doctrines: God’s necessity and independence. That is, God both exists in every possible world, and in every possible world, He exists “wholly independent of anything else.” Further, aseity has been traditionally assigned to God alone, and everything else exists through the agency of something else. In short, the idea attempts to capture the notion that God is the uncreated Creator.

---

69 A slightly weaker definition of “aseity” has been offered above than possible. One could either say that God exists independently from creation, or that God exists independently from absolutely everything else. Of course, the two are not necessarily mutually exclusive, for everything that exists other than God may be His creation. But given the importance of Platonic forms, both historically and in the current debate, and the question of their relationship to God, it seems wiser to assume the weaker view for the sake of argument.
B. Analysis of the Major Premise

Even those who oppose Thomas’ version of simplicity agree that the idea of God’s aseity ought to be taken seriously. Plantinga, for instance, says:

Now I think the intuition—call it the sovereignty-aseity intuition—underlying the doctrine of divine simplicity must be taken with real seriousness. Suppose God has essentially the property of being omnipotent and suppose that property is an object distinct from him, is uncreated by him and exists necessarily. Then in some sense he does depend on that property. For in the first place he could not have existed if it had not; its existence is a necessary condition for his existence. And secondly he couldn’t have the character he does have, couldn’t be the way he is, if omnipotence didn’t exist or weren’t the way it is.\(^\text{70}\)

This, of course, creates a problem for the notion of aseity, which insists that God is completely self-sufficient, but here He seems to be dependent on something else for both the fact and nature of His existence. Plantinga further goes on to point out that if the “Platonic menagerie” actually exists (which he, along with many Christian philosophers today, thinks to be the case), then it presents a severe challenge to God’s sovereignty, as He would have no control over them. In fact, it seems they may have a degree of control over Him!\(^\text{71}\) But before

\(^{70}\) Plantinga, 34.

\(^{71}\) Ibid., 35. By “Platonic menagerie,” Plantinga is referring to “the propositions, properties, numbers, sets, possible worlds and all the rest.” This would include
these issues can be addressed, it must be first
demonstrated that God exists a se and independent of
creation in the first place. It appears a strong case for
aseity can be presented on both philosophical and biblical
grounds.

**Philosophical Evidence**

Philosophically, it seems evident that aseity follows
necessarily if God is conceived as pure actuality. This can
be seen on an analysis of the meaning of the terms
“independent” and “self-existent.” If a being is completely
independent, then, at least, it could not have been brought
into existence by anything else, for if it were, it would
be, by definition, dependent on its cause. As such, any

properties like “being omniscient,” “being red,” and even
“existing.” Plantinga believes that there is every reason
to think that these types of things have real, necessary
existence, in that to deny them existence would be to
create a logical contradiction. He asks, for instance, if
it is possible to conceive of a world in which the
proposition “there are nine planets” is non-existent. He
answers, “That proposition could have been false,
obviously, but could it have been non-existent? It is hard
to see how.” (4) Plantinga, then, is a Platonic realist of
some sort, in that he believes that propositions,
properties, etc. are really existing abstract objects in
all possible worlds whether or not they are exemplified in
any given one. For a detailed defense of this position, see
Moreland’s *Universals* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University
Press, 2001). For an honest critique of the difficulties
posed by this position to traditional theism (including
the belief in aseity), see his and Craig’s *Philosophical
Foundations*, 504-07.
independent being must be an uncaused cause. As self-existent, it could not cease to exist. But this is just to say that such a being has no potentiality, which is to say that such a being is purely actual. For any being with potentiality is necessarily both dependent on another to account for the actualization of that potentiality, and is capable of non-existence, since its existence may be lost in this way as it changes to exist in that way. As Geisler puts it, “What has no potential for nonexistence must exist in and of itself; that is to say, it is self-existent.”72 Dependence and contingent-existence, then, is another way of speaking of potentiality, whereas independence and self-existence are another way of speaking of pure actuality. Thus, that which has aseity is that which has self-existence, which is that which exists in pure actuality.73

Second, one may point out that arguments for God as the First Cause, as noted above, typically do not mean “first” in a temporal sense, but rather a hierarchical sense, in which first means “primary.” From this, it directly follows that if God is the primary cause of all things, then He Himself is dependent on nothing, else He

72 Norman Geisler, Systematic Theology, Volume Two (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2003), 59.
73 Ibid., 34.
would no longer be this First/Primary Cause. Thus, the First Cause must have its existence a se rather than ab alio (“through another”).

Finally, aseity seems to follow from God’s necessary existence and immutability. If a necessary being is incapable of nonexistence, then it must have its existence within itself, which is to say, it is self-existent. If God cannot change, then He cannot lose one form and replace it with another. Such a change would be a substantial change, which is to say, a loss of existence in one way or another. But if God cannot change, then He cannot cease to exist in anyway, and thus, He must be self-existent.

Biblical Evidence

The Scriptural evidence in favor of God’s aseity is very strong. Genesis 1:1, in fact, may be taken as just

---

74 Brower, 4.
75 Geisler, 59. Though no detailed analysis has been or will be offered as to why God exists necessarily, suffice it to say that this is not an issue under serious debate among Christian philosophers. Even opponents of divine simplicity readily grant God’s necessity. See for instance, Plantinga’s ontological argument, which has recently received a strong defense by William Lane Craig.

The nature of God’s immutability, however, has been subject to serious controversy. The strong version—the idea that God cannot change in any way—has been widely rejected by both evangelical theologians and philosophers. Ware’s previously mentioned article and William Lane Craig’s Time and Eternity (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001), 29-31 serve as representative examples.
such a declaration, for if God is the creator of all things, then He is dependent on none of them. “Thus,” Erickson says, “he could not have derived his existence from anything else.”\(^{76}\) Other verses (and this is certainly not an exhaustive list) that stand in support of the doctrine include:

**Exodus 3:14** – Whatever one interprets God’s name, “I Am,” to mean, its very wording speaks to God’s self-existence. In fact, Jesus apparently made use of both the unique name for God itself as well as its temporal significance in John 8:58 to emphasize His own preexistence.

**Job 41:11** – In Job 41:11, God asks Job, “Who has given to Me that I should repay him? Whatever is under the whole heaven is Mine.”\(^{77}\) Here, God points out that no one has ever given Him anything, for everything that anyone has first came from Him. He then boils down this fact into a basic theological truth: everything belongs to God (cf. Ps. 50:10-12). As such, God requires nothing and owes nothing to anything. On the contrary, all owe everything to Him. That is to say, God is dependent on nothing, but everything is dependent on God.

\(^{76}\) Erickson, 271. Emphasis added.

\(^{77}\) All verses NASB unless otherwise noted.
Isaiah 40:18-28 – In this passage, like many others, God is exalted as the Uncreated Creator who cannot be compared to anyone or anything. In 40:28, God is called the “everlasting” God who created the “ends” (qatsah) of the earth. Qatsah refers to the extremities of something and can include all in between. Thus, Isaiah is graphically stating that God, who is forever, created everything within the world. As such, everything owes its dependence on Him.

John 1:3 – “All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being.” In the prologue of his gospel, John sets out to establish the divinity of Christ, and here makes Him the instrument by which God created everything. Thus, Scriptures directly teach the dependency of all created things on Christ and thus His aseity.78

78 Of course, some with Platonic leanings may immediately contend that abstract objects like numbers and properties are necessary beings and therefore were not created, but exist eternally with God. As such, they would not fall under the purview of created things in this verse, since they did not “come into being.” Appeal to the questionable punctuation of the Greek text does not seem to resolve the question, since even a stricter translation may allow Platonic forms never “came into being.” Still, the verse definitely establishes the dependency of creation on God and His independence from it. Other passages may be used to challenge the independence of supposedly eternal abstract objects.
Acts 17:24-25 - While preaching to the Athenians, Paul said, “The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things,” which includes four propositions that entail God’s aseity. First, Paul says God made the world and all things in it. Therefore, He cannot be dependent on them. Second, God is the “Lord of heaven and earth,” which means He is sovereign over all of creation. Therefore, everything is under His authority. Third, He does not need anything, since He is self-sufficient and thus absolutely independent. Finally, God is the source of everything that anyone has, including their very life. If God is the source of all things, then He lacks nothing and is therefore dependent on nothing. God exists, in a word, a se.

Colossians 1:16-17 - “For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together.” Like John in the opening of his gospel, Paul, at the beginning of his epistle, declares the
dependency of all things on Christ. Especially interesting is the fact that Paul includes the invisible\textsuperscript{79}, and emphasizes that nothing exists apart from God’s will. Further, Paul insists that all things are sustained by Christ, meaning they were not merely dependent on Him for their creation, but they are even now for their existence. But if this is true, then it is even less possible for God to be dependent in any way on His creation, since He would be dependent on something dependent on Him, rendering Him essentially self-caused, which is, of course, self-contradictory. Thus, God must exist absolutely a se.

Revelation 1:8 - “’I am the Alpha and the Omega,’ says the Lord God, ‘who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.’” In this verse, Jesus declares His eternality. Since He has no beginning and no end, He was brought into existence by nothing and does not have the capacity to go out of existence. Thus, again, it seems evident that Scripture declares God’s aseity.

\textsuperscript{79} This would presumably include even Platonic, abstract objects. Thus, as suggested above, the weaker definition of aseity, while easier to prove philosophically, seems, on Scriptural grounds, perfectly equivalent with the stronger definition, in which God is independent of all things, since all things come from God; cf. Rev. 4:11.
All these verses, then, seem to teach clearly enough that God is dependent on nothing, exists solely within Himself, is sovereign over all things, and is the source and sustainer of everything. That is to say, the doctrine of aseity, with both its implications for the natures of God and creation, enjoys strong Scriptural support. Therefore, on both Scriptural and philosophical grounds, the first premise in the argument above ought to be affirmed.

C. Analysis of Minor Premise and Conclusion

The second premise in the argument above is, “Any composite being is dependent on something other than itself for its existence.” This is because a distinction must be drawn between what something is and its parts, and therefore, every composite thing is at least dependent on its parts (which are not identical with itself) for its existence. For Thomas, this statement is self-evident. He says, “Every composite thing is posterior to its components and dependent on them. But, as was shown above, God is the first being [and hence not dependent on anything].” (ST I.3.7) Indeed, it seems hard to argue with him on this point. Plantinga asks, “But why should an object be thought of as dependent on its properties? Aquinas clearly says
that this is so; he is less explicit as to why."³⁰ Yet he goes on to answer his own question, for "among a thing’s properties is its nature or essence,"³¹ but "if an object is distinct from its essence, then its essence is in some way a cause of that thing, so that the latter is dependent—causally dependent—on the former."³² Plantinga’s illustration of this point is worth quoting at length:

If God were distinct from such properties as wisdom, goodness and power but nonetheless had these properties, then . . . he would be dependent on them in a dual way. First, if, as Aquinas thinks, these properties are essential to him, then it is not possible that he should have existed and they not be ‘in’ him. But if they had not existed, they could not have been in him. Therefore he would not have existed if they had not. . . . The point is that he would be dependent upon something else for his existence, and dependent in a way outside his control and beyond his power to alter; this runs counter to his aseity.

Secondly, under the envisaged conditions God would be dependent upon these properties for his character. He is, for example, wise. But then if there had been no such thing as wisdom, he would not have been wise. He is thus dependent upon these properties for his being and the way he is . . . and there is nothing he can do to change or overcome it. . . . And this doesn’t fit with his existence a se.³³

In short, if anything has parts, then it is dependent on these parts for both the fact of and the nature of its existence, and this including God. Again, all this seems

³⁰ Plantinga, 30.
³¹ Ibid.
³² Ibid., Italics original.
³³ Ibid., 32-33.
self-evident. Any conceivable composite is dependent on its parts. If one takes the engine out of a car, it stops working. If one takes an animal’s heart, it will die. The same truth holds with metaphysical complexity. A being with intelligence is different from a being without it. As argued above, every actual thing is dependent on its potentiality for the way it could be. Most fundamentally, that one can imagine non-existent things implies really existing things depend on an essence-existence composition for their existence (so a house exists in the architect’s mind and then is given existence by a carpenter).

But if the second premise is accepted, then the conclusion necessarily follows. God is not a composite being, for if He were, He would be dependent on whatever He was composed of. Yet that would deny His aseity, which insists that God is dependent on nothing other than Himself. Brower sums up Aquinas’ thinking, saying, 84

84 Someone may object, of course, that even if God is dependent on His parts, then He is still not dependent on anything external to Himself, and thus, aseity would not be violated. But such an objection misses the point, for whatever God’s parts are, they themselves are not God any more than humans are hearts and trees are leaves. The objector would be forced to suggest that God did not, in fact, create all things, contrary to Scripture, as well as provide a causal explanation for God, which runs counter to both aseity proper and the argument given from motion. This objection will be discussed in more detail later.
The basic pattern of reasoning that Aquinas invokes here helps to explain why, on the traditional doctrine of divine simplicity, God must lack not only proper parts or constituents, but even distinct properties or attributes. If God exists entirely a se, he cannot depend on anything in any way at all, not even in the way that a subject depends on its properties (in order to exemplify them).\textsuperscript{85}

In other words, to avoid the difficulty of God being dependent on His parts, Aquinas simply denies that there are any parts—any composition of any kind—in God. There is thus no distinction between his essence and existence, or even between Himself and His essence. He is omniscience and omnipotence and omnipresence and all of His other attributes. Further, all of these attributes are identical to one another.\textsuperscript{86} Divine simplicity, then, appears to be the necessary outgrowth of a firm commitment to aseity, for it makes it completely clear that God does not depend on things in any way at all, not even in the way that wholes depend on their proper parts or that things depend on their properties (in order to exemplify them).\textsuperscript{87}

\textsuperscript{85} Brower, 5.
\textsuperscript{86} While these statements may seem radical and counter-intuitive, they are the necessary result of the line of thinking put forward. Chapter three will examine them in more detail in attempt to demonstrate that, far from being unintelligible, they are actually extremely theologically fruitful.
In short, for the classical theist and proponent of divine simplicity, God depends on nothing, for there is nothing in God that is not fully and completely God.

IV. Summary

This chapter has argued for a distinction between actuality and potentiality and then offered two main arguments in support of divine simplicity. Concerning the distinction, something may be said to be “in act” insofar as the way in which it “actually” exists at any given moment, and “in potency” insofar as it has the “potentiality” to be in some other state. Thus, water can be “actually” hot and therefore “potentially” cold. From this, it follows 1) that nothing can be in actuality and potentiality at the same time in the same respect, and 2) that no potentiality can actualize itself. That is, any potentiality must be actualized by something else already in act.

Given this, Aquinas argued in his First Way that since it is evident that some things are in motion (that is, are in the process of actualizing potentiality), it follows that they are being put in motion by something else. But there cannot be an infinite regress of such movers, so there must be a first mover. But since all movers must put
into motion by another mover already in act, the first or primary mover must itself eventually be purely actual, having no potential of any kind. From a first mover of pure actuality, Aquinas argues that there can be no distinctions of any kind in God, since every kind of possible distinction implies some sort of potentiality. Therefore, God must be simple.

Finally, the argument for God’s simplicity from His aseity was presented. If God exists absolutely independently of His creation, a notion supported by both reason and Scripture, then He cannot be dependent on anything outside of Himself for either the fact or the nature of His existence. But since every composite being is at least dependent on its parts (which are not identical with it), then no composite being can be said to have the attribute of aseity.

In conclusion, then, it seems that if the arguments here are sound, one must either accept the fact that God is simple, or else one must reject both God as the first mover and the doctrine of aseity. Such a route, however, seems extremely radical and would require very powerful reasons before being accepted.
The last chapter analyzed two major arguments for accepting the doctrine of divine simplicity. This chapter will explicate the major objections against it according to three general classes. First, the idea that there is no biblical or philosophical warrant for divine simplicity will be examined. Second, the objections relating to the doctrine’s coherence, especially as formulated by Plantinga will be explored. Finally, and most forcefully, arguments that insist Aquinas’ version of simplicity actually contradicts the Scriptural view of God and His attributes will be reviewed. Possible solutions to these objections will be discussed in the next chapter.

I. No Biblical or Philosophical Support

Despite the two preceding arguments, some theologians and philosophers argue that there is not sufficient warrant to accept the doctrine of simplicity and therefore it should not be maintained. Yet not everyone who makes this argument does so for the same reason.

