

Trinity, Simplicity and the Status of God's Personal Relations

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Abstract: It is commonly argued by Christian philosophers and theologians that the traditional doctrine of divine simplicity is incompatible with the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity. First, it would seem that the presence of relations in God suggests a composition of substance and accidents in him. Second, if all that is in God is God, as simplicity claims, then it would seem that one could not maintain the real distinctions between the divine persons, as the Trinity requires. In answer to these challenges this article seeks to recover Thomas Aquinas' and the Reformed scholastics' emphasis upon the subsistence and pure actuality of the personal relations in God. The article concludes that while God's personal relations are really distinct from each other, there is no real distinction between the personal relations and the divine substance and that the Trinity and the doctrine of divine simplicity are thus agreeable.

Introduction

To many modern philosophers and theologians the traditional doctrine of divine simplicity seems to contradict the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity. If all that is in God is God, as simplicity claims, and if this means that there is no real distinction between God's existence and essence or between his various attributes, then how can one maintain the real distinction between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit? Does not the strong account of divine simplicity inevitably tend in the direction of the Sabellian heresy? Calvinist theologian John Cooper charges that the strong version of the classical doctrine 'implicitly denies the genuine distinctions among the persons of the Trinity'.¹ Jay Richards notes that 'recent defenses of strong divine

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1 John W. Cooper, *Panentheism, the Other God of the Philosophers: From Plato to the Present* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), p. 326.

simplicity lack any consideration of the problems the doctrine of the Trinity raises for the notion'.² Indeed, in his estimation there are profound problems 'with trinitarianism shackled with strong simplicity'.³ Christopher Hughes takes aim at Thomas Aquinas in particular when he declares that 'the full-strength account of divine simplicity (the one Aquinas presupposes and deploys in his metaphysics of the Trinity) describes a God who could not possibly be triune'.⁴

Others who are not opposed to divine simplicity per se are still uncomfortable with any attempt to link it to the Trinity. Brian Leftow, for instance, understands Aquinas – arguably the most sophisticated proponent of the classical doctrine – to teach that simplicity is a metaphysical doctrine, while the Trinity is a theological doctrine and thus exempt from the strictures of simplicity. Leftow explains that 'on Aquinas' view, God is simple relative to the distinctions metaphysics is equipped to make, and yet Trinitarian theology affirms that God is complex relative to further distinctions theology alone is equipped to draw'.⁵ The difficulty with this is that Thomas, like many of the Church Fathers before him, makes full and unapologetic use of divine simplicity in order to establish the monotheistic credentials of his trinitarianism and to guide his articulation of the personal relations. This point has been made by a number of recent historians and theologians.

Historian Richard Muller objects to '[t]hose modern writers who take the concept [of simplicity] as purely philosophical and therefore miss the point of the traditional treatment, which always assumed that the denial of composition was made for the sake of right understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity and of the divine attributes'.⁶ He further explains that:

Like the Cappadocian fathers and Augustine, and in the tradition of the medieval doctors, the Reformed orthodox recognized that the doctrine of the Trinity could only be supported in the context of a carefully enunciated monotheism – as argued in the doctrine of the divine essence and attributes and quite specifically in the doctrine of divine simplicity.⁷

Gilles Emery likewise maintains: 'The divine simplicity is a Trinitarian doctrine. It is essential for grasping the identity of substance of the three persons.'⁸ It is the

2 Jay Wesley Richards, *The Untamed God: A Philosophical Exploration of Divine Perfection, Simplicity and Immutability* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), p. 229.

3 Richards, *The Untamed God*, p. 230.

4 Christopher Hughes, *On a Complex Theory of a Simple God: An Investigation into Aquinas' Philosophical Theology* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), p. 240.

5 Brian Leftow, *Time and Eternity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 68.

6 Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520–1725*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003) (hereafter *PRRD*), III, p. 297.

7 Muller, *PRRD* IV, p. 199.

8 Gilles Emery, *The Trinity: An Introduction to Catholic Doctrine on the Triune God*, trans. Matthew Levering, Thomistic Ressourcement Series, vol. 1 (Washington, DC: Catholic

position of the Reformed and Thomist traditions, as represented in Muller's and Emery's remarks, which is upheld in this article. Special attention is paid to Aquinas' thought inasmuch as he offers the most precise account of simplicity's impact upon the Trinity and because his position is most frequently targeted by critics.

In what follows various aspects of the divine relations will be considered in order to show the harmony between God's subsistence in three persons and his simplicity. This is not so much an *explanation* of the Trinity or simplicity as it is a demonstration of how Christian simplicists, and especially Aquinas, have endeavored consistently to express that which is in itself incomprehensible – that is, the three-personed subsistence of a simple God.⁹ It should be clear throughout that the current debate over the compatibility of the Trinity and simplicity is about not merely the character of simplicity itself, but also how best to conceive the relationship between the divine persons and divine nature and among the three persons themselves.

The proper character of relations and otherness in the Godhead

It is a key claim of divine simplicity that God is not composed of substance and accidents.¹⁰ The reason is that accidents determine a subject to some further actuality that it does not possess in virtue of its substance alone. If God were to be so determined one would have to say that there are aspects of God's being that are true in virtue of something other than his divine substance. That is, God *as divine* would not be sufficient to account for the full range of his actuality – he would depend upon something non-divine (i.e. the accident) for some aspect of his being. The doctrine of God's simplicity aims to rule out just such dependence. It is founded on the conviction that the first cause of being cannot itself be determined 'to be' in any way by another and that God is the wholly sufficient reason for himself. Nothing is true of God that is not made so in virtue of his divine nature.

On the face of it this denial that God possesses accidents might seem to disallow the Christian ascription of personal relations to God. After all, relations are

University of America Press, 2011), p. 91. For the argument that the Church Fathers deployed divine simplicity to establish the monotheistic orthodoxy of their trinitarianism see Keith Goad, 'Simplicity and Trinity in Harmony', *Eusebeia* 8 (2007), pp. 97–118.

