

MAKING SENSE OF DIVINE SIMPLICITY

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According to the doctrine of divine simplicity, God is an absolutely simple being lacking any distinct metaphysical parts, properties, or constituents. Although this doctrine was once an essential part of traditional philosophical theology, it is now widely rejected as incoherent. In this paper, I develop an interpretation of the doctrine designed to resolve contemporary concerns about its coherence, as well as to show precisely what is required to make sense of divine simplicity.

Few tenets of classical theism strike contemporary philosophers as more perplexing or difficult to comprehend than the doctrine of divine simplicity—that is, the doctrine that God is an absolutely simple being, completely devoid of any sort of metaphysical complexity. This doctrine has its roots in antiquity, perhaps tracing ultimately to Parmenides, but it receives its most elaborate development and careful defense at the hands of philosophers and theologians during the Middle Ages. According to the standard medieval understanding—as epitomized by Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas—the doctrine entails not only that God lacks the obvious forms of complexity associated with the possession of material or temporal parts, but also that he lacks even the minimal form of complexity associated with the possession of distinct properties or attributes. Thus, from the fact that God is divine, medieval thinkers infer that God is identical with his nature or divinity; from the fact that he is good, they infer that he is identical with his goodness; and so on in every other such case. And, of course, from the fact that God is identical with each of these things, they infer that each of them is identical with each of the others.

It is easy to see why contemporary philosophers find the doctrine so difficult. As stated, it seems to entail that God is identical with each of his properties—and, by implication, that each of his properties is identical with each of the others, and hence that God is himself a property. But *that* seems absurd. “The trouble with the idea” C. B. Martin once remarked “is just that it is hogwash”.¹ Other philosophers have drawn the same conclusion, sometimes going a step further and claiming, with Quentin Smith, that the doctrine is not only “plainly self-contradictory” but actually “testifies to the predominance of faith over intellectual coherence in some Christian circles.”²

Given the stature of the thinkers who have endorsed this doctrine historically, it is not surprising that a number of contemporary philosophers have come to its defense, arguing that divine simplicity is at least coherent, even if not ultimately acceptable.³ For all their ingenuity, however, contemporary defenses of the doctrine continue to fall on deaf ears. My purpose in this paper is two-fold: to explain why this is case, and to mount a new defense, one that succeeds where the others have failed to resolve contemporary concerns about the doctrine’s coherence.

As will become clear when I discuss the doctrine below, there is nothing in divine simplicity itself that requires us to identify God with a property. On the contrary, the doctrine requires only that God is identical with the entities (such as *God’s goodness*, *God’s power*, and *God’s wisdom*) that are required to explain the truths expressed by true

¹ Martin 1976, 40.

² Smith 1988, 524, n. 3. The *locus classicus* for contemporary difficulties is Plantinga 1980. There are, however, a number of works that have contributed in important ways to the contemporary understanding of these difficulties, including each of the following: Mann 1982, 1983; Morris 1985; and Stump and Kretzmann 1985. For some of the earliest contemporary discussions of simplicity, see Bennet 1969, Ross 1969, Martin 1976, LaCroix 1977 and 1979, and Wainwright 1979.

³ More often than not, contemporary philosophers have come to the defense of Aquinas’s understanding of simplicity. Cf., e.g., Davies 1987, Dewan 1989, Kretzmann 1983, Lamont 1997, and Stump and Kretzmann 1985.

intrinsic predications of the form “God is *F*”.⁴ That is to say, the doctrine requires nothing more than the following:

(DS): If an intrinsic predication of the form “God is *F*” is true, then *God’s F-ness* exists and is identical with God.

But if this is all the doctrine requires, then the doctrine itself takes no stand on the precise nature of the entities with which it identifies God. Hence the apparent absurdity that God is a property follows not from divine simplicity itself, but rather from its conjunction with something like the following “property account” of predication:

(PA): If an intrinsic predication of the form “*a* is *F*” is true, then *a’s F-ness* exists, where this entity is to be understood as a property.

Although contemporary defenders of divine simplicity often recognize that something like PA is at the root of contemporary difficulties with the doctrine, they are extremely reluctant to abandon it. Indeed, as we shall see, they almost always prefer to defend the claim that God is a property rather than develop an account of predication in terms of something other than properties. This explains, I think, the general failure of contemporary defenses of the doctrine: most accept some form of property interpretation (i.e., the conjunction of DS and PA), which certainly seems absurd; and those that don’t, fail to develop the sort of account of predication needed to render the doctrine coherent.