One group that employs this objection is opposed to philosophy generally, and Greek philosophy in particular.
They claim that simplicity has no biblical basis\textsuperscript{88}, and it is only held by those who prize human wisdom over divine revelation. Emil Brunner, for instance, argues that

Anyone who knows the history of the development of the doctrine of God in ‘Christian’ theology . . . will never cease to marvel at the unthinking way in which theologians adopted the postulates of philosophical speculation on the Absolute, and the amount of harm this has caused.\textsuperscript{89}

Charles Hodge, likewise, insisted that “we must . . . give up the attempt to determine the divine attributes from our speculative idea of infinite essence, or renounce all knowledge of God, and all faith in the revelation of Himself.”\textsuperscript{90} Some have even gone as far as to argue that Christianity’s insistence on monotheism is due to an unjustified reliance on philosophy.\textsuperscript{91}

Another group is made up of philosophers themselves. The arguments delineated in the last chapter attempt to show that simplicity is entailed by Aquinas’ arguments, as

\textsuperscript{88} Objections in the last section of this chapter will make clear that, in fact, some believe simplicity contradicts Scripture.
well as by God’s aseity. J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, however, think that at least Aquinas’ argument from contingent beings “forces us at most to postulate the existence of a being whose essence is such that it exists necessarily, a metaphysically necessary being. It need not commit us to divine simplicity,”\(^92\) and they conclude their brief survey of simplicity by arguing there are “no good reasons to adopt and many reasons to reject a full-blown doctrine of divine simplicity.”\(^93\) Craig repeats the claim in his book *Time and Eternity*\(^94\) and insists that “philosophically, there are no good reasons to embrace [this] radical doctrine.”\(^95\) Further, not only does he find no philosophical support for simplicity, but he finds “absolutely no support in Scripture,”\(^96\) either, a claim partially endorsed by another philosophical theologian, Jay Richards.\(^97\) Obviously, if Craig and Richards are correct, then Christians ought to reject at least a strong form of divine simplicity.

\(^92\) Moreland, *Foundations*, 524.
\(^93\) Ibid., 525.
\(^94\) Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 31n3.
\(^95\) Ibid., 31.
\(^96\) Ibid.
II. Internal Incoherence

Ever since Plantinga’s publication of Does God Have a Nature? the standard objection against divine simplicity has been that it is internally incoherent. In that work, he presents what he sees to be two insurmountable problems. First, if God is simple, then all of His properties are identical with one another, which suggests God only has one property, which is absurd. Second, if God is simple, then He and His one property are identical, which means God is not a person, but merely a property.

A. God’s Properties Are Not Identical

Plantinga states his first objection as follows:

In the first place if God is identical with each of his properties, then each of his properties is identical with each of his properties, so that God has but one property. This seems flatly incompatible with the obvious fact that God has several properties; he has both power and mercifulness, say, neither of which is identical with the other.98

This argument has strong intuitive appeal. Both the Bible and basic reason seem to insist that God has multiple attributes. Scripturally, it is evident that God has power, wisdom, knowledge, wills, creates, blesses, curses, and engages in myriads of other activities displaying a wide variety of attributes, including love, justice,

98 Plantinga, 47.
omniscience, omnipresence, etc. Indeed, the notion that God only has one attribute or property seems to stand in direct contrast with all of Scripture.

Yet the philosophical case is even stronger. First, if God knows everything, then it is evident that God knows what it means, say, to be a horse or to be a turkey. Yet if all of these ideas are identical in God, then it seems there is no distinction between them. Worse, if God is identical with his essence, then it would seem that God Himself would be identical with the property of being a horse or being a turkey, which is absurd. It is at least obvious that the idea of being a horse is distinct from the idea of being a turkey, and both are distinct from being God.99

The same is true when one turns to God’s attributes themselves. Moreland and Craig insist that “to say that God does not have distinct properties seems patently false: omnipotence is not the same property as goodness, for a being may have one and not another.”100 They anticipate the rebuttal that omnipotence and goodness are only different in our conception. Venus, for instance, is called both “the morning star” and “the evening star,” and yet they refer to

99 Ibid., 37-38.
100 Moreland, Foundations, 525.
the same reality. Perhaps, then, omnipotence and goodness (and every other attribute) refer to the same reality—God—and only seem different from our finite perspectives. But they think this view is inadequate, for even if it is conceded that the underlying reality is the same, it is still the case that being the morning star and being the evening star are distinct properties. Just so, being omnipotent and being good are distinct properties, even if their underlying reality is the same. Thus, God really does have distinct properties, contrary to divine simplicity.101

Plantinga considers the objection that God doesn’t really have any properties, that the debate is really a matter of terminology. In consideration of the property “being such that Adam sinned,” he says,

Of course Aquinas would reply that there is no such property as being such that Adam sinned. The singular term ‘being such that Adam sinned’ does not denote a property. . . . One who asserts that God is such that Adam sinned speaks the truth, no doubt, but does not predicate a property to God.102

Thus, Plantinga would have Aquinas object that properties like “being a horse,” “being a turkey,” and “being such that Adam sinned,” do not predicate anything to God at all. A horse may be dependent on the property being
a horse, and Adam may be dependent on the property being such that Adam sinned, but those properties thereby characterize horses and Adam, not God. The same would even be true about properties like “having created Adam” or “knowing it is a horse.” While those things appear to characterize God, in fact, Aquinas would apparently say, they do not. Such terms, rather, signify a relation—a relation found in Adam (and horses) but not in God—not a property in God.\footnote{Plantinga is not far off here. Aquinas certainly would appeal to his view of relations to explain this difficulty, but his ideas here are complicated. They will be discussed in some detail in the next chapter.}

Plantinga finds this view entirely lacking. He explains:

If having created Adam isn’t a property it is at any rate something that characterizes God, and it is something such that its characterizing him makes him different from what he would have been had it not characterized him. It seems plainly mistaken to say that the proposition God created Adam characterizes Adam but not God or says something about the former but not the latter.\footnote{Ibid., 42-43.}

Craig offers a similar argument. In discussing Aquinas’ view of relations, he asks, “If at the moment of creation the world begins to exist with the relational property being sustained by God, then how could God fail to acquire at that very moment the relational property
sustaining the world?” In other words, it seems evident that the moment God creates anything He obtains the property of (or, following Plantinga above, He can be characterized as) having created that thing. But the property of having created Adam doesn’t seem at all to be identical with the property of having created Eve.

Jay Richards offers another example of the seeming absurdity of insisting that all of God’s properties are identical. He concedes that all of God’s attributes are coextensive, but he insists that just because two things are coextensive, it does not follow that they are identical. Triangles, for instance, contain the properties of trilaterality and triangularity coextensively, but that is not to say that trilaterality is the same as triangularity. Or again, the propositions “All red things are colored” and “All bachelors are unmarried men” are necessarily true and coextensive in any possible world. Yet it is obvious that in no world are those propositions synonymous. Likewise, then, while God’s omniscience, omnipotence, omnipresence, and all of His other attributes

---

106 Richards, 227.
may exist in Him, it seems that one cannot say they are all identical. Thus, simplicity ought to be rejected.

B. God Is Not a Property

Plantinga’s second objection to simplicity has been called, perhaps rightly, his coup de grace\textsuperscript{107}, as it appears very intuitively powerful. He says,

If God is identical with each of his properties, then, since each of his properties is a property, he is a property—a self-exemplifying property. Accordingly God has just one property: himself. This view is subject to a difficulty both obvious and overwhelming. No property could have created the world; no property could be omniscient, or, indeed, know anything at all. If God is a property, then he isn’t a person but a mere abstract object; he has no knowledge, awareness, power, love or life. So taken, the simplicity doctrine seems an utter mistake.\textsuperscript{108}

Plantinga’s logic seems irresistible. If all of God’s properties are identical with one another, then He has only one property; but since there is no distinction between God and His essence, then He simply is that one property. Thus, God is a property. But this is surely mistaken, for whatever God is, He is more than a mere property. He is at

\textsuperscript{107} Allen Stanley Gehring, \textit{Divine Simplicity as Actus Purus} (Master’s Thesis: Texas A&M University, 2005), 1.

\textsuperscript{108} Plantinga, 47.
least a person, but persons exemplify properties; they are not properties themselves!\textsuperscript{109}

William Mann offers one of the first attempts to refute Plantinga.\textsuperscript{110} Though he agrees it is absurd to equate God with a property such as life or wisdom, he thinks it is not absurd to equate God with the property of "being the Godhead."\textsuperscript{111} This argument has been harshly criticized. Thomas Morris thinks it fails, since Mann insists that God depends on nothing other than Himself for His existence and yet makes God exemplify the property of "being the Godhead." Thus, God is at least dependent on that

\textsuperscript{109} Actually, Brian Leftow, a prominent contemporary Thomist and defender of simplicity, has questioned whether or not it is problematic to conceive of God as a property after all. For him, abstract objects are timeless and eternal, which certainly fits with how theists normally conceive of God. While such a position may be possible, it seems one should see if there are any alternative positions that maintain the full personhood of God before adopting it. As such, his arguments will not be followed in detail here. For more, see his "Is God an Abstract Object?" Nous 24 (1990): 581-598.


\textsuperscript{111} Mann’s idea is to distinguish between properties and rich-properties. Socrates obviously could not be equated with his wisdom, for his wisdom was just one of his properties. Yet if one considers all of his properties and then single out the one conjunctive property that includes all his others, that one so-called rich-property could be identified as Socrates himself. Every person, including Socrates, would be an instantiation of his or her rich-property.
property. After surveying the debate between Mann and Morris, Wolterstorff rightly concludes, “I think we must simply say that the thought is too undeveloped for us to know whether Mann's theory . . . meets Plantinga’s objection.”

III. Inconsistency with Biblical Data

Besides Plantinga’s arguments, one popular way to criticize divine simplicity is to insist that this “simple God” is not the God of Scripture. The Bible, it is argued, says that God is temporal, mutable, really related to the world (especially to beings that have free will), and/or Trinitarian. Any one of these, however, if true, would render divine simplicity contradictory with Scripture, since simplicity seems to entail that God is timeless, immutable, not really related to the world, absolutely determined, and Unitarian.

A. Argument from God’s Temporality

Both proponents and opponents of divine simplicity agree that it necessarily entails that God exists

timelessly. Thus, divine timelessness can be deduced from divine simplicity. On the other hand, if it can be shown that God is temporal, then it would necessarily follow that God is not simple.

Traditionally, it has been argued that if God were temporal, then He could and would change. That, however, would violate God’s perfection, for it seems that any change from perfection must be a change to imperfection, which cannot be in God. Therefore, God cannot change, and therefore, God cannot be in time. Yet proponents of God’s temporality insist that such reasoning is faulty, for it assumes that all change is “vertical,” that is, for better or for worse. Yet it seems that some changes can be “horizontal,” that is, changes that do not effect God’s perfection. For instance, if God changes from knowing what time it is now to in a few moments knowing what time it is then, such a change would not be for better or for worse. In fact, such a change would actually be a mark of God’s

\[115 \text{ The various notions of timelessness will be examined in the next chapter, but for now, it is sufficient to note that the debate on God’s relationship to time is complicated and employs a variety of different terms. Here, the word “timeless” will be taken to be synonymous with “atemporal,” meaning simply, “not in time.”} \]
perfection, since it would mean that God always knows what time it is.\textsuperscript{116}

Craig has taken this idea and formalized it into what he sees as powerful argument against divine simplicity:

1. A temporal world exists.
2. God is omniscient.
3. If a temporal world exists, then if God is omniscient, God knows tensed facts.
4. If God is timeless, he does not know tensed facts.
5. Therefore God is not timeless.\textsuperscript{117}, \textsuperscript{118}

Fundamental to this argument is the distinction between a tensed and tenseless fact. A tensed fact is one that is true only in a certain relation to the present. A tenseless fact is always true. Thus, “Barak Obama is elected President of the United States” is a tenseless fact. The statement would be true no matter when it was said. However, “Barack Obama was elected President of the United States three years ago” would only be true during the 2011 year (and, possibly, during 2015, if he wins again in 2012). Thus, the truth value of a tensed fact cannot be

\textsuperscript{116} Moreland, Foundations, 527.
\textsuperscript{117} Gregory Ganssle, ed. God and Time: Four Views (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 146.
\textsuperscript{118} Craig admits that, strictly speaking, this argument does not prove that God is essentially temporal. Elsewhere, he offers another argument for God’s essential temporality. It will be discussed under objections pertaining to God’s real relations to the world.
known apart from knowledge of the fact’s relation to the present.\textsuperscript{119}

Craig insists that if God is timeless, then He cannot know tensed facts. At best, “all a timeless God could know would be tenseless truths like \textit{Christ dies in A.D. 30}, but he would have no idea whether Christ has actually died yet or not.”\textsuperscript{120} Or, as Richards puts it simply, “The argument is that God’s knowledge relation can and does change, for the simple reason that, in order for god to know what is the case, he will have to know what is the case at a time.”\textsuperscript{121} The only way out of the dilemma, Craig contends, is to either deny that a timeless God cannot know tensed facts or to redefine omniscience so that it does not have to include tensed facts. After analyzing two of the most sophisticated attempts at the former, he concludes the third premise has not been refuted. Then he insists that to redefine omniscience so that it excludes tensed facts is to pay too high of a price. It appears, then, that if one wishes to follow the Bible and attribute omniscience to God, then by Craig’s argument, one must be concluded that God is temporal.\textsuperscript{122}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{119} Gansssle, 145.  \\
\textsuperscript{120} Moreland, \textit{Foundations}, 513.  \\
\textsuperscript{121} Richards, 202.  \\
\textsuperscript{122} Gansssle, 147-151. 
\end{flushright}
B. Argument from God’s Mutability

Many contemporary Christian philosophers and theologians have embraced a view of God’s immutability that directly contradicts divine simplicity. In short, there is broad acceptance of the idea that God can and does, at least in some respects, change. But if this is true, then God cannot be simple, for He would be a composite of actuality and potentiality. Further, He would be temporal and therefore not simple (as the arguments above make clear). Plantinga makes the case very clearly:

Just as it seems right to suppose there are characteristics God has but could have lacked, so it seems right to think there are characteristics he lacks but could have. It is natural to think, furthermore, that among these there are some he hasn’t yet acquired but could acquire. No doubt he hasn’t yet created all the persons he will create; he will create persons distinct from all those that have so far existed.\textsuperscript{123}

To put the issue in terms of the actuality/potentiality distinction, it seems that God actually exists so that He has created the world, incarnated, reconciled the world to Himself in Christ, and is building the Church. Yet it seems clear enough that He has not yet cast Satan into the Lake of Fire or created the New Heavens and New Earth. Thus, He has potentiality with

\textsuperscript{123} Plantinga, 44.
respect to those things, and once He does them, He will be actual with respect to them. God is therefore not simple, since He is a composition of actuality and potentiality.

The critique of the classical view of immutability is widespread among modern theologians and philosophers. While acknowledging that some form of immutability is biblical, the classical view that God is absolutely unchanging has been jettisoned in favor of weaker versions. Of these, the dominant position seems to be that of I. A. Dorner, who held that moral consistency qualifies as biblical immutability.\footnote{I. A. Dorner, Divine Immutability : A Critical Reconsideration (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 87, 166. Unfortunately, he probably takes his argument too far, for he thinks that God’s love for creation necessitates its creation and thus curtails divine freedom. This is because Dorner thinks that God’s love for creation is essential (in which he is correct), for if it were accidental, then His love would be arbitrary. See p. 182.} Richard Swinburne\footnote{Richard Swinburne, The Coherence of Theism (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 212.}, J. P. Moreland, and William Lane Craig\footnote{Moreland, Foundations, 526.} all agree, taking the immutability of character as the basis for the biblical texts.

Bruce Ware and Jay Richards take somewhat stronger views, though they both reject the classical view of absolute immutability. Both think that while God is
ethically immutable, there is a sense in which God is ontologically immutable as well. Richards says,

It hardly seems adequate to say that God’s character is merely contingently reliable and steadfast. If God is perfect, then surely God is essentially reliable and steadfast, since it is surely better to be reliable and steadfast in all possible worlds than in only some. So grounding God’s reliability and unchangeableness in his essence makes sense.\(^{127}\)

In other words, it is not merely that God happens to always keep His promises, and therefore He is ethically immutable. Rather, God always keeps His promises because His nature or essence is such that He always does so.\(^{128}\) Ware’s position, while similar, is even stronger. He states,

God is immutable not only with regard to the fact of his eternal existence but also in the very content or make-up of his eternal essence, independent of the world. He does not depend for his existence on anything external to him. . . . The line of dependence between God and the world is asymmetrical. God exists in the fullness of his own intrinsic perfection from all eternity, and his creation of a temporal and contingent reality ex nihilo only expresses ad extra what is intrinsic to the very nature of God. . . . Thus in affirming God’s ontological immutability the true and living God is attributed with the changelessness of his own independent existence, essence and attributes, which qualities of being have

---

\(^{127}\) Richards, 198.