9 Timothy Smith insists that the foundation of the trinitarian mystery lies in simplicity itself: 'The incomprehensibility of the Trinity is due to the absolute simplicity of the divine nature.' Timothy Smith, *Thomas Aquinas' Trinitarian Theology: A Study in Theological Method* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2003), p. 123. It should be noted that some Christians object to the ascription of *absolute* simplicity to God. In their estimation this is reminiscent of the total absence of distinction found in Parmenides, Plotinus' One, or Schelling's 'Absolute Identity'. The question of whether Aquinas' identity version of simplicity is sufficiently purged of these sub-Christian notions is beyond the bounds of our present inquiry.

10 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 5 vols. (Allen: Christian Classics, 1981) (hereafter *ST*), I, q. 3, 6.

understood as accidents in creatures and are classified as such by Aristotle in his *Categories*. How could God possibly possess real relations without thereby being composed of substance (divinity) and accidents (personal relations)? Some might suppose that the answer lies in simply denying that the relations are in fact *real*. Maybe the divine persons are only *virtually* distinct, similar to what many traditional accounts of simplicity claim for the distinctions between the divine attributes.¹¹ Attractive as this explanation may appear, adherents to divine simplicity are compelled to reject it for two reasons: first, it would seem to entail the real identity of each divine person with the other two and thus result in Sabellianism; and second, it would flout the proper character of relation, which requires genuine otherness. What needs to be shown, then, is that the divine relations can somehow be conceived as something other than accidents in God while at the same time being sufficient to preserve a real distinction between the divine persons.

Accidentality and the proper character of relation

Thomas Aquinas maintains God's simplicity and pure actuality on the one hand and the reality of the divine relations on the other by observing that accidentality, which is marked by inherence in a subject, does not belong to the proper character of relation as such. Consider his words in *Summa theologiae* I, q. 28, 1:

[R]elations exist in God really; in proof whereof we may consider that in relations alone is found something which is only in the apprehension and not in reality. This is not found in any other genus; forasmuch as other genera, as quantity and quality, in their strict and proper meaning, signify something inherent in a subject. But relation in its own proper meaning signifies only what refers to another.¹²

The point of this passage is to spotlight the difference between relations and the other eight genera of accidents. Among relations we differentiate between relations of reason (such as genus to species or predicate to subject) and real relations (such as an effect to its cause, a part to the whole, potency to act, and an act to its object).¹³ The relations of reason do not exist in the *relata* as accidents inasmuch as they only exist in the minds of knowers. This is what Thomas means when he indicates that among relations we sometimes find those that are non-real, or 'only in the apprehension'. Put simply, in the created order some relations are accidents and

11 On the virtual distinction between God's attributes see James E. Dolezal, *God without Parts: Divine Simplicity and the Metaphysics of God's Absoluteness* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2011), pp. 128 and 133–7.

12 *ST* I, q. 28, 1.

13 See Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *The Trinity and God the Creator: A Commentary on St. Thomas' Theological Summa, Ia, q. 27–119*, trans. Frederic C. Eckhoff (n.p.: Ex Fontibus Co., 2012), pp. 110–11.

some are not. It follows that accidentality must not be an indispensable feature of the proper character of relation.

It is important to note that Thomas is *not* saying that the relations between the divine persons are relations of reason.¹⁴ He is merely making the point that if not all relations are accidents then it must not belong to the *ratio* of relation *qua* relation to exist as an accident. In the created order all relations are real and accidental or merely in the apprehension and so not real (i.e. not actually existing in those subjects they describe). Either way, the only proper characteristic common to each use of 'relation' is 'reference to another', not accidental inherence.¹⁵

Having established that accidentality does not belong to the proper *ratio* of relation, Thomas further insists that the relations between the divine persons are real:

[W]hen something proceeds from a principle of the same nature, then both the one proceeding and the source of procession, agree in the same order; and then they have real relations to each other. Therefore as the divine processions are in the identity of the same nature . . . these relations, according to the divine processions, are necessarily real relations.¹⁶

One might assume that the Angelic Doctor is here conceding that the divine relations are accidents in God after all. But this would be a serious misunderstanding of the truly unique proposal he is offering: the personal relations in the Godhead are real relations properly predicated of God, *and yet are not accidents*. The divine relations are properly relations insofar as the *ratio* of relation entails reference of one to another. In God these cannot be merely notional in that the persons have their relations within the self-same divine nature, and they cannot be accidents inasmuch as God is simple. Clearly, this is a *sui generis* notion of relation that Thomas proposes.

The real yet non-accidental character of the divine relations further requires that one distinguish between the being (*esse*, act of existence) and specific character (*ratio*) of accidents. Thomas does precisely this in answering the question in *Summa theologiae* I, q. 28, 2 of whether relation in God is the same as his essence:

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- 14 Aquinas is sometimes misunderstood on this point. John M. Frame, for example, warns that 'we should reject Aquinas' view that the three persons are distinct only notionally, only in our minds'. John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2002), p. 702.
- 15 On this point Thomas seems plainly to follow Boethius' discussion of relations in *De Trinitate* V. It should further be noted that Boethius places his discussion of simplicity immediately prior in *De Trinitate* IV. See Boethius, *The Theological Tractates; The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. H.F. Stewart, E.K. Rand and S.J. Tester (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973).
- 16 *ST* I, q. 28, 1. Elsewhere Thomas insists that orthodox Christianity must affirm real relations in God: 'those who follow the teaching of the catholic faith must hold that the relations in God are real'. Thomas Aquinas, *On the Power of God*, trans. English Dominican Fathers, 3 vols. (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1932) (hereafter *DP*), q. 8, 1.