My own defense of simplicity is designed to pick up where these others leave off. It employs an alternative account of predication, one that makes crucial use of the notion of a truthmaker:

⁴ For convenience, I will often speak of “true intrinsic predications” as shorthand for the more cumbersome (and also more accurate) phrase “*the truths expressed by true intrinsic predications*”. I focus on intrinsic predications throughout, since no medieval ever thought that divine simplicity requires God to be identical with entities (if there are any) such as *being thought about by me*, which are introduced by purely *extrinsic* predications. Moreover, I rely on an intuitive notion of intrinsic predication according to which such predications are those which characterize things “in virtue of the way things themselves are”. So understood, the notion must be distinguished both from that of essential and from that of non-relational predication, since intrinsic predications can be either contingent (e.g., “Socrates is wise”) or *relational* (e.g., “Socrates has parts”).

(TA): If an intrinsic predication of the form “*a* is *F*” is true, then *a*’s *F*-ness exists, where this entity is to be understood as the *truthmaker* for “*a* is *F*”.

Interpreted in light of TA, the doctrine of divine simplicity avoids the problems associated with the property interpretation. For so interpreted, the doctrine entails that God is identical with each of the *truthmakers* for the true (intrinsic) predications that can be made about him—indeed, that God himself is the truthmaker for each of these predications. But unlike the claim that God is a property, these claims seem perfectly coherent (at least on the assumption that truthmaker theory is itself coherent).⁵ Obviously, there is much in this interpretation, as well as the “truthmaker account” of predication underlying it, that requires explanation and defense. But I shall postpone that until later in the paper.⁶

My discussion will proceed as follows. I begin in Section 1 with a brief account of the doctrine of divine simplicity, making clear why contemporary philosophers find it so natural to interpret it in terms of properties. In Section 2, I explain why, for all its attractiveness, the property interpretation of simplicity should be rejected (at least given certain standard views about properties). I then turn, in Section 3, to the task of developing a satisfactory alternative. Here I begin by critiquing two alternative suggestions that have been made in the literature, before advancing my own preferred truthmaker interpretation. Finally, I conclude my discussion, in Section 4, with a defense of the truthmaker interpretation, arguing that, in fact, it provides the only way of rendering the doctrine of divine simplicity coherent.

⁵ In what follows I assume the coherence of truthmaker theory, as it is understood by some of its most prominent defenders (more on this in §§3-4 below). Those who reject this assumption may take the conclusion of my argument to have the form of a bi-conditional—namely, that divine simplicity is coherent *if and only if* truthmaker theory (so understood) is.

⁶ For a brief, independent development of the truthmaker interpretation, see Oppy 2003. For some nascent expressions of the basic idea behind it, see Leftow 1984 (esp. 51-52, 57) and Ross 1985 (esp. 384).

1. *The Doctrine of Divine Simplicity*

Most contemporary philosophers writing on divine simplicity take themselves to be working with the doctrine as understood by thinkers such as Augustine, Anselm, or Aquinas. It will be useful, therefore, to have before us a few of their characteristic statements of the doctrine. Here is a familiar passage from Augustine:

We speak of God in many ways—as great, good, wise, blessed, true, and whatever else does not seem unworthily said of him. Nonetheless, God is identical with his greatness, which is his wisdom (since he is not great by virtue of quantity, but by virtue of power); and he is identical with his goodness, which is his wisdom and his greatness; and he is identical with his truth, which is all of these things. For in him it is not one thing to be blessed and another to be great, or wise, or true, or to be good, or to be altogether himself. (*De Trinitate* 6.7.8)

Given Augustine’s enormous influence on the development of medieval philosophy, it is not surprising that similar passages pervade the works of Anselm and Aquinas. Consider, for example, the following passage from Anselm’s *Proslogion*:

Life, wisdom, and all the rest are not parts of you, but all are one, and each of them is the whole of what you are and the whole of what the others are. (*Proslogion* 18)

Again, here is a passage from Aquinas’s *Summa Contra Gentiles*:

In every simple thing, its being and *that which it is* are the same. For if the one were not the other, simplicity would be removed. As we have shown, however, God is absolutely simple. Hence, in God, being good is not anything distinct from him; he *is* his goodness. (SCG, I 38)

As these passages help to make clear, the traditional doctrine of divine simplicity can be expressed in terms of the requirements it places on divine predications. At least as understood by the medievals, what this doctrine tells us is that if a predication such as “God is good” is true, then there exists an entity, *God’s goodness*, that is identical with God; likewise, if “God is powerful” is true, then *God’s power* exists and is identical with God; and so on for other such true divine predications. Generalizing, therefore, we can

(as I noted in the introduction) state the traditional doctrine of divine simplicity as follows:

(DS): If an intrinsic predication of the form “God is *F*” is true, then *God’s F-ness* exists and is identical with God.

Stated in this way, the doctrine seems to presuppose the existence of entities corresponding to abstract singular terms such as ‘God’s goodness’, ‘God’s power’, and ‘God’s wisdom’.⁷ So stated, therefore, the doctrine appears to be inconsistent with certain forms of nominalism—namely, all those which deny that expressions of the form ‘*a*’s *F-ness*’ are genuinely referring devices.⁸ Even so, it must be noted that, strictly speaking, the doctrine is silent about the nature of the entities referred to by these expressions. For it says nothing about the ontological category to which they belong. How, then, are we to understand such entities?

It is natural to suppose that the answer must be ‘as properties’. After all, Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas all suppose that, at least in the case of creatures, some true (intrinsic) predications of the form “*a* is *F*” entail the existence of properties, which can in turn be referred to by expressions of the form ‘*a*’s *F-ness*’. To cite just one text as evidence, consider the following passage from Anselm’s *Monologion* in which he compares the justice of a human being to the justice of God.

A human being cannot *be* his justice, though he can *have* his justice. For the same reason, a just human being is not understood as *being* his justice (*existens iustitia*), but as *having* his justice. By contrast, it is not properly said that the supreme nature *has* its justice, but *is* its justice. Hence when the supreme nature is called just, is it properly understood as *being* its justice, rather than as *having* its justice.⁹ (*Monologion* 16)

⁷ Terms such as these are called ‘abstract singular terms’ because they are the abstract counterparts of concrete terms such as ‘good’, ‘powerful’, and ‘wise’ and are grammatically singular in number.

⁸ This is not to deny, of course, that the doctrine could be restated so as to be perfectly consistent with all forms of nominalism. But I shall concern myself in what follows only with the traditional statement of the doctrine, which is the one lying behind contemporary worries about its coherence.

⁹ The possessive pronouns do not explicitly occur in the Latin, but I think they are implicit here (as they often are in Latin). I have discussed the theory of properties underlying Anselm’s discussion here (and elsewhere) in Brower 2004.

Here Anselm tells us that if an individual human being, say Socrates, is truly said to be just, this is because he *exemplifies* justice, which is a property distinct from him.

Evidently, therefore, Anselm takes the truth of creaturely predications such as “Socrates is just” to entail the existence of *Socrates’s justice*, where this entity is to be understood as a property. But if expressions of the form ‘*a’s F-ness*’ refer to properties in the case of creatures, why should they behave any differently in the case of God? To the extent that medieval thinkers suppose that creaturely predications imply the existence of properties, therefore, it is natural to suppose they do so on the basis of a perfectly general account of predication (and abstract reference)—what I earlier called ‘the property account’:

(PA): If an intrinsic predication of the form “*a is F*” is true, then *a’s F-ness* exists, where this entity is to be understood as a property.

The plausibility of attributing PA to the medievals is reinforced by the intuitive nature of PA itself. For this account just appears to make explicit something that, as contemporary philosophers, we often take for granted. We habitually speak as if for any true predication whatsoever, there is a subject of predication (e.g., Socrates), there is a property (e.g., justice or Socrates’s justice), and the subject exemplifies the property (e.g., Socrates *is* just).¹⁰

In light of the foregoing, there seems to be good reason initially to accept a property interpretation of divine simplicity—that is to say, one that combines the doctrine as stated at DS with the property account at PA. Of course, interpreting the doctrine in

¹⁰ Those who think of properties as universals might find it odd that PA introduces properties using expressions of the form ‘*a’s F-ness*’ rather than ‘*F-ness*’ (especially since expressions of the former sort are now standardly used to refer to particular properties or tropes). As stated, however, PA is intended to be neutral as regards the specific nature of the properties to which it refers, and hence to leave open the question of whether they are universal or particular. If Socrates and Plato are both human, PA tells us that they each have the property of humanity. Strictly speaking, however, it takes no stand on the question of whether Socrates’s humanity is identical with Plato’s.

this way has the immediate consequence that God is identical with each of his properties, and hence is himself a property. But this consequence, as we shall see, is one that most contemporary defenders of simplicity are willing to accept.