\(^{128}\) Of course, it isn’t clear that Swinburne, Moreland, or Craig would reject this statement. This is only to say that Richards makes it a point of grounding God’s ethical immutability in some aspect of ontological immutability, a nuance not emphasized in other writers.
ever been his alone and to which no further quality or value can possibly be added.\textsuperscript{129}

Thus, for Ware, God exhibits an “onto-ethical immutability,”\textsuperscript{130} although His emotions\textsuperscript{131}, relation to the world, and even decisions can all change.

Process theologians have offered even stronger critiques. Central to their argument is the claim that the “traditional Christian interpretation of the doctrine of divine immutability . . . cannot be reconciled with the Bible’s revelation of divine love and care for the world.”\textsuperscript{132} This is primarily due to immutability’s entailment of impassibility, that is, the doctrine that God is not affected by the world. That impassibility flows from a strong view of immutability seems obvious enough, for if God cannot change in any way whatsoever, He could likewise not be changed by anything humans do, suffer, or experience. Anselm emphasizes this when he writes:

\textsuperscript{129} Ware, 436. Actually, Thomists would applaud every word of this statement, especially the strong endorsement of God’s aseity, which, as has been seen, furnishes the grounds for one of the major arguments in favor of divine simplicity. It is not clear how Ware would reconcile his belief that God is absolutely independent of creation with his belief that God is in any sense mutable.

\textsuperscript{130} Ibid., 438.

\textsuperscript{131} For a Thomistic critique of this view, see Patrick Lee’s “Does God Have Emotions,” available online at http://www2.franciscan.edu/plee/doesgodhaveemotions.htm (accessed April 1, 2011).

\textsuperscript{132} Whitney, 50.
But how [is God] compassionate, and, at the same time, passionless? For, if thou art passionless, thou dost not feel sympathy; and if thou dost not feel sympathy, thy heart is not wretched from sympathy for the wretched; but this it is to be compassionate. But if thou art not compassionate, whence cometh so great consolation to the wretched? How, then, art thou compassionate and not compassionate, O Lord, unless because thou art compassionate in terms of our experience, and not compassionate in terms of thy being.\textsuperscript{133}

Yet such a view struck Hartshorne as completely unacceptable, for this God gives us everything “except the right to believe that there is one who, with infinitely subtle and appropriate sensitivity, rejoices in all our joys and sorrows in all our sorrows.”\textsuperscript{134} He continues:

"To love," it has been said, "is to wish to give rather than to receive"; but in loving God we are, according to Anselm and thousands of other orthodox divines, forbidden to seek to give; for God, they say, is a totally impassive, nonreceptive, nonrelative being. Such guardians of the divine majesty in my judgment know not what they do.\textsuperscript{135}

Christians, of course, may well sympathize with Hartshorne’s critique. The Bible not only declares that God is love (1 John 4:8, 16), but demonstrates His love for the world (John 3:16) as well as demands that His children love Him (Deut 6:4-8). Further, Jesus seems to declare that God cares deeply about even the most insignificant of His

\textsuperscript{133} Anselm, \textit{Proslogion} 8.
\textsuperscript{134} Hartshorne, \textit{The Divine Relativity} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948), 54.
\textsuperscript{135} Ibid., 55.
creation and therefore much more about mankind (Matt. 6:25-34). It seems, then, that any view of God that diminishes His ability to love and be loved ought to be rejected out of hand as inconsistent with biblical revelation.136

C. Argument from God’s Real Relations

Craig puts forward another argument that is similar in spirit to that of the process thinkers discussed above, only instead of focusing on God’s passibility, he focuses on God’s relationship to the world. He argues:

Opponents of divine timelessness can therefore be understood as claiming that 1) God is timeless; and 2) God is creatively active in the temporal world are broadly logically incompatible, on the basis of the necessary truth of; 3) if God is creatively active in the temporal world, God is really related to the temporal world; and 4) if God is really related to the temporal world, God is temporal. Since (2) is essential to Christian theism, (1) must be abandoned.137


137 Craig, "Timelessness, Creation," 93-94.
This argument appears to be much stronger than his earlier argument in favor of divine temporality, for this argument rests on the biblical fact that God is active in the temporal world and concludes in an essentially temporal God. Since (1) is the issue under discussion, (2) is true if (3) is true, and (4) is self-evident, both the strength and crux of the argument are found in (3). Craig has good reason to affirm it. For any substance, to act on something is to imply a relationship of some sort between the two things. If a man picks up a coffee cup, he is in some way related to that cup. When he puts it down, he is now related to it in a different way than he was when he was holding it. For Aristotle, relations are accidental properties.\(^\text{138}\) Therefore, if God is really related to the world, then He has accidental properties. This has the twofold impact of validating Craig’s claim that God is really related to the world (thus rendering Him essentially

\(^{138}\) In Aristotelian substance theory, accidental properties are contrasted with essential properties, in which the latter are what a thing has to have to be the thing that it is. Humans, for instance, have the essential property of being animals (among other things), but their skin color is accidental. Thus, a person’s skin color can change, but they remain what they are—a human being. Aristotle’s accidental properties included quantity, quality, relation, having, time, location, situation (or position), action, and being affected. See Aristotle’s Categories 4, 6ff. for his discussion on each of these.
temporal) and denying God’s simplicity (since God would be a composite of accidental and essential properties).

Richards also insists that God has accidental properties and therefore cannot be simple. He distinguishes from God’s essential properties, which He has in every possible world, and his accidental properties, which may differ from one possible world to another. God’s omniscience, for instance, is an essential property. That is to say, in every possible world, God is omniscient. But God’s knowledge that Barak Obama was elected President in 2008 is an accidental property, for there is a possible world in which John McCain won, and in that world, God would have so known that fact instead. Or there is one world in which God has the property of “having created the world,” but there is another possible world in which God has the property of “existing alone, not having created the world.”

Thus, Richards argues that not all of God’s properties are coextensive. In other words, all of God’s essential properties necessarily exist side by side. In every possible world, God is omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent, etc. That is to say, all of God’s essential

---

139 On this, even Aquinas agrees. He says, “Wherefore we must simply say that God can do other things than those He has done.” (ST Ia.25.5)
attributes are coextensive. Yet it clearly seems to be the
case that all of God’s accidental properties are not
coextensive, for there are some worlds in which God has the
property of having created Adam, and some where He has the
property of not having created Adam. But if not all of
God’s properties are coextensive, then He clearly cannot be
simple, for He is at least a composite of essential and
accidental properties.\footnote{Richards, 224.}

D. Argument from God’s (and Man’s) Free Will

One of the most difficult problems, admitted by some
proponents of divine simplicity, lies in the fact that
simplicity seems to entail a sort of theological
determinism that may contradict Scripture. There are
several ways of demonstrating the problem, but most are
based on the fact of God’s supreme sovereignty.\footnote{Of course, Christians are familiar with the problem
of the compatibility between God’s sovereignty and man’s
free will, even outside of the simplicity debate. Yet a
distinction should be made between a theological view of
God’s sovereignty and a philosophical view of God’s
sovereignty. While both may point to the same fact, the
former views God as a king (indeed, that is they very image
conjured up by the word ‘sovereign’), whereas the latter
follows from God’s existing necessarily, a se, simple, and
without potentiality. Discussion will be limited to this
second aspect of the problem.} For
instance, it seems obvious that God was not required to
have created the world. Christianity has always claimed that He did so freely, but as some have pointed out, it is not obvious how a simple, sovereign God could choose from alternatives, as such a view leaves the origin and nature of those alternatives unexplained. ¹⁴²

Moreland explains the difficulty well:

If God is identical with his essence, then God cannot know or do anything different from what he knows and does. He can have no contingent knowledge or action, for everything about him is essential to him. But in that case all modal distinctions collapse and everything becomes necessary. Since God knows that $p$ is logically equivalent to $p$ is true, the necessity of the former entails the necessity of the latter. Thus divine simplicity leads to an extreme fatalism, according to which everything that happens does so, not with temporal necessity, but with logical necessity. ¹⁴³

The argument is clear enough. If God necessarily exists how He does, and He is not capable of existing any other way, then it seems obvious enough that His knowledge of the created world must likewise necessarily be the way it is. But if that is the case, it follows that the created world necessarily exists the way it does. If one is to insist on God’s aseity, it further follows that the world exists the way it does because God exists the way He does. That is, it is not the case that the world must exist this

¹⁴² Richards, 17.
¹⁴³ Moreland, Foundations, 525.
way, and therefore God knows it, but rather, since God must exist the way He does, then the world, as His creation, must exist in the way that He does. But this is what Moreland above called “extreme fatalism,” or what Richards calls “of a grand theologically determined system.”

This is a problem that Jeffrey Brower, a contemporary proponent of divine simplicity, has recognized. He points out that “Apart from questions about its coherence, the main contemporary objection to divine simplicity has focused on its apparent exclusion of contingent divine volition and knowledge.” He points out that theists have traditionally affirmed statements such as “God knows that p, where p is a contingent truth.” For instance, the fact that human beings exist is clearly a contingent truth, and God certainly knows it to be the case. Typically, statements like this are used to argue that God’s knowledge is at least in some sense contingent and not necessary as simplicity and aseity would require. Yet Brower can account

---

144 Richards, 17.
145 Brower, 23. In a footnote, Brower points the reader to such works as Craig’s Time and Eternity (2003); Timothy O’Connor’s “Simplicity and Creation,” Faith and Philosophy 16 (1999): 405-412; Stump and Kretzmann’s “Absolute Simplicity,” Faith and Philosophy 2 (1985): 353-382, and others. He also points out that even Aquinas recognized the problem and attempted to deal with it. See, for instance, ST Ia.19.3; 25.5-6.
for God’s knowledge of this contingent truth without rendering God’s knowledge contingent by arguing that humans only exist because God freely willed it. Therefore, God’s knowledge of the contingent truth of human existence is not dependent on human existence, but rather only on His own choice, which preserves God’s aseity.

A more serious problem arises, though, when one considers statements such as “John freely chose to mow his lawn.” If one attempts to explain God’s knowledge of this contingent truth in the same way that Brower explained God’s knowledge of the contingent truth of human existence, one would be forced to argue that John chose to mow his lawn only because God so willed it. But in that case, libertarian free will is destroyed. The choices, then, for the proponent of divine simplicity and aseity are uncomfortable. Either give up divine simplicity or accept a compatibilist account of human freedom. Brower opts for the latter, insisting that though some will see it as sufficient grounds . . . for rejecting divine simplicity . . . [s]uch an attitude would be justified if compatibilism were obviously incoherent, absurd, or false. But it isn’t.Compatibilism has a rich history of supporters, both within and outside of traditional philosophical theology. Indeed, the former often see compatibilism as a natural consequence of theological doctrines just as well established as that of creation.
(most notably, providence, foreknowledge, predestination, and election).\textsuperscript{146}

Proponents of simplicity, therefore, have a serious dilemma on their hands. In the first place, they want to affirm God’s freedom to act however He wills. Even Aquinas plainly stated, “We must simply say that God can do other things that those He has done.”\textsuperscript{147} Yet if God is absolutely sovereign by virtue of His absolute aseity and pure actuality, then it seems such an affirmation is simply impossible. All acts of God would be necessary, which would mean that all actions in the created world would be necessary, and therefore strictly determined. Whatever compatibilism’s rich history, any advocate will have to deal with the fact that the Bible insists that both God and man are apparently really free, and as such, simplicity may prove to have a difficult time reconciling itself with Scripture.\textsuperscript{148}

E. Argument from God’s Triunity

Perhaps the most difficult objection a Christian proponent of simplicity faces is how to reconcile it with the Trinity. Craig puts the issue very succinctly, saying

\textsuperscript{146} Ibid., 31.
\textsuperscript{147} ST Ia.25.5.
\textsuperscript{148} Richards, 237.
that if God is simple, then “He is not really composed of three distinct persons, a claim notoriously difficult to reconcile with the doctrine of the Trinity.”\(^{149}\) This point seems both obvious and definitional. For if simplicity entails no distinctions within God of any kind, it appears impossible to assert that there are three distinct Persons in the Godhead.

But in addition to the problem of the Three Persons, the Trinity provides a more difficult problem for divine simplicity. Traditionally, Christians have taught that each Person in the Godhead is coequal and coeternal. The attributes of one are shared by all the others equally. Yet they have also taught that some of the divine attributes belong to the Godhead generally, while others belong to the individual Persons. For instance, Augustine distinguishes between the essence of God generally and the Persons of God specifically.\(^{150}\) More obviously, while God is a Trinity, none of the Persons are said to be a Trinity. Again, Augustine says this plainly:

\[
\text{For the Trinity is called one God, great, good, eternal, omnipotent; and the same God Himself may be called His own deity, His own magnitude, His own goodness, His own eternity, His own omnipotence: but the Trinity cannot in the same way be called the}
\]

\(^{149}\) Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 30.  
\(^{150}\) Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 5.9.
Father, except perhaps metaphorically, in respect to the creature, on account of the adoption of sons.\textsuperscript{151}

So apparently there are at least two classes of divine attributes: those that apply to the Godhead generally, and those that apply to the Persons specifically. Moreover, these distinctions seem necessary if one is going to insist that the Father is not the Son and the Son is not the Spirit. Paternity, for instance, is attributed uniquely to the Father, while filiation is attributed uniquely to the Son.\textsuperscript{152} Yet it is not obvious how a proponent of simplicity, who insists on no distinction in God, can make these kinds of distinctions.\textsuperscript{153} As obvious as these problems are, it apparently runs even more deeply. Richards, more than anyone else, seems to have put the issue in the clearest terms. For him, the problem is methodological. Natural theology has historically lead theists (not simply Christians) to affirm that God is Perfect in the sense that

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{151} Ibid., 5.11.
\item \textsuperscript{152} In addition to the problem being discussed here, this fact raises another serious problem. Since, according to simplicity, all attributes are really identical with one another, it would seem that paternity, filiation, and spiration—the three attributes by which the Three Persons are distinguished—are actually each identical with one another. That, however, seems absurd!
\item \textsuperscript{153} Richards, 228-29.
\end{itemize}
He lacks nothing\textsuperscript{154} and that He is exists a se. Yet Richards believes that these ideas, while useful, can and have led to deductions that oppose Scripture. For instance, if God is perfect, He is impassible and immutable, which seem to make the Incarnation and Jesus' substitutionary atonement philosophically absurd. It is this methodology, Richards thinks, that leads one to view God as an absolutely undifferentiated unity—which is to say, to affirm divine simplicity—and therefore all the biblical problems it entails.\textsuperscript{155} As such, it may be that the entire enterprise of natural theology needs to be reformulated or rejected if it conflicts with biblical theology!

IV. Summary

This chapter has laid out some of the most widely raised objections to divine simplicity. First, some insist that there is no biblical or philosophical warrant for accepting the doctrine. It is certainly the case that there is no biblical statement that directly claims God is not a

\textsuperscript{154} This is another major proof for God's existing as pure act. For if God had any potential to be in any way that He is not, He would not be perfect, for He would not be fully actual. That is to say, He would at least lack existence in the way in which He had potentiality for existence; but to claim God lacks anything is to claim He is imperfect. Since God is perfect, He must be pure act.

\textsuperscript{155} Richards, 36.
composite being\textsuperscript{156}. Such is a thoroughly philosophical claim. Some, then, reject it on the grounds that philosophy in general has no place in theological studies. Yet more often, others have considered the philosophical case and found it lacking.

The primary objection leveled today in one form or another insists that the doctrine is simply incoherent. Since simplicity requires all of God’s properties to be coexistent and actually identical, it would seem to follow that God has only one property. But such is absurd, since what omniscience and omnipotence are, for instance, they are not identical. Perhaps worse, since God is also identical with His essence, then it would seem that simplicity would require that God actually be His one property. But this, again, would be absurd, for no property is a person. If these objections are sound, the theist is forced to abandon divine simplicity.

A third class of arguments are particularly Christian in nature, in that they claim not merely that there is no biblical warrant for the doctrine, but that what it entails actually contradicts what Scripture reveals.