[W]e must consider that in each of the nine genera of accidents there are two points for remark. One is the nature belonging to each one of them considered as an accident; which commonly applies to each of them as inherent in a subject, for the essence of an accident is to inhere. The other point of remark is the proper nature of each one of these genera. In the genera, apart from that of 'relation,' as in quantity and quality, even the true idea of the genus itself is derived from a respect to the subject; for quantity is called the measure of substance, and quality is the disposition of substance. But the true idea of relation is not taken from its respect to that in which it is, but from its respect to something outside.¹⁷

Relation is predicated properly of God because, unlike all other accidents, its specific character is not found in its reference to the subject it describes, but in its reference of one subject to another ('something outside'). For all the other accidents inherence in a subject is entailed in their specific character and thus their act of existence is that of 'existence in' (*in esse*) a subject. They depend upon the existence of the substance in which they inhere and they also determine the subject to exist in some way not proper to its substance as such. Accordingly, they are really distinct from the essences of the subjects they describe. Of course, if this were true of God he would most certainly not be simple. This is why it is important, if one is going to ascribe real relations properly to God, to show that relation *qua* relation does not entail a specific manner of existence, such as accidentality.

So what can one say about the existence of relations in God if they are neither purely conceptual nor accidents inhering in him? Thomas tells us quite plainly:

Now whatever has an accidental existence in creatures, when considered as transferred to God, has a substantial existence; for there is no accident in God; since all in Him is His essence. So, in so far as relation has an accidental existence in creatures, relation really existing in God has the existence of the divine essence in no way distinct therefrom. But in so far as relation implies respect to something else, no respect to the essence is signified, but rather to its opposite term.¹⁸

Divine simplicity is obviously at the heart of these remarks.¹⁹ If one were not committed to the axiom of simplicity that there are no accidents in God it is rather

17 *ST I*, q. 28, 2. For more on Thomas' understanding of the *ratio* of relation see Mark G. Henninger, *Relations: Medieval Theories 1250–1325* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), pp. 14–16.

18 *ST I*, q. 28, 2. Thomas distills his core concern earlier in the question when he writes, 'Everything which is not the divine essence is a creature. But relation really belongs to God; and if it is not the divine essence, it is a creature.'

19 Thomas draws the connection to simplicity even more explicitly in *DP*, q. 8, 2:

[G]iven that there are relations in God we are bound to say that they are the divine essence: else we would have to say that there is composition in God and that the

doubtful that one would arrive at such a strong identity between the essence and personal relations of God. At least there would be no apparent ontological reason to do so. On the other hand, if one did not hold that the relations in God are real and are properly predicated of him it is doubtful that one could ever arrive at the real distinction between the three persons and thus avoid the Sabellian error. This brings us to a consideration of the real opposition entailed in the divine relations.

Real relations, opposition and distinction among the divine persons

Trinitarian adherents to divine simplicity have long insisted that simplicity only proscribes division and composition in the Godhead, not distinction.²⁰ The divine persons do not divide or carve up the divine essence in any way, nor are they component parts of the Godhead. Nevertheless, there is a real distinction between the persons. The Father is not the Son or Spirit, the Son is not the Father or Spirit, and the Spirit is not the Father or Son. Their real opposition is integral to the real relations between them. In this regard Thomas states:

The attributing of anything to another involves the attribution likewise of whatever is contained in it . . . The idea of relation, however, necessarily means regard of one to another, according as one is relatively opposed to another. So as in God there is a real relation, there must also be a real opposition. The very nature of relative opposition includes distinction. Hence, there must be real distinction in God, not, indeed, according to that which is absolute – namely, essence, wherein there is supreme unity and simplicity – but according to that which is relative.²¹

Gilles Emery observes that the opposition entailed in the divine relations is not between God's relations and his essence, but only in the mutual connection between the relatives themselves: 'it is a distinction from relative to relative, and not of relative to essence'.²² This is sufficient to uphold simplicity's demand that the divine

divine relations are accidents, since whatever adheres to a thing besides its substance is an accident. It would also follow that something that is not the divine substance is eternal; and all these things are heretical.

20 Richard Muller observes that simplicity 'by definition, means *not* an absence of distinctions, but only and strictly an absence of composition (and of the kind of distinctions that indicate composition)'. *PRRD* III, p. 57.

21 *ST* I, q. 28, 3. No doubt it is remarks such as these that lead some to conclude that divine simplicity just does not apply to God's trinity and that Thomas' understanding of God can be neatly divided into *de Deo uno* and *de Deo trino*. But such a conclusion cannot be squared with the texts we have already considered such as *ST* I, q. 28, 1 and 2 and *DP*, q. 8, 2.

22 Gilles Emery, *The Trinitarian Theology of Saint Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 97.

relations not inhere as accidents in the divine substance while at the same time avoiding any suggestion of Sabellianism.

Emery explains:

The word ‘opposition’ obviously does not indicate competition, but must be taken in its formal meaning: opposition is the *principle of a distinction*. This opposition is required because the distinction of the divine persons is not ‘material’. No opposition, no distinction: to reject such ‘opposition’ comes down to an acceptance of Sabellianism.²³

It is the opposition which belongs to the formal character of relation that enables one to account for the real otherness between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.²⁴ But not all real opposition, and so not all real distinction, is of the same sort. Following Aquinas, Emery lists four kinds of opposition: (1) of affirmation and negation; (2) of privation and possession; (3) of contrariety; (4) of relation. Thomas denies that the first three can apply to God, as Emery explains: ‘The first kind of opposition implies a difference in being, the second necessarily involves inequality, and the third entails an essential difference (a “difference of form”) between the opposed terms.’²⁵ Only relative opposition includes within it both real distinction and the inseparability of the *relata* ‘because a relative, as such, cannot exist without its correlate’.²⁶

Reformed writers traditionally follow the medieval scholastics in distinguishing between a ‘real major distinction’ of those things distinct in being or essence and a ‘real minor distinction’ of terms that are opposed by relation alone. Francis Turretin thus explains the distinction between the divine persons:

Those who say that they differ really are nevertheless unwilling to express it as a real major distinction (*distinctionem realem majorem*) which exists between

23 Emery, *Trinitarian Theology*, p. 98. Emery references Aquinas’ remarks in *Summa contra Gentiles* IV, ch. 24 [7]: ‘among things, with the material distinction gone (and in the divine Persons such can have no place), one discovers no differentiation except by some opposition’ – in translation as *On the Truth of the Catholic Faith*, trans. Anton C. Pegis, James F. Anderson, Vernon J. Bourke and Charles J. O’Neil, 5 vols. (Garden City: Doubleday, 1955).