2. Property Interpretations of Simplicity

Perhaps no one has done more to highlight the apparent absurdity of the property interpretation of divine simplicity than Alvin Plantinga. Indeed, ever since the publication of his 1980 monograph, *Does God Have a Nature?*, the literature on divine simplicity has been dominated by the question of whether it is coherent to say that God is identical with each of his (intrinsic) properties. As Plantinga points out, there are at least two reasons for thinking it is not:

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 he has but one property ... In the second place, 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. (Plantinga 1980, 47)¹¹

Although the first consideration “seems flatly incompatible with the obvious fact that God has several properties,” it is the difficulty raised by the second consideration that Plantinga regards as “truly monumental”:

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 to be an utter mistake. (Plantinga 1980, 47)

It is hard to disagree with Plantinga's conclusion here, at least on the assumption that properties are abstract objects. For no such object could be a person, much less one

¹¹ For important discussion of both difficulties in the literature, see Forrest 1996, Hughes 1989, Mann 1986, Stump and Kretzmann 1985, and Wolterstorff 1991.

responsible for the creation of the universe, capable of love, knowledge, power, awareness, and life.

2.1 Properties as Universals. I think it is fair to say that most philosophers writing about simplicity since Plantinga have assumed that the apparent absurdity of the doctrine derives entirely from the specific conception of properties in terms of which Plantinga interprets it. As is clear from the passages just quoted, Plantinga espouses a form of *Platonic realism*—that is, a conception of properties according to which they are a specific type of abstract entity, namely, *universals*. Most defenders of simplicity would admit that this conception raises problems for the doctrine. But insofar as it represents only one of several respectable ways of conceiving of properties, they assume that these problems can be avoided merely by adopting some other conception of properties.

Although it would be possible to develop a version of the property interpretation in terms of some form of *Aristotelian* (as opposed to Platonic) *realism*—according to which properties are *concrete* (as opposed to abstract) universals—no one to my knowledge has attempted to do so. Nor is it hard to see why. The claim that God is a concrete universal seems just as problematic as the claim that he is an abstract universal. For by their very nature, universals are multiply exemplifiable entities—that is to say, entities capable of being exemplified by more than one thing at a time; and concrete universals are typically regarded as constituents of the concrete particulars that possess them.¹² Thus, interpreting simplicity in terms of concrete universals would have the consequence that God is both multiply exemplifiable and capable of serving as a

¹² For a defense of the concrete conception of properties, also commonly referred to as ‘immanent realism’, see Armstrong 1978, vol. 2, chap. 3 and Armstrong 1997, chaps. 3-4.

constituent of other concrete particulars. But each of these consequences seems absurd. Certainly there are one-many relations in which God stands to concrete particulars; and we may, if we like, follow the neo-Platonists in speaking of such relations in terms of *participation*. But it doesn't follow that God can literally be multiply exemplified, for only universals can stand in *that* relation to particulars and no concrete particular is a universal.¹³ Nor would it seem plausible, at least on the classical conception of deity, to say that God is a constituent of anything else. For according to the classical conception, God is a transcendent being.¹⁴ Evidently, therefore, if we are going to defend the coherence of identifying God with a property, we must formulate a theory of properties according to which at least some properties are both *concrete* and *individual*.

2.2 Properties as Concrete Individuals. As far as I know the first person in the contemporary literature to adopt a version of the properties-as-concrete-individuals interpretation is William Mann (1982). Although his specific version of this interpretation faces seriously difficulties, it nonetheless suggests a general type of interpretation that can seem quite promising.