\textsuperscript{156} One, and probably the only, possible candidate is Deut. 6:4. It will be discussed in the next chapter.
First, many evangelicals today insist that God is temporal, since if God is omniscient He must know tensed facts. Yet only a temporal being can know tensed facts. Yet if God is temporal, He is not simple, since simplicity entails that God is timeless.

Second, many argue that God is mutable. This flows directly from God’s temporality, but further from a rejection of a strong view of divine impassibility. For if God is truly able to respond to His creation and be affected by it, it necessarily follows that He is in some sense changed by (or changes in response to) that creation. But if God is mutable in this sense, He cannot be simple, as simplicity entails God’s absolute immutability.

Third, the Bible seems to clearly teach that God stands in real relations to His creation. Craig argued for this on the basis that God is active in the temporal world, and it seems hard to imagine God being active in the world and yet not related to it. Richards comes to the same conclusion by arguing that God’s knowledge of contingent facts means that one must distinguish between God’s essential and accidental properties. Yet by either of these arguments, simplicity must be rejected, as it entails that God stands in no real relations. If that were true, it
seems that He could not act in a temporal world and could not have any accidental relations to that world.

Fourth, Scripture insists that God is absolutely free, and a strong case can be made that mankind has a free will as well. Yet on these assumptions, critics reject simplicity as it entails a form of theological determinism. If everything about God is essential to Him, then it appears everything God knows is essential; but since God’s knowledge includes knowledge of free human choices (indeed, of all contingent facts), then, apparently, all such choices are in fact determined by the divine will. As such, if one wishes to embrace the notion that man can freely choose (which seems necessary to account for his moral responsibility), one must reject divine simplicity.

Finally, since the Bible clearly teaches that God is Trinitarian, critics insist that divine simplicity must be rejected. For if God is not a composite being, and if He is the Absolute, Undifferentiated Being, it makes no sense to speak of a distinction of divine Persons within the Godhead. Further, classical theism traditionally teaches that some attributes are predicated to individual Persons, while others are predicated to the Godhead as a whole. As such, any proponent of simplicity must reconcile his view with the biblical data concerning the structure of God or
else reject either simplicity or the authority of Scripture.

    All of these objections are weighty, and any proponent of divine simplicity must appreciate them to the fullest. The next chapter will attempt to offer a fair and thorough answer to each of them.
CHAPTER THREE

Chapter two presented a series of objections that have been leveled against divine simplicity. This chapter will attempt to offer plausible responses to each of them. Arguments against simplicity’s general philosophical and biblical warrant are considered first, followed by the arguments against its internal incoherence, and finally the various arguments against its fidelity to Scripture.

I. No Biblical or Philosophical Support

The claim that divine simplicity lacks either biblical or philosophical warrant is best responded to by working through arguments in favor of the doctrine, since if those arguments are sound, then the assertion is proved false. Still, several comments are in order regarding those who deny that philosophical speculation ought to be used at all when discussing the nature of God, as well as regarding the claim that the doctrine enjoys no biblical support.

First, any claim that philosophy should not be integrated into Christian thought runs the risk of self-refutation. Thus Clement of Alexandria said,

For truly it appears to me to be a proper point for discussion, Whether we ought to philosophize: for its
terms are consistent. But if we are not to philosophize, what then? (For no one can condemn a thing without first knowing it): the consequence, even in that case, is that we must philosophize.¹⁵⁷

Thus, those theologians who reject the use of philosophy to derive doctrines such as simplicity or (strong) immutability have already contradicted themselves. Second, even if their rejection of philosophy were not self-refuting, it at least would prove to be a genetic fallacy. That is, just because Aristotle or other Hellenistic philosophers thought God was simple, it does not follow that the idea is wrong since they did not worship the God of the Bible. Finally, returning to Clement, in discussing the degree of truth to which the philosophers had apart from Scripture, he said,

Also, as all animals breathe the same air, some in one way, others in another, and to a different purpose; so also a considerable number of people occupy themselves with the truth, or rather with discourse concerning the truth.¹⁵⁸

That is, to the degree that the human mind can know the truth about reality, it can know reality in various

¹⁵⁷ The Stromata 6.18. Philip Schaff, commenting on these words, said, “The author’s meaning is, that it is only by a process of philosophical reasoning that you can decide whether philosophy is possible, valid, or useful. You must philosophize in order to decide whether you ought or ought not to philosophize.” See his Ante-Nicene Fathers, available online at: http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf02.pdf (Accessed December 9, 2011)

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 8.17.
ways. What Scripture reveals is certainly true, but that
does not mean that philosophical reasoning therefore cannot
be trusted—that is, that Scripture is thereby the only

Philosophical theists who think doctrine of divine
simplicity lacks warrant must demonstrate the failure of
the arguments put in its favor. Unfortunately, while
arguments against simplicity abound, very little is said
against arguments for it. That is, opponents of simplicity
must do more than offer arguments against it. They must
also demonstrate the flaws in arguments on its behalf
before they declare it to have no philosophical warrant.\textsuperscript{159}

The claim that divine simplicity has no biblical
support can also be challenged. It can be admitted that

\textsuperscript{159} This is not to say, of course, that there have been
absolutely no critiques of Aquinas’ (or others’) arguments
in favor of simplicity. For instance, see Hugh’s \textit{On a
Complex Theory of a Simple God} (Ithaca: Cornell University
Press, 1989), 28-57. It is only to say that major
philosophers like Plantinga, Moreland, Craig, and Richards,
while offering extensive critiques of simplicity, have
offered no analysis of the arguments in its favor. Craig
comes close in \textit{The Cosmological Argument} when he interprets
Aquinas’ First Way in strictly physical terms, but as shown
in chapter one, even that more limited interpretation
supplies a basis for Aquinas’ arguments in \textit{ST} Ia.3.
Further, even if the First Way under Craig’s interpretation
failed to provide a proper basis for Aquinas later
arguments, Gilson’s and Owens’ metaphysical interpretation
certainly does. Craig only challenges their interpretation
on historical grounds. Thus, even if his view holds, their
essential argument still stands waiting to be answered.
there are no direct affirmations of God’s simplicity. Deuteronomy 6:4, following the traditional translation, is the closest candidate. But unless one assumes Moses was making a decidedly philosophical point, H. C. Brichto is certainly correct in his observation that “affirming that a person known by a proper name ‘is one’ is as meaningless of a deity as it would be of a human being. A discrete entity is not normally in danger of being taken for more than one or less than one.” Based on this and other points of consideration, Daniel Block argues convincingly that the verse should be translated as “Yahweh is our God, Yahweh alone!” and functions as a declaration of Israel’s complete fidelity to Yahweh. Taken this way, the verse says nothing about the unity of God and therefore cannot speak to God’s simplicity.

Still, it does not follow from this that the doctrine enjoys no biblical support, for there are also no verses that directly state God’s triunity. Yet the Trinity is

160 “Hear O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one” (NIV). See the KJV, NKJV, NASB, ESV, and HCSB for similar translations.
clearly biblically mandated, since it is the only way to make sense of the biblical data. Likewise, since on Thomistic metaphysics several biblically attested divine attributes entail simplicity, simplicity (Thomists believe) is biblically warranted.

A. God’s Timelessness

Many passages of Scripture teach God’s eternity. For instance, Deut. 33:27 says, “The eternal God is your refuge . . .” (NIV). Likewise, 1 Tim. 1:17 says, “Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen” (NIV). God’s relationship to time is hotly debated, but eternality can be properly understood as timelessness. In fact, passages like Ps. 90:4 seem to teach, at a minimum, that God’s relationship to time is certainly different from man’s.

Yet divine timelessness entails divine simplicity. Craig and Moreland seem to recognize this in some sense when they say

If God is really related to the world, then it is extraordinarily difficult to see how God could remain untouched by the world’s temporality. For simply in

This is not to say it is the only way to understand eternity. See below for a detailed discussion on why God’s eternity ought to be taken of as timelessness. For now, it is enough to note that there is biblical warrant for the notion that God is timeless, granted only that eternality can possibly be understood as timelessness. Warrant, of course, is not to be confused with proof.
virtue of his being related to changing things (even if he himself managed to remain intrinsically changeless), there would exist a before and after in God’s life. Aquinas escaped the force of this reasoning only by insisting that God stands in no real relation to the world—a position that seems fantastic in light of God’s being the Creator and Sustainer of the universe.\textsuperscript{164}

If one accepts their arguments as one should, then apparently one must affirm a timeless God stands in no real relations to the world. Craig and Moreland, of course, think this is an argument against God’s timelessness. Since one man’s modus ponens is another’s modus tollens, they could be correct. But the point is that if one accepts the premise that the Bible teaches God is timeless, then, by their own arguments, one must also accept as a corollary fact that God stands in no real relations to creation. To make that clear, we can formulate their argument as follows:

1. If God is really related to the world, He is temporal
2. God is really related to the world
3. Therefore, God is temporal

They defend (1) on the basis that being related to changing things would constitute a before and an after in God, and anything that has a before and after is

\textsuperscript{164} Moreland, \textit{Foundations}, 512.
temporal. But accepting (1), one can make the following argument:

1. If God is really related to the world, He is temporal
2. God is not temporal
3. Therefore, God is not really related to the world

(1) can here be defended on the same grounds as above. Yet if one believes that (2) is taught by Scripture, then the conclusion necessarily follows that God stands in no real relations. But if this is true, then God is simple, for relations are accidental properties.

The notion that God stands in no real relations to the world will be discussed in detail later in this chapter. For now, it is enough to note two points follow the concept. First, even if it turns out that it does not entail God’s simplicity, it is at least entirely consistent with and in fact demanded by Aquinas’ doctrine. Second, an argument for such entailment can be put forward. Put briefly, if God stands in no real relations to creation, then He is pure substance—that is, He is pure essence, which leads directly to His simplicity.

---

165 Aquinas avoids this argument by arguing simply that God does not stand in any real relations. This will be discussed in detail below.

166 In fact, this writer is unaware of anyone who holds to the position who does not also hold to a strong version of divine simplicity.
According to Aristotle, there are ten ways in which anything can exist (substance, quantity, quality, relation, place, time, position, state, action, and passion).\textsuperscript{167, 168} Of these, the latter nine are all accidental properties. Of them, quantity, action, and passion are the causes of all real relations\textsuperscript{169}, and qualities and substance serve as the ground for all incidental real relations.\textsuperscript{170} Further, place is relative to one’s environment; time is relative to a course of events; position is relative to an act; and state is relative to a passion. Thus, any being that is really related to anything in the world must possess in some sense each of the accidental categories. Yet if a being cannot

\textsuperscript{167} \textit{Categories} 1b25-2a4

\textsuperscript{168} There is some debate about whether Aristotle intended the categories to delineate the way things can be or the way words can describe them. This is partly due to his terminology. He calls the things divided into categories \textit{ta legomena} (“things that are said”). Further, the Greek word he used for each classification (\textit{kategoriai}) means “predicate.” The idea seems to be that there are ten ways \(x\) can be predicated to \(y\). Still, many scholars think Aristotle had in mind not words, but the world to which words correspond. Aquinas certainly interpreted him so. Thus, like Craig’s historical challenge to Owens and Gilson discussed above, the debate about what Aristotle had in mind is not the issue, for the arguments Aquinas used, and the one presented here, presume an extra-linguistic interpretation of the \textit{Categories}. For more on this matter, see \textit{The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2008 Edition)}, s.v. “Aristotle’s Categories.” http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/aristotle-categories/ (Accessed December 4, 2011).

\textsuperscript{169} \textit{De Pot.} VIII.1c

\textsuperscript{170} \textit{De Pot.} VII.9c
stand in real relations, then a simple argument demonstrates the being cannot have any accidental properties:

1. If a being shares qualities with the world, it is really related to it
2. God is not really related to the world
3. Therefore, God shares no qualities with the world

(2) is simply an affirmation of the above idea that God stands in no real relations. (1) is true since qualities serve as the ground for all incidental real relations (e.g., two sugar cubes that are both white are really related in that both share the quality of being white). (1) can be modified in accordance with above to show how each of the accidental properties must be denied of a being that stands in no real relations with anything other than itself.\textsuperscript{171}

If the argument holds throughout, then such a being would be pure substance—that is, pure essence. In fact,

\textsuperscript{171} Let (1) be stated as, “If \(x\), then it is really related to the world.” Then, for each of the latter nine properties substitute \(x\) for “a being . . .” and the following: quantity: “can be quantified”; quality: “shares qualities with the world”; relation: “is related to the world”; place: “can be located with respect to the world”; time: “can be located with respect to a course of events”; position: “is in a position following a particular act upon anything in the world”; state: “is in a state following being acted upon by anything in the world”; action: “really acts upon anything in the world”; and passion: “is really acted upon by anything in the world.”
even attributing “substance” to such a being would be analogical, for the same argument would allow one to deny substance to such a being, since substances can serve to really relate the being with things in the real world, insofar as both are substances. One obvious way to understand the analogy is to take God’s substance as, again, pure act, or the very act of existence. In all created things, essences are actualized by existence. God’s essence, though, simply is existence. But, by the arguments offered in chapter two, any being that is the pure act of existence must necessarily be absolutely simple.

B. God’s Immutability

Most theologians have affirmed that God is immutable in some sense. The idea has been commonly derived from such passages as Num. 23:19; 1 Sam. 15:29; Ps. 110:4; Isa. 46:9-11; Eze. 24:14; Mal. 3:16; Jas. 1:17; etc., and (if a strong view of immutability accepted) directly entails His simplicity. Further, all of the passages that teach God’s

173 As with eternality discussed above, there are different views on what kind of immutability, if any, the Bible ascribes to God. A defense of the strong view will be offered later in this chapter. For now, it is enough to note that if a strong view of immutability is derived from the text, then simplicity can on these grounds claim biblical warrant.
eternity can also be seen as teaching God’s immutability, since change is impossible for a timeless being. Put simply, if God is timeless, He is immutable; if He is mutable, He must be temporal.

The argument that immutability entails simplicity is fairly straightforward. Any being that is incapable of change has no potentiality to exist any other way. As such, it is pure act, and following the reasons outlined in chapter one, any being that is purely actual is also absolutely simple.

C. God’s Aseity

God’s aseity has already been discussed in some detail in chapter one. Suffice it to say that that passages such as Ex. 3:13, Job 41:11, and Isa. 40:18-28 claim that God is dependent on nothing. Further, Others such as Acts 17:24-25 teach that everything is dependent on God. These ideas entail God’s aseity, and as argued in chapter one, God’s aseity entails His simplicity.

174 “Change” here includes all forms of change (substantial, quantitative, qualitative, and local), not simply motion. As such, immutability requires a being to not even have the potential to go into or out of existence. It is for this reason that no creature can be immutable in this sense, and for this same reason that strong immutability, if properly belonging to God, is one of His incommunicable attributes.
D. God’s Sovereignty

The Bible emphatically states that God is sovereign over all of creation. He is called sovereign in passages such as Gen. 15:2, Deut. 3:24, 2 Sam. 7:18, and hosts of others. The reason God is sovereign is that He is the Creator of the universe. But if that is true, then Patrick Lee’s observation is important to keep in mind: “So, whatever else is said about God must be consistent with the fundamental truth that he is the Creator and all that that legitimately implies.”

One of the implications of God being Creator is that He is dependent on nothing other than Himself (an idea that clearly follows from God’s sovereignty as well). But if God is dependent on nothing other than Himself, then God’s sovereignty entails His simplicity for the same reason His aseity entails it. A being dependent on absolutely nothing other than itself cannot even be dependent on its own parts. That is, a maximally sovereign being must necessarily be absolutely simple, for any degree of dependence would reduce that sovereignty. Further, since creation includes everything outside of God (John 1:3; Col 1:16-17), then God could not even be dependent on so-called

---

175 Lee, “Does God Have Emotions?”
Platonic properties like “being omniscient.” Therefore, an absolute Creator-God must be absolutely simple.

II. Internal Incoherence

The arguments against divine simplicity’s coherence, especially as formulated by Plantinga, have received a variety of responses. Mann, as discussed in the last chapter, offered important early responses by arguing that God is identical with a property instance of a rich-property. Underlying his proposal is a basic agreement that it is absurd to think of God as a property.