24 Incidentally, the reason simpliciterists traditionally deny that the divine attributes are really distinct while affirming such a distinction among the divine persons is that the attributes are not relations and thus do not require one to affirm any sort of opposition between them.

25 Emery, *Trinitarian Theology*, p. 98.

26 Emery, *Trinitarian Theology*, p. 99. Thomas writes in *DP*, q. 8, 1, ad 13, ‘In other kinds of opposition one of the extremes is always by way of being imperfect or non-existent, or with an admixture of non-entity . . . Hence other kinds of opposition cannot be in God, whereas relative opposition can because on neither side does it imply imperfection.’ See also Wilhelmus à Brakel, *The Christian’s Reasonable Service*, ed. Joel R. Beeke, trans. Bartel Elshout, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 1992), I, p. 141: ‘This one divine Being subsists in three Persons, not collaterally or side-by-side, but rather the one Person exists by virtue of the other Person either by way of generation or procession.’

things and things (as if there was in the Trinity a difference of things or one and another essence, which would be opposed to the unity and simplicity of the divine essence). But they say it is only a real minor distinction (*distinctionem realem minorem*, as the Scholastics have it) which exists between a thing and the mode of the thing or between the modes themselves . . . Although in God there is not one and another thing (i.e., different essences), still there is one and another subject (a difference of persons).²⁷

The goal of the real minor distinction is to make the least distinction possible. In God relatives are opposed *only* according to their relations. Indeed, as Timothy Smith puts it, 'The Persons are equal in every way except according to relations of opposition.'²⁸ The real opposition and distinction entailed in real relation undercuts any implication of Sabellianism in the doctrine of divine simplicity.

So far we have considered that real relation in God is not opposed to his simplicity inasmuch as accidentality does not belong to the proper character of relation and thus relation need not be construed as something really distinct from the divine substance itself. In God real relation adds nothing to the subject. It simply denotes that there are within him relatives which refer to one another. In this connection we have further noted that relation includes opposition and is thereby equipped to account for the real otherness of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Non-composite persons

But does all that has been said above really show the agreeability between the Trinity and simplicity? Surely, denying that God is composed of substance and accidental relations does not in itself preclude the possibility that he might be composite in some other sense. For instance, divine simplicity could just as well be disproved by the Trinity if we were to locate composition in the divine persons themselves. This argument might proceed as follows. The relations that distinguish each of the divine persons indicate that the three divine subjects are composed of personal essence and differentia, such as the personal properties of paternity, filiation and spiration. Therefore, the persons *as persons* are not simple. Furthermore, the generation of the Son from the Father and the procession of the Spirit from Father and Son certainly seem to indicate a composition of act and potency. That is, the Son and Spirit both appear to exhibit passive potency in their reception of divinity from the Father. After all, what does it mean for a person to receive from another if not to have some passive potency reduced to actuality by that other person? While these are not inconsiderable

27 Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison, trans. George Musgrave Giger, vol. 1 (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1992) (hereafter *IET*), p. 191 (top. 3, q. 7, 1). See also Muller, *PRRD* IV, pp. 48–9, 194–5.

28 Smith, *Thomas Aquinas' Trinitarian Theology*, p. 29.

objections, it is not apparent that they succeed. This is because God's simplicity pertains not merely to the divine substance, but to the divine persons as well.

Divine persons as subsistent relations

It was noted above that divine relations are not accidents in God and that in fact they are really identical with the divine essence. Their act of existence (*esse*) is none other than the one pure act of the divine essence itself. In this vein Thomas Weinandy writes: 'The Godhead is the Trinity. The one Godhead, the one being of God, is the action of the Father begetting the Son and spirating the Spirit.'²⁹ It follows that if the *esse* of the divine relations is identical with the one simple *esse* of the divine essence, then composition is as inimical to the divine persons as it is to the divine substance and relations can no more inhere in the persons than they can in the substance.³⁰

Obviously it is a challenge to understand how there can be a real identity between the essence, which is one, and the divine persons, which are three. *Prima facie* it seems to contravene the law of identity. If the first, second and third persons of the Godhead are each equal to the divine essence, then must we not conclude to the real identity of the persons? The answer is that we must if we predicate 'person' and 'relation' univocally of God and humans, that is, as referring to relations between three individual substances. But simplicists reject such univocity.³¹ In the *Summa theologiae* Aquinas takes divine simplicity as his point of departure in answering the question of whether essence is the same as the person in God: 'the divine simplicity requires that in God essence is the same as *suppositum*'.³² And since the relations by which the persons are constituted and really distinguished from each other cannot inhere as accidents in the divine substance, it must be that the relations themselves subsist.

If the personal relations were accidents in God they would be really distinct from his divinity. If they were only conceptual relations then the persons would not be really distinct from each other. And if they were substantial relations the persons would be three really distinct beings, three gods. Thus, the divine personal relations must be *subsistent* relations. Such a notion is entirely without counterpart in

29 Thomas G. Weinandy, *The Father's Spirit of Sonship* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1995, repr. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2010), p. 60.

30 For the purposes of the present discussion the terms 'substance' and 'essence' are used interchangeably as denoting that in virtue of which God is what he is, his divinity.

31 Undoubtedly, the classical Thomist and Reformed insistence upon analogical thought and predication about God is one of the most perplexing and unacceptable aspects of their position to many modern analytic philosophers. Alvin Plantinga, for example, favors univocal predication over analogical because the latter seems to suggest that 'our concepts do not apply to God'. Alvin Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1980), p. 54. For more on analogical predication see the references in n. 52 below.

32 *ST I*, q. 39, 1.