According to Mann, when medievals such as Aquinas identify God with *his* nature, *his* goodness, and *his* power, they do so with the intention of identifying God with what he calls *property instances*—that is, concrete individuals that stand in a special relation (namely, instantiation) to the Platonic universals of which they are the

¹³ When the neo-Platonists (or, for that matter, philosophers such as Aquinas) speak of creatures as *participating* in God, they don't really mean to suggest that God is *exemplified* by creatures, and hence is a universal. On the contrary, they typically mean that creatures are resemblances of, and beings causally dependent on, God. For discussion of this conception of participation, as well as the attribution of it to Plato himself, see Allen 1960.

¹⁴ Cf. Aquinas's discussion of this issue in *Summa Theologiae* Ia, q. 8, a. 1.

instances.¹⁵ As Mann sees it, therefore, we must distinguish between two very different kinds of property—abstract universals such as goodness, power, and wisdom, and concrete individual properties such as God’s goodness, God’s power, and God’s wisdom, which are instances of the corresponding universals.¹⁶ With this distinction in hand, he suggests that the medieval doctrine of simplicity requires the identification of God with properties of only the latter sort. Thus, if God and one of his creatures, such as Socrates, are both good, it will be true that they both stand in relation to the same universal, goodness. At the same time, however, it will also be true that they stand in this relation by virtue of possessing their own numerically distinct, concrete individual instances of goodness—namely, *God’s goodness* in the case of God (which is identical with God), and *Socrates’s goodness* in the case of Socrates (which is distinct from him). But, of course, if this is correct, then the medieval doctrine can preserve the intuition that God is a concrete individual.

Although initially promising, the property-instance interpretation of simplicity must ultimately be rejected. As is often pointed out, one of the chief motivations historically for the doctrine of divine simplicity is divine *aseity*—that is, the view that God is an absolutely independent being, and hence exists entirely from himself (*a se*).¹⁷ But if God is a property instance, he will lack *aseity*. For property instances, at least as Mann conceives them, are dependent for their existence on the universals of which they are the instances. Thus, if God is identical with his goodness, even where his goodness is

¹⁵ Mann 1982; cf. Mann 1983.

¹⁶ Mann doesn’t speak of property instances as properties, since he reserves the latter term for universals. Still, it’s clear from his discussion that he’s thinking of them along the lines of what philosophers nowadays call particular properties or tropes. Cf. esp. 1982, 466.

¹⁷ See Bergmann and Brower 2006; Brower forthcoming; Immink 1987; Jordan 1983, esp. 176-179; Leftow 1990, 584-592; and Plantinga 1980, 28-37.

conceived as a property instance, God will depend for his existence on something distinct from himself, namely, the universal property of which his goodness is an instance, *being good*; and the same will be true for each of his other property instances.¹⁸

It might be thought that this objection could be avoided, and the properties-as-concrete-individuals interpretation upheld, if we simply denied the Platonic aspect of Mann's view, and conceived of properties in terms of what are now standardly called 'tropes'. Like property instances, tropes are concrete individuals, but unlike them, they are not generally thought to require the existence of universals to explain their similarity or "sameness". Thus, if it is asked in virtue of what two (or more) tropes of whiteness resemble each other, the answer will typically appeal to nothing more than the tropes themselves. Just in virtue of being the concrete individuals they are, they resemble each other with respect to color. End of story.¹⁹

Would a trope-theoretic version of the property interpretation fare any better than Mann's property-instance interpretation?²⁰ The answer, it seems to me, is 'no'. For although identifying God with a trope would avoid making him dependent on a universal (since according to most trope theorists, there are no universals), it would not succeed in making him absolutely independent. For even tropes, as they are usually conceived, are dependent beings—that is, concrete individuals depending for their existence on something distinct from themselves (namely, the subjects to which they belong). But, then, even if God is identified with a trope, he will lack aseity. Of course, one could

¹⁸ Morris (1985) criticizes Mann on these grounds, as does Wolterstorff (1991) and Vallicella (1992).

¹⁹ For discussion of trope nominalism, see Armstrong 1989, Campbell 1980 and 1990, and Smith, Mulligan, and Simons 1984.