Other philosophers have taken different approaches. Lawrence Dewan thinks Plantinga is right that God should not be identified with a property, but argues that Aquinas’ position does not require such a conclusion, since God

\[176\text{This is a severe consequence that those who reject divine simplicity must come to terms with. The only possible alternatives seem to be: 1) There are properties on which God’s nature depends, but God somehow created them and maintains sovereignty over them; 2) Those properties on which God depends are not included in the biblical parameters of all that God created, and therefore God’s sovereignty is only philosophically, and not biblically, limited; or 3) God is not absolutely sovereign. The first of these appears logically absurd. The second appears impossible to reconcile with the language of the texts discussed. And the third appears at odds with the basic message of Scripture.}\]
ought to be conceived of as being itself.\textsuperscript{177} Likewise, Katherin Rogers thinks that talking about God's properties is wrongheaded to begin with, since Aquinas would have denied that, strictly speaking, God, being pure act, has any properties at all.\textsuperscript{178} Brian Leftow, on the other hand, disagrees with Plantinga's basic argument and wonders whether it is problematic to identify God with a property. Properties are abstract objects and are thus timeless and eternal, both descriptions that turn out to be most appropriately applied to God.\textsuperscript{179, 180}

Before examining a refutation of the objections based on coherence, one should first determine whether or not there is any philosophical warrant for the notion that all of God's properties are identical with one another, in fact, that they are all identical with the divine essence itself. Leftow calls this the Identity Thesis (hereafter, IT)\textsuperscript{181}. Howard Robinson rightly points out that if this

\textsuperscript{179} Leftow, “Is God an Abstract Object?”
\textsuperscript{181} Leftow, “Is God an Abstract Object,” 582.
position fails the whole doctrine of simplicity falls with it. Yet a desire to uphold simplicity itself is probably not sufficient to warrant defending the IT. Its veracity ought to be established on separate grounds.

Aquinas himself offers three such arguments _ST_ Ia.3.4. The second of these follows directly from the notion that God is pure actuality and thus follows immediately from his arguments for God’s existence. Still, this first argument is easier to make, since it does not rely has heavily on Thomistic metaphysical commitments. Robinson formalizes it as follows:

1. Any property of a thing not identical with the essence of that thing is either caused by the essence or comes from outside.

---


183 Briefly, Aquinas argues that existence makes anything, including essence, actual. Thus, essence itself is potential to actual existence. Since God is pure act, His essence must really be existence itself, otherwise there would be potential in Him (that is, God’s essence would have the potential to exist, which is contrary to the hypothesis).

184 One problem that comes up when discussing divine simplicity is that Aquinas and other medieval philosophers had a different set of ontological commitments than modern philosophers do. As such, moderns may be prone to either misunderstand him or reject the arguments as they are based on supposedly antiquated ideas. While a strong case can be made for the relevance of such Thomistic categories—and indeed, needs to be in many places—any time arguments can be cast in already accepted terms, they should be.
(2) Essence cannot produce its own existence or it would be prior to itself. Therefore,
(3) if existence is not identical with essence, it must come from outside.
(4) God’s existence does not come from outside. Therefore,
(5) God’s existence is identical with His essence

The second premise through fourth premises should not be controversial. The second and third are simply explanations of causality and show why nothing can be self-caused. The fourth premise just affirms the commonly accepted notion that God does not owe His existence to anything outside of Himself. The first premise, though, is open to serious and common-place challenges and thus must be defended.

It is well known that philosophy since Kant has argued that “existence” is not a property. Thus, it is meaningless to assert that God’s existence, as a property, is identical with any of His properties, much less His essence. Despite the popularity of this objection, it is not at all clear it should be accepted, for it seems that statements such as “Horses exist” are both meaningful and informative (that is, “exist” is a meaningful property!). More problematic for proponents of this objection is what happens to proper names. Consider the sentence, “Thomas Aquinas existed.” If

185 Robinson, 128.
“existence” is a meaningless predicate, then that proposition would have to be recast along the lines of, “The man who wrote Summa Theologica is the same man who lived during the thirteenth century.” While such a rephrasing seems possible, it requires a commitment to the descriptive theory of proper names. On this view, “a proper name . . . refers via the descriptive content associated (by the speaker) with that name. This descriptive content is thought to uniquely determine the name's referent.”

This view, however, is “generally rejected on strong grounds.”

To take only one such reason, consider the problems of ignorance and error:

Suppose that Fred believes of Einstein only that he was a physicist. Then, he will fail to refer to Einstein via his use of ‘Einstein’ because the associated descriptive content — a physicist — fails to pick Einstein out from among countless other physicists. This is the problem of ‘ignorance.’

Suppose now that Fred believes that Einstein was the inventor of the atomic bomb. . . . The description theory would then predict what is surely false, [for] such a speaker . . . refers not to Einstein but to Oppenheimer (the person who did in fact invent the atomic bomb). This is the problem of ‘error.’

---


187 Ibid., 132.

188 Ibid. Reimer concludes her discussion of the descriptive theory of reference for proper names saying, “mental content, however detailed, is simply not sufficient to ‘pick out’ out some extra-mental entity. Fortunately, there are promising and well-developed alternatives to descriptivism.”
Against this, it seems perfectly reasonable to take the existential qualifier according to common sense as really attributing to a thing the property of existence.\textsuperscript{189} As such, the first premise can be upheld, and Aquinas’ argument is sound. In short, God’s existence is either identical with His essence, or God’s essence is caused to exist. But nothing can cause God’s essence to exist. Therefore, God’s essence must be identical with His existence.\textsuperscript{190}

\textsuperscript{189} See Robinson, pp. 131-134 for a more detailed argument as to how and why such a conclusion is warranted.\textsuperscript{190} Leftow offers another interesting argument by which he derives the IT. He formalizes it as follows:

1. necessarily, for any $x$, if $x$ is God, $x$ creates and maintains in existence whatever is not identical with $x$.
2. there is a set $S$ of attributes which is such that necessarily, for any $x$, if $x$ is God, then for any attribute $\phi$, if $\phi \in S$, then $\phi x$
3. $(\exists \phi)(\phi \in S)$

Therefore, propositions such as the following are false:

4. There is an attribute which is a member of the set $S$ and which is distinct from God. (In symbols: $(\exists \phi)((\phi \in S) \land (\phi \neq \text{God}))$.)

And from that, he reasons as follows:

5. $\sim (\exists \phi)((\phi \in S) \land (\phi \neq \text{God}))$
6. $(\phi) \sim ((\phi \in S) \land (\phi \neq \text{God}))$
7. $(\phi) \sim ((\phi \in S) \supset (\phi \neq \text{God}))$
8. $(\phi) ((\phi \in S) \supset (\phi = \text{God}))$
Since it appears that there are strong grounds for affirming the IT, all that remains is to see how objections against it fail. Objections to identifying God’s properties with one another or with God Himself are problematic for one who holds a Platonic view of properties. If, however, one adopts an Aristotelian-Thomistic view it is not at all obvious that Plantinga’s objections hold. In fact, Aquinas himself argued that abstract objects do not even exist!

In other words, when Plantinga uses the word “property,” he is using the word differently than Aquinas did. For Plantinga, a property is an abstract object. In fact, he makes this explicit when he says that if God is a property, “then he isn’t a person but a mere abstract object.” Yet if Aquinas did not believe abstract objects

In other words, assuming that God creates and sustains everything distinct Himself (a proposition Leftow finds non-controversial, but still takes time to derive from what he calls the Ultimacy Assumption—that God is the ultimate explanation for any and all state of affairs, and no regress of explanation can go beyond Him), then all divine attributes are necessarily identical with God Himself; for if a divine attribute were distinct from God, then since all such attributes are a part of God’s nature, one would be forced to say that God creates part of His nature, which seems impossible. Thus, any and all divine attributes are identical with God. See his ”Is God an Abstract Object,” pp. 582-83.

191 Robinson, 138.
192 ST Ia.15.1
193 Plantinga, 47 (emphasis added)
existed, he must have had something else in mind when He spoke of God’s properties or attributes.

If the notion of God as pure act is accepted, a solution is easily seen. God is not merely existence itself. He is the act of existence. Since He is in act, and is identical with His actuality, “God just is what He does.”¹⁹⁴ This view allows one to consider the various attributes of God as His act variously considered.

For instance, to speak of God’s perfection is to say that He is fully actualized, for a being is perfect insofar as it has being. God, being pure existence, is perfect in every way.¹⁹⁵ Likewise, He is perfectly good since, in Thomas’ view, something is good to the extent that it exists.¹⁹⁶ God is immutable because, as pure act, there is no potential in Him for change.¹⁹⁷ He is eternal because there is no succession of moments, for again, a succession of moments implies potentiality, which does not exist in Him.¹⁹⁸ God is omnipresent in the sense that He is giving existence to anything, anywhere, and any time that it

¹⁹⁴ Rogers, The Anselmian Approach to God, 37.
¹⁹⁵ ST Ia.4.1
¹⁹⁶ ST Ia.6.2,3; 5.1
¹⁹⁷ ST Ia.9.1
¹⁹⁸ SCG I.15
exists. He is omnipotent in that nothing limits what God does; what He does, He simply does.

Perhaps the most complicated attribute is God’s omniscience. Since God is pure being, to the extent that anything exists, it resembles Him. Thus, in fully knowing Himself, God simultaneously knows every way in which something could resemble His own essence. That, however, covers all possibilities as well as all actualities. But to know all things that are both actual and possible is to know everything, which is called omniscience.

What this demonstrates is that there is no reason to think of God’s properties (e.g., “being omniscient,” and “being perfect”) as abstract objects that exist independently of God. Rather, they are different ways of thinking about the same act of God. By the very act of causing everything, God can in one way be said to be all powerful, in another way said to be all loving, in another way said to be all knowing, etc. This is even true of the various ideas that God knows. Plantinga, for instance, argues that “the property of being a horse is distinct from that of being a turkey and both are distinct from God and

---

199 ST Ia.8.2
200 ST Ia.25.2-3
his essence." But if everything—including being a turkey or horse—is similar to God insofar as it exists, then God, by virtue of knowing His own nature (a single idea) would simultaneously comprehend what it would mean to be a turkey or horse. Thus, even these ideas, when considered in themselves are distinct, yet when considered as to how they are known by God are one and the same.

Given this view, then, of God’s nature, it seems that objections against the internal coherence of divine simplicity fail, for the simple reason that there are no properties in God to speak of. He is, rather, identical with His own existence, which is further identical with His own actions. As God is variously known according to His

---

Plantinga, 38.

For Thomas' full discussion on this, see ST Ia.I.15.2, especially the following:

Now there cannot be an idea of any whole, unless particular ideas are had of those parts of which the whole is made; just as a builder cannot conceive the idea of a house unless he has the idea of each of its parts. So, then, it must needs be that in the divine mind there are the proper ideas of all things. . . . Now it can easily be seen how this is not repugnant to the simplicity of God. . . . Inasmuch as He knows His own essence perfectly, He knows it according to every mode in which it can be known. Now it can be known not only as it is in itself, but as it can be participated in by creatures according to some degree of likeness. . . . So far, therefore, as God knows His essence as capable of such imitation by any creature, He knows it as the particular type and idea of that creature.
acts, He is variously conceived as having different attributes.

III. Inconsistency with Biblical Data

In addition to the attacks on simplicity’s internal coherence, a number of attacks have been leveled from across the theological spectrum at the doctrine’s consistency with Scripture. Yet an analysis of the major objections reveals weaknesses in each argument. The first three are closely related: God is said to be temporal, mutable, and really related to the world. In fact, if any of these is true, then the other two must be as well. The next two arguments, one from the libertarian free will of both man and God and from God’s triunity, are significantly more difficult, though answers can be suggested.

A. God’s Temporality

Despite the fact that Christian theologians have traditionally asserted that God is essentially timeless, as pointed out in the last chapter, modern philosophical theologians have developed an argument they think proves God’s temporality. They say that tensed facts exist and God knows them; but the only way for God to know tensed facts is for Him to be temporal. Thus, God is temporal.
The easiest answer to this problem is to deny the second premise.\textsuperscript{203} It simply is not clear why it must be true that in order for God to know a tensed fact, He himself must be temporal. Craig's defends this saying, "all a timeless God could know would be tenseless truths like Christ dies in A.D. 30, but he would have no idea whether Christ has actually died yet or not."\textsuperscript{204} But this is highly problematic, for by insisting that God does not know "whether Christ has actually died yet," he is assuming a temporal perspective in God.

Such an argument, however, appears to beg the question. For if one assumes that God is timeless (as simplicity requires), then it follows that it is meaningless to speak of events being past or future for God. To assert, then, that God does not know "whether Christ has actually died yet" is to assume from the outset that simplicity is false!

Further, the soundness of Craig's premise can be challenged. For given God's timelessness, it is still the case that events are past or future for temporal beings. Consider the statement, "It is now 2011." The term "now"

\textsuperscript{203} According to this formulation. This would correspond to Craig's fourth premise as formalized in the last chapter.
\textsuperscript{204} Moreland, Foundations, 513.
implies that (if the statement is true) the speaker is so related to the course of time that he can affirm it is 2011. Likewise, he may truly state, “Last year was 2010” for the same reasons. There seems to be no reason why an omniscient God could not know the truth-value of these statements for any given speaker. Further, God would know that assertions by any person such as “It is now 2010” when it was really 2011 (again, for the speaker) would be false. Still further, God would know the truth value of all tensed-facts that were not even explicitly stated insofar as God would know every relation in which every creature stood at every moment of its existence.205

An analogy for this analysis can be found in purely subjective facts. The statements, “William Lane Craig likes philosophy” and “I like philosophy” are both necessarily true (or false) only if spoken by Craig. Yet God clearly knows that Craig likes philosophy, and the fact that God

205 Similar arguments are put forward by Jonathan Kvanvig (The Possibility of an All-Knowing God (New York: St. Martin's, 1986)) and Edward Wierenga (The Nature of God: An Inquiry into Divine Attributes (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989)). Craig rejects both of their arguments on technical grounds in his “Omniscience, Tensed facts, and Divine Eternity,” Faith and Philosophy 17 (2000): 225-241. Yet underlying his critique of each is the argument that if God does not know tensed facts in a tensed fashion, then the facts themselves are not tensed. But since that is the very issue under discussion, he needs to prove that assumption.
does now know it in the first person sense (so far as Craig’s inclinations are concerned) does not change the fact that God knows it to be true. Thus, if God can know completely subjective facts in an objective fashion without destroying the subjective nature of the fact in the given subject, it seems God can similarly know tensed facts in an objective fashion relative to the subject without destroying their tensed nature.\textsuperscript{206}

It thus seems that the argument for divine temporality fails. But two more brief comments are in order. First, even if the above defense fails, Craig himself admits a way out of the argument. He says,

One possible way of escape for defenders of divine timelessness does remain: deny the objectivity of tense and temporal becoming and therefore also the (necessary) truth of 4) if God is really related to the temporal world, God is temporal. If one embraces (to borrow McTasggart’s [sic] convenient terminology) a B-Theory of time, according to which there are no tensed facts and temporal becoming is merely a subjective feature of consciousness, then the argument is undercut. For in that case all events comprising the four-dimensional space-time manifold simply exist

\textsuperscript{206} It seems the only way to avoid this argument is to return to the descriptive theory of proper names discussed above. For if “I” and “William Lane Craig” refer to the same entity insofar as they both uniquely describe the same subject, then the analogy would fail, for both Craig and God would know the subjective fact in precisely the same way. The analogy, of course, is meant to prove that God and Craig can know the same fact in two different ways without denying that God knows all facts. But, as noted above, the descriptive theory is highly problematic.
tenselessly, and God can be conceived to exist "outside" this manifold, spacelessly and timelessly. 207

In short, one may adopt a B-theory of time, which simply denies the reality of tensed facts altogether. On this view, change is illusory and the universe should actually be conceived of as a 4-D static "block." This idea is currently under serious debate. As such, the argument for temporality, since it assumes the A-theory model of time, is at best conclusive only for those committed to one particular theory of time. 208

Second, there is an alternative argument in favor of God’s timelessness that is at least as persuasive as Craig’s. Helm argues,

One of the striking facts about being in time . . . is that each of us has a past, a present, and a future . . . We may make ourselves a cup of coffee in the present, and we may have made ourselves a cup of coffee in the past week, but we cannot now enjoy the

207 Craig, “Timelessness,” 111.
past week’s cup of coffee as we enjoy the present cup. We can remember our enjoyment of last week’s coffee and so (in a sense) continue to enjoy it, but we cannot presently enjoy it any longer. . . . Now suppose that God is in time. . . . It follows that there are segments of his life—those segments that existed before the present moment—which together constitute a part of God’s life that is over and done with. And the eternalist will say such an idea is incompatible with God’s fullness and self-sufficiency.\textsuperscript{209}

In short, if God is in time, then His past no longer exists, but that means that God does not enjoy all of His life at once. Instead, He only enjoys part of it at a time, which appears to contradict His perfection and aseity. Further, it implies that God is not a necessary being, since part of Him (the present) is continuously going out of being (as it passes)! Proponents of divine temporality, then, should have very strong reasons for their position if they are going to make a claim that so directly impacts God’s perfection. It does not seem that Craig’s argument provides sufficient warrant for such a move.