Aristotelian philosophy. Thomas writes: 'Now distinction in God is only by relation of origin . . . while relation in God is not as an accident in a subject, but is the divine essence itself; and so it is subsistent, for the divine essence subsists'.³³

If the divine relations *themselves* subsist then it is not possible to conceive of them as existing *in* another, such as the personal essence of each divine person. Indeed, there is no particular Father-essence, Son-essence or Spirit-essence; there is simply the divine essence subsisting according to three really distinct relations within itself.³⁴ These three subsistent relations simply *are* the three persons of God. Clearly, there is a radical difference between the criteria by which creaturely persons (or *supposita*) are distinguished and those by which divine persons are distinguished. Thomas locates this difference precisely in the fact that creaturely relations are not subsistent (i.e. they are accidents in creatures) while divine relations subsist in virtue of their identity with God's essence:

There cannot be a distinction of *suppositum* in creatures by means of relations, but only by essential principles; because in creatures relations are not subsistent. But in God relations are subsistent, and so by reason of the opposition between them they distinguish the *supposita*; and yet the essence is not distinguished, because the relations themselves are not distinguished from each other so far as they are identified with the essence.³⁵

33 *ST* I, q. 29, 4.

34 Aquinas explains this in terms of the Son's substantial identity with the Father as the Father's *Logos*, his intelligible likeness:

[S]ince God's understanding is His existence, His intellectual conception, which is His intelligible likeness, must be His substance . . . Consequently the representation of the divine intellect, which is God's Word, is distinct from Him who produces the Word, not with respect to substantial existence, but only according to the procession of one from the other. (Thomas Aquinas, *Compendium of Theology*, trans. Cyril Vollert (St Louis: Herder, 1947), ch. 52)

On the essential identity and personal distinctions in the Godhead, see also Muller, *PRRD* III, p. 298, and Turretin, *IET*, p. 280 (top. 3, q. 27, 14).

35 *ST* I, q. 39, 1, ad 1. The Reformed orthodox endorse this understanding of the divine persons as the relations within God. Muller (*PRRD* IV, p. 184) writes:

The orthodox follow the traditional definition of 'subsistences' in the Godhead as real relations or relative properties, modes of the divine being – which, in the Godhead can be called persons, as distinct from usages applicable in the creaturely order, where relative properties or real relations in a being cannot be understood as 'persons'.

William Ames writes: 'A relative property in God implies a person, but this is not so in creatures.' William Ames, *The Marrow of Theology*, trans. John Dykstra Eusden (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997), p. 88 (bk I, V, 9). It should be noted that both Muller and Ames, as with the medieval schoolmen, are using 'property' language in a loose and improper sense inasmuch as it belongs to the proper *ratio* of a property to inhere in a substance and the divine relations do not *inhere* in the divine substance or persons. Such language is admissible so long as one recognizes its limitations.

The distinctions between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are not as those between thing and thing or substance and substance. Neither are they distinct as between accident and accident within a single subject. As far as essence is concerned the divine relations are not really distinct from each other – they are all three the one same God. As fully existing by virtue of the self-same divinity the divine persons cannot be distinguished by anything other than the opposition of their relations. And while those relations wherein they are distinguished cannot be properly ascribed to each person, as befits opposition, everything else about them can. Their distinction lies solely in their relations of opposition. As real, non-accidental and identical with God's essence these relations must themselves be subsistent.³⁶ Reformed theologian John Owen remarks that 'a divine person is nothing but *the divine essence . . . subsisting in an especial manner*'.³⁷ That special manner is as a subsistent relation.

If the divine persons just are the divine relations subsisting in the Godhead then it must be that the Father is *identical* with the relation of paternity, the Son with filiation and the Spirit with spiration. As *subsistent* relations these ordinarily abstract terms are predicated of the persons concretely.³⁸ These are not relations that are superadded to already-constituted subjects in the Godhead, otherwise it would not be the relations that ultimately constitute and distinguish the divine persons after all. Gilles Emery distils the essence of the claim for the simplicity of the divine persons:

[In God] relative property and person designate the same reality, even though their mode of signifying it differs. In the final analysis, this identity of relative property and person rests on the nature of a divine relation, and . . . divine relations formally possess the being of the divine essence. This applies in full to the three personal relations, that is, to the three relative properties which constitute the persons: paternity, filiation, and procession. These relations or

36 Though not really distinct from the divine essence, the persons are modally or conceptually distinct from the essence. This will be further discussed below.

37 John Owen, *A Brief Vindication and Declaration of the Doctrine of the Trinity*, in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1997), p. 407.

38 This is similar to another prominent claim of divine simplicity, that God is subsistent being itself. Being and relations are both predicated of God concretely and of creatures abstractly. Just as simplicists say that God is 'subsistent being itself', it may also be said that he is 'subsistent relation itself' in virtue of the fact that his relations subsist in identity with his pure act of existence. Thomas notes that God's 'personal properties are the same as the persons because the abstract and the concrete are the same in God; since they are the subsisting persons themselves, as paternity is the Father Himself, and filiation is the Son, and procession is the Holy Ghost.' *ST I*, q. 40, 1, ad 1. On the unity of God's relations see Gilles Emery's discussion of divine relations as a 'transcendental multitude' in 'The Doctrine of the Trinity in St. Thomas Aquinas', in Thomas G. Weinandy, Daniel A. Keating and John P. Yocum, eds., *Aquinas on Doctrine: A Critical Introduction* (London and New York: T. & T. Clark International, 2004), pp. 56–7. See also Aquinas, *DP*, q. 9, 7.

relative properties 'are the subsisting persons themselves': paternity is the Father himself, filiation is the Son, and 'procession' is the Holy Spirit.³⁹

Just as God's simplicity requires the real identity of the divine essence and relations, it also requires that we conceive these relations as subsistent and each of the divine persons as identical with his distinct relation. This identity means that the persons *qua* persons are non-composite.

Purely actual relations

Holding that each divine person is simple may follow rather nicely from the logic of divine simplicity, but it seems more difficult to square with the precise character of the relations themselves. The Father's begetting of the Son and their joint spiration of the Spirit would appear to require that at least the Son and Spirit are composed of act and potency. To receive from another surely seems to imply passivity of some sort in the receiving subject. And this passivity would undoubtedly strike at a very core commitment of the classical doctrine of simplicity – that God has no passive potency. It is difficult, to say the least, to conceive of the Son and Spirit, constituted as they are by their receptive relations, as purely actual. Indeed, some would say that this is one of the best reasons for trinitarians to abandon the doctrine of God's simplicity.