²⁰ Interestingly, in later work, Mann (1986, 343-353) explicitly considers the aseity objection as well as the trope-nominalistic reply, though even here he does not adopt it. Like so many other defenders of simplicity, he is simply unwilling in the end to abandon Platonic realism altogether, and hence tries to rebut the objection from within a realist framework. For discussion of Mann's reply here, as well as the new problems it raises, see Wolterstorff 1991, 538-540.

reject the usual conception of tropes, maintaining instead that tropes have a measure of independence—that they are (in A. J. Ayer’s memorable phrase) “junior substances”. But even if this proposal would resolve the worry about aseity, it would still face a serious difficulty—indeed it would face what I take to be the chief difficulty for any every version of the property interpretation. Regardless of how else they are conceived, tropes are *properties*. But, then, even if they are conceived of as independent beings, they will still be distinguished from substances proper—“senior substances”—insofar as properties can (whereas as concrete particular substances cannot) be exemplified—i.e., possessed, instantiated, or had.

There is one final step that the defender of the property interpretation could take—namely, to reject that properties in general, and tropes in particular, must be conceived of as entities capable of being exemplified. At one time I thought this was just the sort of response required to make sense of divine simplicity. But I am now convinced that it is mistaken—or at least misguided in the current dialectical context. For unlike the other features of properties we have been considering (abstractness, universality, and dependency), the capacity for being exemplified is generally taken by critics of the doctrine to be constitutive of, and hence inseparable from, the concept of a property.²¹ Nor is it hard to see why. This conception of properties is precisely the one lying behind the traditional view that properties are entities categorially distinct from substances.

According to the traditional view, both properties and substances may be the subject of

²¹ Or at least to be constitutive of, and inseparable from, the concept of a *basic* or *fundamental* property. This qualification is needed because many philosophers want to admit the existence of unexemplifiable properties such as *being red and not being red*. As Chris Swoyer (2000, §1) points out, however, “even they typically believe that such properties are intimately related to other [more basic or fundamental] properties (here *being red* and *not being red*) that can be exemplified”.

further properties, and hence can both be said to *exemplify* other things. But only substances are such that they cannot be *exemplified* by anything else.²²

In light of the foregoing, we may state the fundamental difficulty for any version of the property interpretation succinctly as follows:

- (1) God is a substance.
- (2) No substance can be a property (i.e., an exemplifiable).
- ∴ (3) God cannot be identical with a property (no matter how entities of this type are conceived).

The first premise, I take it, is non-negotiable, since according to traditional theism, God is a person, and persons are substances.²³ But the second premise would seem to be non-negotiable as well, since it seems to be central tenet of our very conception of properties that whatever else they are, they are not substances.

2.3 Properties as Substances. As it turns out, however, a number of people have attempted to defend the property interpretation precisely by rejecting premise 2 of the argument above. Katherin Rogers (1996), for example, has suggested that even if there is a categorial divide between substances and certain types of properties, which she calls *qualities* or *traits*, there is no such division separating substances and what medievals such as Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas call *actions*—a special type of concrete individual that, at least in the case of creatures, *inheres in* or is *exemplified by* substances.²⁴ But, then, provided we identify God only with “actions” of this specific

²² For further discussion and defense of the traditional view, see Oliver 1996 and Swoyer 2000.

²³ As indicated earlier (in note 13), this premise is not violated by neo-Platonic conceptions of God, according to which God is that in which all things participate. Nor, would I argue, is it violated by the traditional insistence that God is not a substance or person in exactly the same sense we are.

²⁴ As this description makes clear, such “actions” are not to be confused with events as contemporary philosophers conceive of them.

sort, a version of the property interpretation can be upheld—or so Rogers’s discussion suggests.²⁵

Again, Brian Leftow (1990) has presented an argument which suggests that the failure of the traditional conception of properties and substances, and hence the falsity of premise 2, is precisely the lesson to be drawn from the doctrine of divine simplicity. Suppose that divine simplicity *does* entail that God is a property. Even so, Leftow argues, it does not follow (as Plantinga suggests) that God is an abstract object and hence not a person, even if (like Plantinga) we are initially inclined to accept a form of Platonic realism. If God is identical with a property *P*, then admittedly it follows that there is only one thing where we might originally have thought there were two (namely, God and *P*). Again, this single thing must have all the characteristics that God really has and all the characteristics that *P* really has. But as Leftow rightly points out, these characteristics may constitute only a proper subset of those originally associated with God and *P*. Thus, if God is a substance and *P* is a property, it *may* turn out that some substances (namely, God) are abstract entities capable of being exemplified (in which case Plantinga’s conclusion would be right, God is *not* a person). But then again, it *may also* turn out that some properties (namely, *P*) are concrete particular substances and hence incapable of exemplification (in which case there is no problem with saying that God is a person). For