B. God’s Mutability

While the last chapter demonstrated a fairly broad acceptance of the notion that God is mutable in some sense, the actual arguments in favor of the position can be boiled down to two.

\textsuperscript{209} Ganssle, 29-30.
First is Plantinga’s argument that there are clearly things God has not yet done. Yet once He does them, He will have changed, at least insofar as He would have transitioned from a state of “will do x” to “has done x.” Thus, in at least some sense, God is mutable. This argument, however, clearly presupposes God’s temporality, which is highly questionable. Moreover, Plantinga recognizes as much and admits that if God is eternal then his objection fails. Unfortunately, he offers no reasons for rejecting God’s eternality. Since strong reasons have been given above, it seems Plantinga’s objection fails.\footnote{Plantinga, 44.}

Second, process theologians have argued that an immutable God is an impassible God, but since the Bible teaches God’s passibility, immutability fails. This argument is particularly persuasive to Christians, since it rests on a biblical foundation. Yet upon examination, it is not at all clear that the Bible teaches God’s passibility. It is true that people are commanded to love God, but the Bible says the way they love Him is not to give anything to Him, but rather to obey Him (Deut 11:1; John 14:23-24; 1
John 2:5\textsuperscript{211}). Further, the Incarnation seems to undermine the force of the objection, for while it is certainly true that man cannot know God \textit{qua} God, man can know God \textit{qua} Christ. In fact, that seems to be one of the major reasons for the Incarnation. For it is \textit{in Christ} that God suffers with His creation (Isa. 53; Phil. 2:5-11; Heb. 2:9-10, etc.).

Beyond this, it is difficult to conceive of how God’s ethical immutability can be preserved if one holds God as ontologically mutable in any sense. It is not clear how, once admitting the possibility of divine intrinsic changes\textsuperscript{212}, God’s character is any less subject to change than His being. For if God’s being is mutable, and His character is derived from His being, it seems that God’s character would be equally mutable, at least in principle.

C. God’s Real Relations

The third objection to divine simplicity is rooted in the strongly intuitive notion that God is really related to

\textsuperscript{211} 1 John 2:5 only contributes to the argument if “the love of God” is taken as an objective genitive. It makes little sense to suggest that God loves someone more or less perfectly based on their obedience to Him, which would be the implication if the phrase is taken subjectively. It makes good sense, though, to say men love God more or less perfectly to the degree in which they obey Him.

\textsuperscript{212} Which Craig does. See Moreland, \textit{Foundations}, 527.
the world. Nelson Pike captures the thrust of the argument in saying, "A timeless individual could not produce, create, or bring about an object, circumstance or state of affairs." 213 Of course, the God of Scripture does all of these things, so if Pike’s assertion is true, then God must not be timeless; therefore, He must not be simple.

Proponents of simplicity just deny the assertion. For Aquinas, since God is simple, He stands in no real relations with the world. 214, 215 Craig asks, “even if God immutably wills the creation of the temporal world, would not the origin of that world, in virtue of God’s relation to it, bring God into time?” 216 But, as Craig recognizes, the obvious answer is no if God is not really related to the world as Aquinas contends.

214 ST Ia.3.6
215 Craig recognizes Aquinas’ line of thought here:

[Aquinas] denies that God has any real relation to the world. This prima facie incredible position is rooted in Thomas's doctrine of divine simplicity, which is in turn based upon Aquinas's understanding of God as ipsum esse subsistens, the unrestricted act of being.

See his “Timelessness” (p. 95). Of course, he thinks Aquinas is wrong about God’s simplicity, but the point here is that Aquinas’ position can be properly derived following the general argument of this paper, and that in addition to the argument put forward in this chapter above.

216 Ibid., 96.
To understand Aquinas' position, one must understand the he distinguished three ways in which things may be related. First, the relation may be logical only (as in the case of self-identification or judgments of existence); second, a real relation may exist in both things (as in two cubes of sugar, both white and one twice as heavy as the other); third, a real relation may exist in one thing only, and a logical relation in the other (for instance, $x$ is known by $y$. In this case, $y$ is really related to $x$ as the knower, but $x$ is only logically related to $y$ as known. This is evident in that $x$ is not somehow changed because it is known by $y$, though $y$ certainly accrues some new, real property when it comes to know $x$).\textsuperscript{217}

Aquinas says God's relation to the world is of the third kind. Thus, on this view, the world is really related to God as being created by God, but God is only logically related to the world as having created the world. Craig thinks this view is "contradictory or meaningless."\textsuperscript{218} Specifically, he argues:

\begin{quote}
If the relation of some cause to its effect is unreal, then the cause has in particular no causal relation to its effect; that is to say, the cause is not a cause, which is self-contradictory. All we can say in such a case is that the effect is really related to another object or event as the effect of said object or event.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{217} \textit{ST} Ia.13.7
\textsuperscript{218} Craig, “Timelessness,” 101.
In truth there is no real cause in such a case, only a real effect. But it seems unintelligible, if not contradictory, to say that one can have real effects without real causes.\textsuperscript{219}

Craig is certainly right if one follows Hume’s analysis of causality. On that view, events are conceived as causes. Thus, when one billiard ball hits a second (the first, causal, event) then the second ball moves (the second, caused, event). As “common sense” as this analysis might appear, there is good reason to think it is unintelligible. Hume himself demonstrated that, on this view, causality can only be asserted to be a psychological phenomenon.\textsuperscript{220} But taken in this sense, such an argument actually turns on itself, for then every effect is ultimately uncaused, insofar as causality is really only a human concept imposed on an external world.

Whatever Craig’s own view of causality, for Aquinas, causality is completely found in the effect. This is because all changes are reductions of potentiality to actuality, but the thing causing the change is in act, not in potency. As such, it is the thing being affected that is

\textsuperscript{219} Ibid., 100.

\textsuperscript{220} On Hume’s view, while it is certainly clear that event B consistently follows event A, all that is actually observed are the events themselves and not the actual causality. For Hume, it is the repeated association of one event following another that leads the human mind to posit the cause of one to the other.
being reduced from potentiality to actuality. For instance, when a potter is shaping clay, it is the clay that is changing, not the potter’s hand. His hand actually exists in a certain way, and the clay is being changed (being changed from the way it actually exists to a way it could potentially exist) by its real relation to the hand. As such, the cause and effect are one simultaneous event, not two distinct events as in modern analysis.\(^{221}\)

If this view is accepted, then Thomas’ position is hardly meaningless and still less contradictory, for contrary to Craig’s assertion above, there can be real effects with only logical causes. God is pure act. Creation, “prior” to coming into existence, has the potential to exist. God, through His act (which is to say, Himself), brings about a substantial change in creation such that creation now exists in a way it only potentially did before. In this sense, creation changed.\(^{222}\) God did not in any sense. Creation’s relation to God is clearly real, since it was changed (better, created) by God. But God’s relation to creation is logical only, since no change was brought about in Him.

\(^{221}\) Feser, 21-22.  
\(^{222}\) “Change” here is taken loosely. Aquinas makes clear in SCG II.17.1 that, “is neither a motion nor a change, properly speaking” (emphasis added).
Thus, as difficult as Aquinas’ position may be, it seems there is ample reason to accept the notion that God stands in no real relations to creation. Further, in addition to the two arguments already put forward to motivate one to accept the idea, a third one has now been offered, in that Aquinas’ notion of causality seems more intelligible than the modern Humean conception.

D. God’s (and Man’s) Free Will

Free will presents a twofold problem for simplicity, for although freedom seems to require the reality of contingencies, simplicity appears to deny contingency in 1) God’s acts, 2) man’s acts. Since simplicity requires that God have no accidental properties and be the same across all possible worlds, it looks as if God necessarily exists the way He does, including His knowledge of what He (and others) will do. But in that case, then neither God nor man is free.

In answering the first problem, Aquinas says things can be necessary either absolutely or by supposition. Things absolutely necessary are those that cannot fail to be the way they are. For instance, all unmarried men are bachelors. Things are necessary by supposition when they are the way they are in reality, but they could have been
otherwise. So if Socrates is sitting on a stone, it is necessary true he is so sitting, but only by supposition, for he could have been some other way.\textsuperscript{223}

Now, according to Aquinas, God wills His own goodness absolutely necessarily, but on that count, so do humans.\textsuperscript{224} Yet just as what humans will is necessary only by supposition, so it is for God. Thus it is necessary that God wills, but what God wills is not necessary in the strong sense. So it is easy to conclude with Thomas that “Wherefore we must simply say that God can do other things than those He has done.”\textsuperscript{225} There is no violation of simplicity for the reason that what God does is necessary only by supposition. This solves the broad problem of contingency that some contingent facts (e.g., “Humans exist”) are known by God, for those contingent facts are true only because God Himself freely willed them. They are, again, now necessarily true, but only by supposition. Thus,

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{223}{ST Ia.19.3}
\footnote{224}{In fact, it is the desire for the good that causes all men to act. That they sometimes choose to do evil shows a defect in the intellect. A thief, for instance, robs a store because he is trying to get something he thinks is good (e.g., money).}
\footnote{225}{ST Ia.25.5}
\end{footnotes}
general contingency as well as God’s knowledge of contingent things does not conflict with simplicity.\textsuperscript{226}

The contingency found in human free will is much more difficult. As noted in the last chapter, Brower thinks it cannot be overcome, and thus simplicity entails some form of compatibilism.

The problem may be put very succinctly: one must decide if human actions can be absolutely independent of God (that is, if humans can be true self-movers apart from God). If so, then libertarian free will is easily upheld. But this view creates at least serious problems: 1) it makes God’s knowledge contingent on human actions (making God Himself in some sense dependent on humans), and 2) it means humans are in some sense independent of God.

If one decides that absolute independence is impossible, then one must either affirm that the will is determined by God or not. If so, God’s aseity and

\textsuperscript{226} If one wishes to press that this does not solve the problem completely, for it still does not explain how God could be the same across all possible worlds, one can return 1) to Thomas’ idea that all God knows, He knows by knowing Himself; and 2) to Thomas’ notion of causality existing completely on the part of the effect. Taking these concepts together, it is easy to see how things external to God could have been different than they were had God so willed them, but how God Himself would have been the same, since He is, following these two ideas, not really related to the world.
sovereignty are easily maintained at the expense of free will, and one is left with some type of compatibilism. If not, then one must explain how a choice that is ultimately dependent on God is not thereby determined by Him.

Thomas’ solutions are suggestive but not satisfactory.

God, therefore, is the first cause, Who moves causes both natural and voluntary. And just as by moving natural causes He does not prevent their acts being natural, so by moving voluntary causes He does not deprive their actions of being voluntary . . . for He operates in each thing according to its own nature.227

Here, his general defense is that just as God is the First Cause of all natural causes, and yet that does not deprive them of being natural causes, so also God can be the First Cause of all voluntary (free) causes without determining them. He makes a similar claim elsewhere:

[God] moves all things in accordance with their conditions; so that from necessary causes through the Divine motion, effects follow of necessity; but from contingent causes, effects follow contingently. Since, therefore, the will is an active principle, not determinate to one thing, but having an indifferent relation to many things, God so moves it, that He does not determine it of necessity to one thing, but its movement remains contingent and not necessary, except in those things to which it is moved naturally.228

Again, Thomas thinks that God moves causes according to their nature. Since the will is inclined to what is good, but since there can be many good things (or things

227 ST Ia.83.1
228 ST I.II.10.4
perceived as good), the will is not determined to choose any one. As such, God moves it according to its proper contingency. But it is not clear how the will can freely choose among its contingencies without violating God’s aseity, sovereignty, and simplicity.

One possible answer lies in the nature of being itself. Aquinas insists that all perfections pre-exist in God, since God is the First Cause. Since intelligence is a perfection, God is obviously intelligent. But more to the point, since God is pure being, this means that whatever being itself is, when manifested in a certain way, men call it intelligence. In other words, being has latent within itself the ability to be self-determined. Thus, to the degree that man wills, he is exercising the very nature of

---

230 ST Ia.4.2
231 It is easy to reverse this relationship. There is an independently existing reality called “intelligence” that God actualizes. Rather, since God is known by His effects, it turns out that since a perfection called intelligence exists, one can surmise that being itself is such that, manifested in a certain way, men can conceive of it as intelligence. This is evident when one remembers that the will and intellect work together to achieve the good, and in Thomistic thought, the good is synonymous with being. Thus, it seems that being tends towards itself, and when manifested in a composite creation, the good toward which it tends (necessarily) is indeterminate.
being, in fact the highest nature of being in created things.

If this is true, and on a Thomistic metaphysic it appears to be, then the answer to how humans can make a choice dependent on God without that choice being absolutely necessarily determined by Him turns out to be the same as how God Himself can make a choice dependent on Himself without His own choice being absolutely necessary. Man, by virtue of being an intelligent creature, can will this rather than that. God, as the First Cause, actualizes it through the man and thus knows that contingency as a contingency as He would any other.

One may try to object by pointing out that this answer appears to make God respond to a person’s choice, thereby violating again God’s aseity. But this fails to recognize that it is the very nature of being to self-determine, whether in God or in man. As such, God, as the First Cause, is simply working out all effects in accordance with their formal nature, just as Thomas suggested.

---

232 This is true even of inanimate things. Aquinas says in ST Ia.83.1 that things like stones move in accordance with their nature, though without judgment. The point is that being always acts in accordance with its formal nature. God is always the First Cause of that nature, but it is the nature of the thing itself that determines the act.
E. God’s Triunity

The final major problem for simplicity is perhaps its most obvious. Christianity teaches that God is three Persons in one Being. Any concept that denies or falsifies the Trinity must be rejected.

Thomas addressed this issue himself. Richards says,

Incidentally, Thomas argues that these are real relations in God (Summa Theologica 1.Q.28.A.1) and that they are really distinguished from each other (Summa Theologica 1.Q.28.A.3); but he also says in the same question that relation in God is the same as his essence (Summa Theologica 1.Q.28.A.3). This way of speaking certainly contributes to the problem.233

Certainly, it may cause problems for Aquinas to say on the one hand that there are real relations in God, but then on the other to say that those relations are identical with the divine essence. But obscurity and difficulty do not equate to absurdity and self-contradiction. Likewise, Craig’s claim that simplicity is “notoriously difficult to reconcile with the doctrine of the Trinity”234 may well be true, but difficulty is not the same as impossibility.235

233 Richards, 230n57.
234 Craig, Time and Eternity, 30.
235 In fact, the Trinity is a difficult doctrine in any case. In the final analysis, simplicity makes the doctrine no more difficult to comprehend than otherwise traditional statements, for whatever else simplicity means for the Trinity, it at least emphasizes that God is a single being.
In order to understand Aquinas’ language in *ST* Ia.28, one first must understand his concepts of procession and generation in the Godhead\textsuperscript{236}, which are dealt with in the preceding question. There Aquinas considers the following objection: “Further, everything which proceeds differs from that whence it proceeds. But in God there is no diversity; but supreme simplicity. Therefore in God there is no procession.”\textsuperscript{237} This is remarkably similar to the Trinitarian argument against simplicity, so Aquinas’ response is particularly enlightening. In consideration of two heretical views of procession (Arianism and Sabellianism), he says that “both of these opinions take procession as meaning an outward act; hence neither of them affirms procession as existing in God Himself.”\textsuperscript{238} In other words, since Arius considered the procession to be the creation of the Son, and Sabellius considered it to be God impressing His likeness upon Christ, it turns out in both

\textsuperscript{236} It is also helpful to understand that divine personhood must be understood in terms of the divine relations that subsist within the Godhead. For this reason, when treating the Trinity, the first thing Thomas addresses after the notion of procession is that of the divine relations. For an excellent exposition of this topic, see Gilles Emery, *Trinitarian Theology of Saint Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 129-150.