It is precisely at this point, though, that we must bear in mind the character of the divine persons as *subsisting* relations. As such the three persons are nothing but the relations of paternity, filiation and spirated procession, and each of these relations is an act. The Son and Spirit are not subjects to whom generation and spiration

39 Emery, *Trinitarian Theology*, p. 121. Emery elsewhere explains:

As regards their standing in being, these relations are identical to the very being of God; they are identified with the essence of God, which is his pure existence: these relations subsist. The divine person is not the result of a composition of the divine being with another thing. God is simple. As regards relation to another – and a relation is defined precisely through reference to another – these relations distinguish the divine persons.

Furthermore, Emery writes:

The relations not only distinguish the persons, but also they constitute these persons. To affirm that the relation constitutes the person (to say, for example, that filiation constitutes the Son) is to recognize that this relation is not added to the person and is not involved only in manifesting the person, but rather that the person consists in this very relation insofar as the relation possesses the divine being.

And finally, Emery states:

The divine person is a *subsisting relation*. The divine relation includes in itself the unity of the divine being and the personal distinction . . . Such a theological contemplation does not pretend to comprehend God, but it gives an account of faith in three persons who are one God. (latter quotations from *The Trinity*, pp. 107–8)

'happen'; rather, they simply *are* the 'happening' of generation and spiration as considered under the relations of filiation and procession respectively. Moreover, the Father is not a divine person whose personal identity is ontologically prior to the generation of the Son or spiration of the Spirit. He just *is* his act of begetting the Son and of spirating in communion with the Son. The persons are pure relations and thus purely actual as persons. According to Thomas, 'The only "passive" that we posit among the divine persons is grammatical, according to our mode of signifying; i.e., we speak of the Father begetting and of the Son *being begotten*.'⁴⁰ But the Son's begottenness is not the actualization of some passive potency in God, nor is it something that is 'done to' the Son. The Son just is the eternal generation from the Father and the Father just is the eternal act of begetting and of spirating together with the Son.⁴¹

Along these lines Emery offers some illuminating remarks on the pure actuality of the divine relations:

When we consider the generation of the Son and the procession of the Holy Spirit, it is necessary to avoid any idea of passivity. Our thinking must pass through an important work of purification when we apply it to the mystery of the holy Trinity. It is by one operation that the Father begets and that the Son is born from all eternity, but this one operation is in the Father and in the Son under *distinct relations*: paternity and filiation. Therefore the Father's act of begetting the Son implies no passivity in the Son . . . Similarly, it is by one operation that the Father and the Son 'breathe' ('spirate') the Holy Spirit and that the Holy Spirit proceeds; but this operation is in the Father and the Son, and in the Holy Spirit, under *distinct relations*. In the Father and the Son, this action possesses the relative mode of 'spiration,' while in the Holy Spirit, this action possesses the relative mode of 'procession.' This 'procession' is the relative property that distinguishes and constitutes the person of the Holy Spirit.⁴²

Conceiving the persons in this manner requires that we remove the idea of passivity from our notion of receptive relation in God, and compels us instead to hold that the persons are purely actual 'receivers', inscrutable as such a notion might be. Wilhelmus à Brakel remarks: 'the words "generate" and "proceed" neither suggest superiority or inferiority *nor the transformation from nothing to something*, for all

40 *ST I*, q. 41, 1, ad 3. Emery writes similarly with regard to the Spirit:

The Holy Spirit exists in a proper mode that is relative to the Father and to the Son, from whom he receives himself. This does not imply any 'passivity' in the Holy Spirit, any more than generation implies 'passivity' in the Son who is begotten. To proceed is an act. (*The Trinity*, pp. 149–50)

41 Smith states that 'the act of being that is the subsistent divine relation is not other than the act of proceeding, by reason of the simplicity of God' (*Thomas Aquinas' Trinitarian Theology*, p. 94).

42 Emery, *The Trinity*, p. 150.

this is an eternal reality'.⁴³ In other words, divine generation and procession cannot involve the reduction of passive potency to actuality as that would entail a transformation in God, the addition of some new 'reality' that was not there previously. Aquinas writes: 'it is through *one and the same action* that the Father begets and the Son is born, but this action finds out two distinct relations in the Father and the Son'.⁴⁴ Emery adds his commentary:

This is difficult to think through, and yet it is compelling: the fact of being begotten does not imply any 'passivity' in the Son. To be begotten is an action – that is, to be born. For the Son to receive the divine nature is to be born of the Father. And when one says that the Son 'receives the divine nature from the Father' this 'reception' refers to a pure relation of the Son to the Father: this is the relation of origin.⁴⁵

Since the Son is neither created nor comes to be in any sense, his must be receptivity without passivity. The same goes for the Spirit.

It should be further noted that the plurality in relations by which the persons are really distinct from each other does not entail that the activity by which these relations exist is likewise a plurality of really distinct acts. The act by which the Father begets the Son is not really distinct from the act by which they together breathe forth the Holy Spirit. 'The Father spirates the Spirit,' Weinandy explains, 'in the same act by which he begets the Son, for the Spirit proceeds from the Father as the fatherly Love in whom or by whom the Son is begotten.'⁴⁶ For each person to be (*qua* person) is to be in relation to the other two. Thus, they cannot be distinguished by really distinct acts of existence.

Nor is this trinitarian act with its various relations really distinct from the one simple act of God's existence. For God to be is for him to be subsisting in three persons. As Weinandy has it, 'The eternal constituting of the persons takes place within (and not outside of) the one being of God, and therefore is the one being of God. There is neither a priority of oneness nor of threeness. Three persons *are* one God or one God *is* three persons.'⁴⁷ The three-personed communion and life of God is really identical with his pure act of being.

It is frequently charged that if God is purely actual, subsistent being itself, he must somehow be less personal and less relational than the God of the Bible. In truth, exactly the opposite is the case. As simple and purely actual the triune God could not possibly be more personal and relational than he is. If the persons were composed of act and passive potency, so that there were some sort of becoming in God, his

43 Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service* I, p. 174 (emphasis added).

44 Aquinas, *Commentary on Lombard's Sentences* I, d. 20, q. 1, a. 1, ad 1, cited by Emery, *Trinitarian Theology*, p. 75 (emphasis added).

45 Emery, *Trinitarian Theology*, p. 75. By 'origin' Emery does not mean 'beginning'.

46 Weinandy, *The Father's Spirit of Sonship*, p. 69.

47 Weinandy, *The Father's Spirit of Sonship*, p. 64. Aquinas denies that 'there exists in God anything besides relation in reality'. *ST* I, q. 28, 2, ad 2.

personalness and the dynamic actuality of his triune life would be diminished and *less* lively, not more so. Thomas Weinandy makes this point beautifully:

As subsistent relations fully in act, the persons of the Trinity are utterly and completely dynamic and active in their integral and comprehensive self-giving to one another, and could not possibly become any more dynamic or active in their self-giving since they are constituted, and so subsist, as who they are only in their complete and utter self-giving to one another.⁴⁸

In other words, a simple and purely actual God is understood to be more intimately and perfectly personal and relational than any creature we can conceive. Indeed, insofar as the divine relations are identical with the divine nature we may say that God is relation itself.

In sum, the divine persons are just as simple as the divine nature because they are not really distinct from that nature. They are not three essences or substances that passively receive their distinct relations, nor are they accidental relations inhering in the divine substance. Rather, the persons just are the divine relations subsisting in the one act of God's existence and essence. Inasmuch as the relations by which the persons are constituted are purely actual from all eternity, the relations are not to be understood as reducing passive potency to actuality in God. It remains, then, for us to consider how it is that we predicate of divine persons who are really distinct from each other and yet each identical with the one same divine essence.

Distinguishing God's persons and essence

When we speak of the divine persons we are not speaking about something *other* than the divine essence, something adjoined to it, and determining it to be in some way or another. The divine relations are not principles of actuality supplying concrete personal existence to an abstract divine essence. *Rather, they are simply the divine essence subsisting in a threefold manner.* Nevertheless, when we speak about the divine persons and essence we do tend to make a clear distinction between them. This final section aims to identify the character of this distinction and to highlight the duality in our God-talk that follows therefrom. Both the distinction and the double way of predication are fundamentally agreeable with the doctrine of simplicity.

Modal and conceptual distinction

Francis Turretin pinpoints some of the obvious differences between the ways we conceive of God's persons and essence:

48 Thomas Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), p. 119.

The persons are manifestly distinct from the essence because the essence is one only, while the persons are three. The former is absolute, the latter are relative; the former is communicable (not indeed as to multiplication, but as to identity), the latter are incommunicable; the former is something broader and the latter are narrower. For although the essence is adequate to the three persons taken together, yet is it broader than each one of them because each person has indeed the whole divinity, but not adequately and totally (if it is right so to speak), i.e., not to the exclusion of the others because it is still communicable to more.⁴⁹

The claims of this passage are subtle and far-reaching. God's essence is absolute inasmuch as it is not correlative to anything outside itself; the persons are relative in that their existence as persons is constituted by their relations, that is, in co-relation to one another. The divine essence is communicable in the sense that it can be shared by more than one person, but the unique personage of each one of the three is not communicated to the other two. So the Father may communicate divinity to the Son, for instance, but he does not communicate paternity to him. This is what Turretin means when he says that the essence is broader and the persons narrower. While each person can be said to be divine he cannot be said to be the other persons. In saying that none of the persons has the whole of divinity adequately and totally Turretin intends that no one person, *qua* person, can be said to be the divinity *as such*. Since the divinity is communicable to all three and the unique personal relations are not, the notion of the divine nature is not adequately comprehended in the consideration of any single divine person. Another way of expressing this is to say that the Father is wholly divine yet divinity is not wholly the Father, and so forth for the Son and Spirit.

While the distinction between God's persons and his nature may appear to undermine the strong classical account of simplicity, it has traditionally been argued by simplicists that it does not since it is not in fact *real*. Turretin identifies the distinction as a 'modal' distinction between a thing and its mode(s) of subsistence, yet with an important disclaimer:

[T]he personal properties by which the persons [T] are distinguished from the essence are certain modes by which it may be characterized; not indeed formally and properly (as modes are said to be in created things, which as finite can be differently affected and admit modes really distinct and posterior to the thing modified, which cannot fall on the infinite and most perfect essence of God); but eminently and analogically, all imperfection being removed. Thus the person may be said to differ from the essence not really (*realiter*), i.e., essentially (*essentialiter*) as thing and thing, but modally (*modaliter*) – as a mode from the thing (*modus a re*).⁵⁰

49 Turretin, *IET*, p. 278 (top. 3, q. 27, 1).

50 Turretin, *IET*, p. 278 (top. 3, q. 27, 3). See also Muller, *PRRD* IV, p. 190, and Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service* I, pp. 145–6.

Perhaps the parenthetical qualification is the most significant with respect to the question of God's simplicity. What Turretin proposes is that the three divine persons are non-modifying modes of the divine essence. This is clearly an *analogical* understanding of mode. What is retained in our God-talk is the conception of mode as an essence's 'manner' of subsistence. What is removed from our ordinary conception of mode when we speak of God is its function as a quality *modifying* or conveying some additional actually to a thing in which it inheres – such as a mode of subsistence that a creature does not possess in virtue of its essence per se. Since God's essence is infinite it cannot possibly be determined to subsist as Father, Son and Spirit by the reception of additional forms or modes of being. The actuality of God's three-personed mode of subsistence is not really distinct from the actuality of his essence as subsistent being itself. Yet the twofold manner in which we speak about essences and their mode(s) of subsistence is retained in our God-talk as an accommodation to our creaturely way of thinking and speaking. We cannot comprehend a substance so perfectly in act that it is really identical with its mode(s) of subsistence, much less speak adequately of such a being.