\textsuperscript{237} *ST* Ia.27.1

\textsuperscript{238} Ibid.
cases that procession is not within God at all but rather out of Him. Then he goes on to point out that procession always supposes action, and as there is an outward procession corresponding to the act tending to external matter, so there must be an inward procession corresponding to the act remaining within the agent. This applies most conspicuously to the intellect, the action of which remains in the intelligent agent. For whenever we understand, by the very fact of understanding there proceeds something within us, which is a conception of the object understood, a conception issuing from our intellectual power and proceeding from our knowledge of that object.\footnote{Ibid., emphasis added.}

Procession is primarily an inward event even in human beings. For instance, when a man sees a tree, his mind produces a concept of the tree by which the man knows what it is he sees. This production of the concept can be thought of as the procession of the concept, and it is completely internal to the man. Just so, as God understands Himself, a concept of Himself proceeds within Him, which is the Son. Thomas makes this clear in the answer to the objection:

Whatever proceeds by way of outward procession is necessarily distinct from the source whence it proceeds, whereas, whatever proceeds within by an intelligible procession is not necessarily distinct; indeed, the more perfectly it proceeds, the more closely it is one with the source whence it proceeds. For it is clear that the more a thing is understood, the more closely is the intellectual conception joined and united to the intelligent agent; since the intellect by the very act of understanding is made one with the object understood. Thus, as the divine
intelligence is the very supreme perfection of God (Q[14], A[2]), the divine Word is of necessity perfectly one with the source whence He proceeds, without any kind of diversity.\textsuperscript{240}

Thus, rather literally, the Son is the Word of God.\textsuperscript{241} As God knows Himself, the concept of Himself—or the Word—proceeds from and within Himself, though not distinct from Himself. Thus, Aquinas can rightfully and meaningfully say that the relation between the Father and the Son is real even though the relation is identical with the divine essence.

In a similar way, Thomas shows the Holy Spirit to be identical with the divine essence, for the intellect is not the only internal procession in intelligent beings; there also is the will. As God knows Himself (by which the Son proceeds), He also wills Himself (by which the Spirit proceeds).\textsuperscript{242}

The problem of distinguishing between properties applying to the Godhead generally and the Persons specifically is also addressed by Aquinas. The most obvious

\textsuperscript{240} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{241} It is worth noting that in scholastic thinking, the concept—called the formal sign—is that by which an idea is known to the mind. That is, each concept corresponds exactly to one idea, and that concept is the internal word. That word, so named, is spoken, and thus communication of an idea is possible.
\textsuperscript{242} ST Ia.27.4
of these (as mentioned in the last chapter) is the term ‘Trinity’ itself. For if God is simple, then all of the Persons are identical with the divine essence; but if the essence of God is Triune, then it would seem each of the Persons is Triune, which is clearly absurd.\(^{243}\)

Thomas’ answer is simply that “The name ‘Trinity’ in God signifies the determinate number of persons”\(^{244}\) and thus in the strict meaning of the term it rather signifies the number of persons of one essence; and on this account we cannot say that the Father is the Trinity, as He is not three persons. Yet it does not mean the relations themselves of the Persons, but rather the number of persons related to each other.\(^{245}\)

In other words, while it is proper to say there is a plurality of Persons in the Godhead\(^{246}\), the term ‘Trinity’ simply defines the concrete number of the relations in the Godhead. That is, there is a plurality of relations,

\(^{243}\) In fact, the problem compounds itself, for this would continue \textit{ad infinitum}. In any case, Thomas phrases the objection this way:

It would seem there is not trinity in God. For every name in God signifies substance or relation. But this name "Trinity" does not signify the substance; otherwise it would be predicated of each one of the persons: nor does it signify relation; for it does not express a name that refers to another. Therefore the word "Trinity" is not to be applied to God. (\textit{ST Ia.31.1})

\(^{244}\) \textit{ST Ia.31.1}

\(^{245}\) Ibid., \textit{ad 1}

\(^{246}\) Which Thomas had just proved in the previous question.
namely, three. As such, the term does not refer to the very substance of God as a quality of His, nor to the relations (that is, the Persons). It only clarifies the number of relations in God.\textsuperscript{247} Therefore, the term “Trinity” neither applies to the essence of God but not the Persons (which would create a division in God that denies His simplicity) nor to the Persons but not the substance (which would mean each Person was Triune).

This overview of the Trinity has been necessarily brief, but it should suffice to show that divine simplicity need not contradict the biblical revelation of God’s triune nature. Though one may readily concede that the two concepts are difficult to reconcile, that has more to do with the difficult nature of the Trinity itself. Fundamentally, as it relates to the Trinity, simplicity only insists on the seriousness of the word “One” in the normal way to phrase the Trinity: “Three Persons in One God.”

IV. Summary

This chapter has attempted to answer the various objections leveled against divine simplicity under three general headings: the doctrine’s general biblical and

\textsuperscript{247} Emery, 132.
philosophical warrant, its internal coherence, and its consistency with biblical revelation.

With regard to the first, it was argued that the philosophical arguments put forward in the first chapter provide proponents of divine simplicity with a compelling case for accepting it. It was also argued that while no single verse of Scripture directly endorses the doctrine, Scripture does teach several ideas that can be taken to entail it.

With regard to the second, it was argued that Plantinga’s objection fails due to his imposing a Platonic structure on Aquinas’ thoughts—one that he explicitly rejects. Rather, on the conception of God as pure act, it follows that each of God’s “properties” or attributes are in fact different ways of considering His essence. Further, independent arguments were offered for the viability of the Identity Thesis, the general idea undergirding the notion of divine simplicity.

Finally, it was argued that each objection to the doctrine’s biblical fidelity is flawed. The argument for God’s temporality from His knowledge of tensed facts begs the question, since it presumes God must have a temporal frame of reference to know tensed facts. Against this, there seems to be no reason to suggest that an eternal,
omniscient God cannot know tensed facts as tensed facts through the temporal frame of reference of His creation, just as He seems to know in like manner each of His creations’ purely subjective facts.

The argument for God’s mutability fails as it presupposes God’s temporality, and the Incarnation answers the emotional needs of the process theologians’ desire for a responsive, anthropomorphic God. The argument for God’s real relations fails in not proving its crucial premise, namely, that a timeless God cannot act in a temporal world. If Aquinas’ notion of causality is accepted, it is perfectly coherent to speak of a timeless God willing temporal events.

The argument that simplicity cannot be squared with either divine or human freedom is the most potent and shy of strong arguments for simplicity could serve as sufficient justification for rejecting it. Two factors mitigate its force, though. First, it appears that when one considers the nature of being itself that a plausible solution can be found as to how God can be the First Cause of all volitional causes without undermining their volitional nature. Second, even if this solution is rejected, the argument’s overall force is somewhat blunted in that it has proven extremely difficult for theologians
and philosophers of any persuasion to reconcile these two ideas. As such, the argument leveled against divine simplicity could well “prove too much,” for it would require the critic to offer an answer to the problem of his own.

The last argument discussed is whether or not simplicity is compatible with the Trinity. It was suggested that a sufficient understanding of Thomas’ concept of the Trinity removes any apparent difficulties. Further, it was argued that whatever else simplicity means for the Trinity, it simply underscores and emphasizes the fact that in God, the three Persons are but one Being. As such, it poses no greater difficulty than any other formulation of the Trinity.

Since all of the objections considered have plausible resolutions, then given the arguments in favor of simplicity in chapter two as well as the independent arguments for it given throughout this chapter, it seems that one is on solid ground in accepting it as true.
CHAPTER FOUR

This study has attempted to show the essential viability of Thomas’ doctrine of divine simplicity, understood on its own terms. This chapter will offer some final thoughts on the strength and limitations of conclusions reached so far, as well as suggest potentially fruitful areas of further research should those conclusions be accepted.

I. Summary of Arguments

A. Basic Arguments for Divine Simplicity

Chapter one put forward two essential arguments in favor of divine simplicity. These are particularly important as most of the objections against the doctrine make little to no attempt to answer these positive evidences. The first argument began with an explication of the potentiality/actuality distinction. Something is “actual” (or “in act”) to the extent that it exists the way that it does, whereas something is “potential” or “in potency” to the extent that it could exist in some other way. A red, rubber ball is actually red and circular and potentially blue (if painted) and gooey (if melted). On
this view, all change is accounted for in terms of this distinction, where something actually is one thing at one time, and later actually becomes something it before had only the potential to become. Since only that which actually exists can effect change, it is evident that actuality is prior to potentiality, and thus, “whatever is [changed (from being potential to being actual)] is [changed] by another [actual thing].”²⁴⁸

Given the validity of this distinction, Aquinas’s First Way sets out to prove that there is a First Cause that is pure actuality. The argument was stated this way:

1. Some things in the world are in motion.
2. Anything in motion is being put in motion by something else.
3. But this something else, if it is in motion, is also being put in motion by something else, and so on.
4. This series of things being put in motion by something else cannot be endless.
5. Therefore, there must be a first cause of motion which is itself unmoved; this we understand to be God.²⁴⁹

In essence, the fact that some things are in motion (that is, being changed from potentiality to actuality), and nothing can change itself, means there must be a First Cause (or “First Mover” or “First Changer”) not itself caused by anything else (that is, not “moved” or

²⁴⁸ In Phys VII.2.891
²⁴⁹ See Chapter one, p. 16, and Craig’s Cosmological Argument, 161-62.
"changed"). This is because an infinite causal chain is absurd, as the type of changes under discussion are instrumental changes. Yet without a First Cause, then all other causes "cease operating because the intermediate causes have no causal efficacy of their own." But on this view, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the First Cause is also necessarily Pure Act. For if the First Cause had the potential to change, then it itself would need to be changed by something other than itself (as per the argument above), which would mean it is not, in fact, the First Cause. Thus, there can be no potentiality in the First Cause, which is to say, it exists as purely actual.

Once the notion of God as pure act is accepted, divine simplicity necessarily follows. Aquinas argues in ST I.3 that any type of composition assumes potentiality, which is not to be found in the First Cause. Thus, there is no composition in God, which is to say, God exists simply.

The second argument for divine simplicity is drawn from the notion that God exists a se and is formalized as follows:

1. God is not dependent on anything other than Himself, and everything outside of God is completely dependent on Him for its existence.

---

250 Craig, Cosmological Argument, 174.
2. Any composite being is dependent on something other than itself for its existence.
3. Therefore, God is not a composite being.

Both premises appear sound. Concerning the first, the Bible explicitly declares that God is the Creator of all things, both visible and invisible, and that He needs (that is, depends on) nothing. Indeed, His role as Creator of everything, the clear point of Genesis 1:1, seems to entail His dependence on nothing beyond Himself. Further, if God is identified as the First Cause, then He can be dependent on nothing beyond Himself, as being so dependent He would no longer be the First Cause. The second premise is self-evident, for any composite being is at least dependent on its own parts to exist the way it does (to say nothing of the unifying cause or principle of those parts). Alvin Plantinga, who thoroughly rejects divine simplicity, agrees with Aquinas, arguing, “if an object is distinct from its essence, then its essence is in some way a cause of that thing, so that the latter is dependent—causally dependent—on the former.”\textsuperscript{251} Thus, it appears evident that God is not a composite being, which is to say, He exists simply.

\textsuperscript{251} Plantinga, 30. Italics original.
B. Arguments against Simplicity and Their Rebuttals

Without reference to the above arguments, several important objections have been raised against the very notion of simplicity. In general, it is argued that the doctrine has no biblical or philosophical support, that it is internally incoherent, and that it is inconsistent with the biblical data. The former may be dismissed out of hand with reference to the above two arguments, for if they are sound, it has both biblical and philosophical support. Arguments under the next two categories are more substantive.

Charges against internal incoherence are best summed up by Plantinga, who argued that God’s properties are not identical with one another (e.g., God’s love is not the same as His knowledge). This challenges the first premise to the second argument above and directly implies composition in God (for God would be at least composed of properties).

It was argued in response that this objection assumes a Platonic view of universals, that is, that properties really exist. Yet defenders of divine simplicity, and certainly Aquinas himself, do not think of properties as

\[252\] See Plantinga, 47.
really existing things at all.\textsuperscript{253} Rather, God is conceived of as the act of existence, and that each of what are call His “properties” are just different ways of thinking of that act. Beyond that, there seems to be good philosophical evidence that in the First Cause, all properties would be identical with one another. One such argument is rooted in the premise that “any property of a thing not identical with the essence of that thing is either caused by the essence or comes from outside.”\textsuperscript{254} Yet since essence cannot produce its own existence, then anything that exists (including the First Cause) is either identical with its existence or was caused to exist. But nothing could cause the First Cause to exist, and therefore, the First Cause’s essence must be identical with its existence. So long as “existence” can be thought of as a proper predicate (and it should be, contra Kant), then the argument appears sound and further validates the doctrine of simplicity.\textsuperscript{255}

\textsuperscript{253} \textit{ST} Ia.15.1
\textsuperscript{254} Robinson, 128.
\textsuperscript{255} This argument also nullifies Plantinga’s second objection, which is that God would literally become a property under the concept of divine simplicity. For, again, proponents of simplicity typically do not even think that properties really exist at all. If one understands “property” in the sense of “another way of thinking about God’s act of existence,” then one could readily affirm that God is a “property.” After all, one way to think of God’s act of existence is to relate it to His actual existence.
More severe objections have been raised recently concerning Aquinas’ views and their consistency with the biblical data. First, some argue that the Bible depicts God as being temporal, mutable, and really related to the world, any of which, if true, would negate God’s simplicity. Yet each of the passages raised in these arguments can be (and historically have been) understood in terms consistent with divine simplicity. Further, specific arguments for each of these attributes (temporality, mutability, and real relatedness) seem weak.

Proponents of God’s temporality appeal to the distinction in tensed and tenseless facts and argue that if God were timeless, He could not know tensed facts. But this seems plainly false, for all tensed facts are tensed from the perspective of knower. Yet God knows all perspectives, and therefore would know all tenses of all facts. In fact, the very argument against God’s timelessness can be turned against God’s temporality. If God’s knowledge of one’s perspective on a fact does not qualify Him to know the fact itself, then some facts, such as purely subjective facts (i.e., “I am tired”) are completely unknowable to God. He could know them in an objective sense (“He is tired”) but not as the subject. But if one claims that God’s objective knowledge of subjective facts is enough to say He knows
that fact (which it certainly seems to be), then the argument for temporality based on tensed facts falls apart on the same grounds.

The arguments against God’s mutability and real relatedness are more easily disposed. Concerning the former, Plantinga himself admits that if God is timeless, then his argument that there are things God has not yet done fails. Concerning the latter, while modern philosophers may not like Aquinas’ concept of God’s strictly logical relation to the world, an analysis of that concept bears out its viability.

The last two arguments are more difficult. The first deals with the relation between man’s free will and God’s knowledge. The answer, it was argued, is likely to be found in the very nature of being itself. In short, being has the natural tendency toward self-determination, and thus, when man acts, God (as the First Cause) can be thought of as bringing about the act without Himself having determined the act, yet without Himself having been determined by another to do so. That is to say, God can bring about a free choice according to its nature: freely.

---

256 Plantinga, 44.
The final argument relates to the Trinity. It is objected that if God is Triune, divine simplicity is necessarily false. But an analysis of Aquinas’ explanation shows that there are, at least, strong arguments (given Thomas’ metaphysical assumptions) that such a conclusion is not warranted. If one objects that the answers to the last two arguments are vague, then it can be said that 1) they are necessarily brief, and 2) that any attempt to fully reconcile either of these two positions will eventually fail to be totally concrete. Thomas’ positions seem at least as plausible as any other attempt to solve these very difficult problems. This especially true in the case of the Trinity, since, in the end, simplicity merely (strongly) affirms that the Trine God is in fact one Being.

II. Limitations of the Arguments

It can scarcely escape notice that much of the preceding discussion assumes an Aristotelian-Thomistic metaphysical framework. The Prima Via explicitly assumes Aristotle’s account of change, and much of the argument between Plantinga and Aquinas has been shown to actually boil down to an argument about the nature of universals—
that is, in what sense do properties exist? Yet in much of modern philosophy, Aristotle has gone by the wayside, having supposedly been debunked by modern science. If, then, Aristotle’s basic accounts are faulty, then it seems that everything said above is at best misguided.

This is, of course, not the place to engage in a full discussion on which metaphysical picture is correct. Yet given the centrality of this question, it is worth noting the possibility that Aristotle may have been cast aside too quickly. In support of this notion, three brief arguments are worth considering.

A. General argument against Platonism

Michael Bergmann and Jeffrey Brower have put forward a very powerful argument against Platonism—specifically, against the view that

the truths expressed by predications such as “Socrates is wise” are true because there is a subject of predication (e.g., Socrates), there is an abstract property or universal (e.g., wisdom), and the subject exemplifies the property.