Others have described the distinction between God's persons and essence as a 'conceptual' distinction. In a passage plainly beholden to divine simplicity, Richard Muller writes:

The distinction between the persons and the essence is not a distinction between genus and species, since there is no genus 'god'; 'god' does not indicate a class of beings, of which there are three instances. There is, moreover, no real distinction between the three persons and the divine essence, as if the essence were one thing (*res*) and the three persons another thing, for God is a simple and noncomposite being. Rather the persons are rationally or conceptually (*ratione*) distinct, not merely in the mind of the finite knower but in *ipsa re*, that is, in the Godhead or divine essence itself.⁵¹

This conceptual distinction bears upon our God-talk in that it requires us to speak of the divine persons in two ways at once, one way according to their identical essence and another according to their really distinct personal relations.⁵² We turn finally to this double way of predicating.

51 Muller, *PRRD* IV, p. 191. See also Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 39, 1.

52 It should be clear at this point that we say 'person' rather differently of God and humans. Richard Muller observes: '[T]he orthodox insist that "person" is not applied to God in the way it applied to human beings – given that, although human beings are also independent subsistences, their individuality is not understood as a real relation or a relation of opposition within a single being'. *PRRD* IV, p. 180. Augustine famously remarks: 'Yet when you ask "Three what?" human speech labors under a great dearth of words. So we say three persons, not in order to say that precisely, but in order not to be reduced to silence.' Augustine, *The Trinity*, trans. Edmund Hill (Brooklyn: New City Press, 1991), bk 5, ch. 2, 10. In this connection see also Rudi A. te Velde, 'The Divine Person(s): Trinity, Person, and Analogous Naming', in Gilles Emery and Matthew Levering, eds.,

Duality in predicating of divine persons

The challenge in speaking of a divine person is to express that which is at once the self-same identical God with the other two persons, and yet really distinct from them according to relation. Emery offers some scintillating insight in navigating this challenge:

The investigation of relation gives rise to a twin distinction, and one has to observe what is happening here very carefully. On the one hand, each personal relation is distinguished from its opposite correlate, and this distinction is entirely real (paternity is not filiation). But, on the other hand, from within the divine essence, relation is just a logical distinction. Effectively, when we speak of 'paternity' in God, we *signify* the reference of the Father to the Son but we do not pinpoint 'anything other' than God himself. In our language and in our thinking, relation remains a mode of attribution which is distinct from substance, but without naming anything which could be distinct from the divine substance.⁵³

These remarks spotlight the profound analogy that is at work in the way we speak of a simple God. He is an essence that subsists because his essence is identical with his act of existence. Moreover, this singular subsistence is located in persons who themselves are nothing but relations subsisting in the divine substance. When we speak of relations we are predicating of one in reference to another. Now, it happens that in creatures all real relations are also accidents and thus really distinct from a thing's essence. Accordingly, we are accustomed to predicating of real relations under an accidental rather than substantial rubric. Such distinction in predication is preserved in our talk about the divine persons for two reasons. First, it is preserved by way of accommodation since we have no way of adequately speaking or thinking about real relations which are identical with a thing's essence. And second, if we were to predicate of the relations by way of divine substance we would not be able to express the real distinctions between them.

All this does not mean, though, that we do not predicate of the persons by way of substance in any sense whatsoever. In particular, we do it when we speak of the subsisting relations as 'persons'. As we have no way as creatures to speak of persons except by way of substance, since among creatures 'person' always picks out a particular substance, it follows that our talk about the divine persons will inevitably proceed under a rubric that is most proper to substances. Again, all such talk is by way of analogy and accommodation to our inability adequately to think or express three persons who are really just relations subsisting in one substance.⁵⁴

The Oxford Handbook of the Trinity (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 359–70.

53 Emery, *Trinitarian Theology*, p. 95. See also Aquinas, *ST I*, q. 28, 2, ad 1–2, and *DP*, q. 8, 2.

54 See Emery, *Trinitarian Theology*, pp. 117–18, and Aquinas, *ST I*, q. 29, 4.

In the end, when we speak of divine subsisting relations we are forced to predicate in a double way, using language that is proper both to relation and substance to describe persons who are both at once.⁵⁵ We should be careful not to assume that this doubling up in our God-talk functions as a direct map of divine ontology by which we discover some sort of composition between the divine relations and essence resulting in the concrete persons. Given that we are composite creatures who can only think and speak compositely, it is no argument against divine simplicity that we are compelled to predicate of the simple Father, Son and Holy Spirit according to the double way of relation and essence. Whatever distinction we make in that regard is merely conceptual and not real.

Conclusion

Far from posing a problem for the Trinity, divine simplicity has historically been deployed to purify our talk about the divine relations and persons in such a manner as is most agreeable to monotheistic conviction. As Emery declares, ‘Simplicity lays itself down as a fundamental rule of Trinitarian doctrine: God is his own essence or nature, and the persons themselves are this nature.’⁵⁶ This means that God’s personal relations do not determine him to some further actuality that he does not eternally and perfectly possess by virtue of his substance. Nor are the persons themselves composed of substance and relation; rather, they just are the relations perfectly and eternally subsisting in the Godhead. Furthermore, the real identity between the divine essence and persons and between the persons and their distinguishing relations, which seems to be required by the doctrine of simplicity, does not necessarily do violence to the reality of the relations and distinctions among the divine persons. It only requires that we not regard these persons as distinct substances, or the relations as accidents, in God. Obviously, human thought and language fail adequately to comprehend or express such realities. The ‘purification’ undertaken in this article has not been with the goal of arriving at comprehension of God, but merely to show the harmony that can be had between the doctrines of divine simplicity and the Trinity.

55 Emery elsewhere denominates this duality in our talk about God’s persons as ‘redoublement’. It contains two aspects, ‘the divinity or the divine essence *common* to the three persons, and the *properties* that distinguish the persons’. Gilles Emery, *Trinity in Aquinas* (Yipsalanti: Sapientia Press, 2003), p. 133. Augustine similarly observes that we speak of the divine persons both ‘substance-wise’ and ‘relationship-wise’. *The Trinity*, bk 5, ch. 1, 8.

56 Emery, *Trinitarian Theology*, p. 143. See also Aquinas, *ST I*, q. 3, 3; I, q. 39, 1.