---

257 For a full discussion of the view promoted by Plantinga, see J. P. Moreland’s Universals.

258 Although there are, of course, many more. For interested readers, Edward Feser’s The Last Superstition amounts, in large part, to a full scale defense of Aristotelianism in the face of modern atheistic philosophy.

259 Bergmann, 358.
Their argument begins by recognizing the importance of the doctrine of aseity, which they define as, “(i) God does not depend on anything distinct from himself for his existing and (ii) everything distinct from God depends on God’s creative activity for its existing.”\textsuperscript{260} That this position is the traditional theistic claim needs no discussion, and a full defense of it has already been offered in chapter two. Bergmann and Brower contend, however, that any form of Platonism\textsuperscript{261} is necessarily at odds with aseity so defined, and as such, if any form of Platonism is true, then one must either cease to be a theist or, at least, become a non-traditional theist. They boil the essential idea of their argument down as follows:

If [Platonism] is true, then every property . . . will be a product of God’s creative activity. But this implies the general principle that, for any property $F$, God’s creating $F$ is a prerequisite for, and hence logically prior to, $F$. Notice, however, that in order

\textsuperscript{260} Ibid., 6.

\textsuperscript{261} This is important, as some, sensing the difficulty in affirming both the existence of Platonic forms, including really existing properties, and aseity, have redefined those forms on other terms in attempt to remove the tension. For instance, see Michael J. Loux, *Metaphysics: A Contemporary Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1998) for Aristotelian realism; David Armstrong, *A World of States of Affairs* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) for immanent realism; Keith Campbell, *Abstract Particulars* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990) for trope theory; and Thomas V. Morris, “Absolute Creation,” in *Anselmian Explorations*, ed. Thomas V. Morris (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987), 161-178, for the Augustinian view.
to create $F$, God must have the property of *being able to create a property*. . . . Evidently, therefore, in order for it to be true that God is the creator of all properties, there must be a property—namely, *being able to create a property*—that is both logically prior and logically posterior to God’s creating properties. . . . [T]his conclusion is obviously absurd.\(^{262}\)

In other words, if God is to create any property (i.e., “being wise”), He must have the property of *being able to create properties*. But that is itself a property. Thus, either God created the property *being able to create properties* (which is circular and obviously absurd), or God is dependent at least on the property *being able to create properties* (which violates aseity and thus traditional theism). Thus, it seems that one cannot be a Platonist of any kind and maintain traditional theism, which includes the notion of aseity. And if aseity is biblically and philosophically warranted, which it seems to be, then it seems one cannot be a Platonist at all.\(^{263}\)

\(^{262}\) Bergmann, 11-12.

\(^{263}\) This is not to say that one cannot be a theist of any kind and a Platonist. It is only to say that one cannot be a traditional theist, believing that God’s aseity is biblically and philosophically warranted, and a Platonist. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *On Universals* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970) serves as one example of someone who has adopted a non-traditional solution. For those who are convinced that God exists *a se*, however, Bergmann and Brower’s argument is very powerful.
B. General argument for realism of some sort

Since Descarte, philosophy has tended to take a mechanistic view of the world—a view is fundamentally at odds with the Aristotelian approach assumed throughout this study. As such, many of the claims made in favor of simplicity can easily be questioned or even dismissed given modern metaphysical commitments. Brian Ellis calls this system "passivism," given its fundamental idea that inanimate things are capable of acting only as directed—depending, for example, on how they are pushed or pulled around by God, or by the forces of nature. . . . A passivist therefore believes that the tendencies of things to behave as they do can never be inherent in the things themselves. They must always be imposed on them from outside.\(^{264}\)

Yet, since the 1970s, there has been an increasing dissatisfaction with the mechanistic view, and philosophers are increasingly arguing for a "new essentialism."\(^{265}\) These


essentialists have returned in some respects to Aristotle in claiming that “things behave as they do . . . not because of any external constraints that force them to, but because this is how they are intrinsically disposed to behave in the circumstances.”266 In other words, things have essences, and part of the essence of a thing includes its natural potentialities (e.g., water has the potential to exist as a liquid, solid, or gas).267

Essentialism seems to have a strong case on its side. The entire scientific method seems to presuppose it, for experiments are designed precisely to see how things behave under very specific circumstances. That is, modern science seems very interested not merely in describing how things have acted, but how they do act—that is, in uncovering and describing their basic natures. Further, the passivist view seems difficult to maintain in the face of modern science,

266 Ellis, 3.
267 This fact seems to naturally introduce Aristotle’s notion of final causality, for potentiality is always the potential of a thing for something else. Ellis denies, however, that the new essentialism is at all teleological. He thinks that Aristotle’s teleology only includes consciously intended purposes (11-13). When one understands, however, that, for Aristotle, a thing’s final cause is only that to which it is directed (and, usually, not consciously so (i.e., a match toward striking a flame)), then it is easy to see how any reintroduction of essences, particularly with respect to their naturally inhering powers, necessarily reintroduces teleology.
particularly chemistry, for current theories of chemical interactions are precisely about the causal powers of certain things. The “forces of nature” in these models are not broad, abstract frameworks, but rather descriptions of the way really existing things really behave; that is, the stuff of chemistry—atoms, molecules, electrons, and the rest—are really thought to exist and really thought to have the properties attributed to them. They are not passive blobs of mass being pushed around by abstract forces.\textsuperscript{268} They are, rather, thought of as active, causal agents in their own right. But in that case, it seems that essences, complete with Aristotle’s notions of actuality and potentiality, have in some form returned to the discussion.

C. General argument for possibility of change as implying actuality/potentiality distinction

A third general argument in favor of something like an Aristotelian metaphysical framework lies in the reality of change. As Henderson notes, “The idea of change indicates sameness. If something has undergone a change, then something has to remain the same, otherwise nothing has

\textsuperscript{268} Ellis, 24-25.
changed." That is, any theory of change one adopts must explain and include at least three elements: a thing that persists through the change, a property the thing had before the change, and a new property the thing has after the change. For a thing, in gaining (or losing) properties ceases to become what it was and becomes something new, there is no change—there is only the destruction of what was and the replacement with something else.

For present purposes, the point is simple enough. Regardless of the vocabulary employed to describe change, admission of its reality admits something very much like Aristotle’s notions of substance, actuality, and potentiality. The thing that changes is the substance.

---

269 Scott Henderson, “Rethinking Death and Donation: Mediating Death at the End of Life in the Wake of Brain Death’s Failings” (PhD diss., Duquesne University, 2009), 132.

270 It can also be pointed out that change implies the thing changing possess, at different times, fundamentally incompatible properties. For instance, a candle may have the property of being straight, and after being heated, may gain the property of being bent. But something cannot be both bent and straight at the same time. For that reason, for a candle to go from having the property of being straight to having the property of being bent is for the candle to change. See Mark Hinchliff, “The Puzzle of Change.” Philosophical Perspectives 10 (1996): 119.

271 This is true whether one embraces Aristotle’s developed notion of “substance” or not. Here, simply accepting the fact that something persists through change is sufficient to say that something like Aristotle’s metaphysical system is correct.
The way it is now—the properties it currently possesses—is the way it actually is (that is, it’s actuality). The way it will be after the change—the properties it will soon possess—is its potentiality. Of course, once it undergoes the change, its initially potential properties will now be actual.

So it seems that, if one accepts that things really do change, then one must accept that Aristotle’s notions of actuality and potentiality accurately describe reality (regardless of the vocabulary employed to discuss the concepts).

D. Tentative conclusions

While a full defense of an Aristotelian-Thomistic metaphysic is outside the scope of this study, given the three cursory arguments above, it appears to be the case that there are good, modern reasons for its reconsideration. More directly related to this study, if anything like Aristotle’s framework is accepted—that things have essences and that they really change while remaining substantially the same—then it seems the basic assumptions Thomas makes are sufficiently warranted and thus, so too are the arguments in favor of divine simplicity.
III. Strengths of the Argument

A. Complexity and the Coherence of Theism

A final area of interest one may point to in studying this issue is the further benefits divine simplicity offers the theist insofar as it provides a ready answer to some otherwise difficult problems. First, it renders powerless one of the most popular arguments used by atheists today: Dawkins’ “Ultimate 747 Gambit,” as well as its far more substantive relative, Hume’s “Cleanehes’ Gambit.”

Dawkins’ argument may be formalized as follows:

(1) If God exists, then God has these two properties: (i) He provides an intelligent-design explanation for all natural, complex phenomena in the universe and (ii) He has no explanation external to Himself.

(2) Anything that provides an intelligent-design explanation for the natural, complex phenomena in the universe is at least as complex as such phenomena.

(3) So, if God exists, then God has these two properties: (i) He is at least as complex as the natural, complex phenomena in the universe and (ii) He has no explanation external to Himself. (from 1 and 2)

(4) It is very improbable that there exists something that (i) is at least as complex as the natural, complex phenomena in the universe and (ii) has no explanation external to itself.

(5) Therefore, it is very improbable that God exists. (from 3 and 4)²⁷²

Many critics have pointed out why this argument fails. Erik Wielenberg sums up the problem nicely: “The central weakness of Dawkins’s Gambit, then, is that it is aimed primarily at proving the nonexistence of a being that is unlike the God of traditional monotheism in some important ways.”273 One such difference comes from Dawkins’ lack of clarity regarding his second (and central!) premise. He does not clarify what he means by “complex.” On the one hand, Dawkins could be thinking of complexity in God in the same way he thinks of complexity in nature. It must be admitted that his argument against a physically complex God is decisive. Of course, such is not the God of traditional theism, and one must assume Dawkins has some other view of complexity in mind.

A second way to take this complexity is in a non-physical sense (i.e., the complexity of an idea). Yet the fourth premise fails on this view, for it only holds against physical, contingent things. Yet if God is not physical and therefore contingent, but instead is spiritual and necessary, then the argument fails.

Wielenberg points out, however, that while Dawkins’ argument may fail, the defense suggested (namely, an appeal

273 Ibid., 116.
to God’s spiritual and necessary nature) appears to fall victim to Hume’s argument as found in part nine of his Dialogues. He formulates that argument as follows:

(1) Either (a) the natural universe exists contingently and was created by a necessarily existing complex God or (b) the natural universe itself exists necessarily.
(2) (a) and (b) account for the existence of the natural universe equally well, and (b) is simpler than (a).
(3) If (2), then it is more reasonable to believe (b) than it is to believe (a).
(4) If (1) and (3), then it is reasonable to believe that (b) is true.
(5) Therefore, it is reasonable to believe that (b) is true.\(^\text{274}\)

The most important for the purposes of this study is that it is in no way obvious that the universe can, much less that it does, exist necessarily. Hume responds by saying

\[ \text{w}e \text{ dare not affirm that we know all the qualities of matter; and, for aught we can determine, it may contain some qualities which, were they known, would make its non-existence appear as a great a contradiction as that twice two is five.}\]\(^\text{275}\)

In other words, Hume admits that it is not obvious that the universe exists necessarily; yet, just as Christians argue that God exists necessarily, and yet not

\(^{274}\) Ibid., 117.
\(^{275}\) David Hume, Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998), 56.
obviously so\textsuperscript{276}, so the same may be true about the universe itself. So it seems that if one affirms a physically complex God, then one falls to Dawkins; yet if one affirms a spiritually complex God, then one falls to Hume. Proponents of divine simplicity, however, avoid both difficulties, for in such a case, Dawkins' argument fails at (2), whereas Hume's fails at (1).

B. Evil and the Coherence of Theism

In addition to answering Dawkins and Hume, divine simplicity also answers the Euthyphro Dilemma, which is encapsulated in the question, "Is what is morally right, morally right because God commands it; or does God command that which is morally right because it is morally right?"\textsuperscript{277}

The question has long been discussed, for either way one answers the question, series problems arise. If one opts for the first horn, then among other problems, one "cas[ts] doubt on the notion that morality is genuinely


\textsuperscript{277}Plato, in Euthyphro 10a, actually asks whether something is “hallowed” or “holy” (hosion) because it is loved by the gods, or if the gods love it because it is “hallowed” or “holy.”
objective." For if morality is merely what God wills it to be, then God’s willing of this to be right rather than that must necessarily be arbitrary. Yet adopting the second option sets up serious challenges to God’s sovereignty, for it appears that something (in this case, morality or goodness) exists objectively and independently of God, over which He has no control. Further, such a view strongly implies that objective morality is possible without reference to God, which renders moot, for instance, most (if not all) forms of the moral argument for His existence.

Much more could be said on the subject (indeed, much has). But suffice it to say that if one endorses divine

---

280 Murray, 247.
281 Some theists, as was demonstrated earlier, might not have such a serious problem with this. If one adopts a Platonic view of God, then one must admit that there are things that exist independently of Him, over which He is not sovereign. At the very least, however, such a view is contrary to what has been historically held to be true about God and His nature, especially as it relates to good and evil.
simplicity, the issue is easily resolved. As Wes Morriston (who is no proponent of simplicity) says:

Those who accept the doctrine of divine simplicity can pass unscathed between the horns of this dilemma. If God is God’s nature, the problem disappears. Since God’s nature is not something over and above God, there can be no question of its providing a standard of moral goodness apart from God.  

The dilemma presupposes that the morally good is something separate from God Himself; therefore, He either wills it, which makes it good, or He sees it as good and therefore wills it. Divine simplicity answers that God’s nature itself is simply goodness, and since He is His nature, there is nothing outside of Himself to which He must appeal. Of course, such an argument depends on the viability of the doctrine of simplicity as a whole, including its underlying metaphysical assumptions. But the apparent usefulness in dispensing with such a major theological and philosophical problem (i.e., the Euthyphro dilemma) ought to give pause to those who would reject it.

---


284 This claim is all the more intelligible when one understands it from the Thomistic perspective that “Goodness and being are really the same, and differ only in idea.” See ST Ia.5.1. On the view of simplicity proposed throughout this study, God is the pure act of existence, which is to say, the pure act of being. Since being is goodness (and vice-versa), God really is goodness.
IV. Summary

The preceding study has put forward several arguments in favor of divine simplicity. Classical arguments for the existence of God seem to lead necessarily to certain facts that require the doctrine—specifically, if one is to take seriously the notion of God as First Cause and Unmoved Mover, it is hard to avoid conceiving of God as pure act. Yet this conception of God seems to necessarily entail divine simplicity. Helpfully, this same conception even answers the most serious objections against the doctrine.

Moreover, divine simplicity offers several apologetic benefits. For instance, it completely rebuts not only Dawkins’ famous argument against theism, but, more importantly, also Hume’s related, and far more substantive, critique. Likewise, it provides the theist with a ready answer to the Euthyphro dilemma and makes plain the relationship between God, good, and evil.

All of this, of course, is predicated on the plausibility of the Aristotelian/Thomistic framework on which the doctrine is built. But even this can even be a potential strength, for it appears that Aristotle—despite the last four hundred years of philosophical history—may well be returning to his rightful place in the philosophical community. As modern science continues to
progress, it seems that it is increasingly providing evidence that his ideas of essences and final causes ought to be taken very seriously; and with essences and final causes come actuality and potentiality; and with and with that, the arguments first given in the study become adequately grounded. As such, the theist actually can draw from the developing metaphysical assumptions underlying modern science (even if scientists themselves fail to appreciate them) to present a solid demonstration of God’s existence.\textsuperscript{285}

Given all of the above, then, it is the conclusion of this study that divine simplicity is both defensible and preferable to modern, non-classical approaches to the doctrine of God. Its preservation of the biblical notions of sovereignty and aseity, along with how seriously it takes the biblical view of God as Absolute Creator,

\textsuperscript{285} The notion of “demonstration” here is particularly important and valuable. It can be argued that many arguments for God’s existence are really not demonstrations per se, but arguments for God as the most plausible explanation of the evidence as it currently stands. Such a view is thoroughly in line with the modern scientific approach but may (arguably) always be open to the “God-of-the-Gaps” criticism. The arguments put forward in this study, however, given the metaphysical assumptions presented here, are not based on mere probabilities, but on concrete demonstration, and thus can be known to be true with certainty, regardless of whatever theories scientists put forward about anything in the future.
certainly warrant it serious consideration, and, perhaps even a strong *prima facie* case in its favor. Indeed, given simplicity’s strong support for these very attributes, those who reject it ought to take special care to either provide their own positions that at least cohere as well with them as it does; or, they ought to give strong (philosophical and biblical) evidence as to why such attributes ought to be given up after thousands of years of acceptance.
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY


Lobkowicz, Nikolaus. “Quidquid Movetur ab Alio Movetu.” *New Scholasticism* 42, no. 3 (1968): 401-31