²⁵ See Rogers 1996, esp. 170-172. Rogers would not accept my description of her view, for she denies that the term ‘property’ can be applied to what the medievals call actions on the grounds that actions are done or performed, whereas properties (i.e., qualities or traits) are possessed. This restriction on the scope of the application of the term, however, seems artificial and even misleading in the context of the medieval philosophical tradition that she claims to be representing. For as indicated in the text itself, when the medievals speak of *actions* (*actiones*), what they have in mind are concrete individuals *inhering in* or *belonging to* particulars—which, of course, is why they follow Aristotle in identifying actions (or at least creaturely actions) as one of the nine categories of accidents (i.e., accidental properties). For a representative medieval discussion of actions, see Aquinas’s *Sententia super Physicam* III, lect. 5.

obvious reasons, proponents of the property interpretation may well opt for the latter conclusion.²⁶

By far the most explicit attempt to challenge the traditional conception of properties and substances occurs in William Vallicella's (1992) treatment of divine simplicity. Vallicella grants that something is a property if and only if it can be exemplified. He also grants that substances are such that they cannot be multiply exemplified nor exemplified by anything distinct from themselves. As he points out, however, the conjunction of these two claims is consistent with the view that substances are capable of being exemplified *by themselves*, and hence of also qualifying as properties. Vallicella recommends, therefore, that we identify God with his properties and then construe God's properties as entities that can be exemplified only by themselves. Here again, the motivation is clearly to uphold a version of the property interpretation.²⁷

As I see it, none of these discussions provides anything like compelling grounds for abandoning the traditional conception of properties. For while they each recommend abandoning the conception, they offer us little in the way of independent motivation for doing so.²⁸ Without some such motivation, however, the strategy they adopt for making sense of simplicity appears not only extreme, but also extremely *ad hoc*. Indeed, it would seem that any account of simplicity that could render the doctrine coherent without giving up the traditional conception of properties would be preferable to them.²⁹

²⁶ See Leftow 1990, 593-594.

²⁷ See Vallicella 1992, esp. 512-519.

²⁸ Leftow (1990, 582-3) actually offers positive arguments for the truth of divine simplicity. But even if these arguments compelling, they don't require us to reject the traditional conception of properties as exemplifiables. For as we have seen, there is nothing in the doctrine of divine simplicity itself (as stated at DS) that requires the identification of God with a property.

²⁹ In saying all this, I don't mean to suggest that the traditional conception of properties is unassailable. There are, after all, a number of contexts in which philosophers habitually conceive of properties in ways that don't involve the notion of exemplifiability—namely, as *sets* of possibilities or *functions* from possible

For all these reasons, I conclude that if we want to make sense of divine simplicity, our best hope is not to abandon the traditional conception of properties, but rather to abandon the attempt to interpret the doctrine in terms of properties at all.

3. *Alternative Interpretations of Simplicity*

Obviously, if we are going to avoid the difficulties associated with the property interpretation, we must find some alternative way of understanding locutions such as ‘God’s nature’, ‘God’s goodness’, and ‘God’s power’—one according to which they refer something other than properties. But to what other type of entities can they plausibly be taken to refer?

There is very little discussion of this question in the contemporary literature. In fact, there appear to be only two suggestions that have been developed—namely, (a) that abstract singular terms refer to *states of affairs*, and (b) that they refer to metaphysical *constituents* of particulars. Although neither suggestion is ultimately acceptable, both are worth exploring briefly, since the reasons for their failure are instructive: they point the way not only to an adequate interpretation of simplicity, but also to the conditions that must be met by any adequate interpretation.

3.1 The State-of-affairs Interpretation. States of affairs provide what is, perhaps, the most obvious suggestion for a type of entity (other than properties) that could serve as the

worlds to sets of possibilities. My own view is that the “properties” appealed to by these alternative conceptions are not genuine properties at all, but rather entities introduced to model some of the functional roles that genuine properties play. But even if I am wrong about this, these alternative conceptions are not the ones taken for granted in the context of simplicity. And even if they were, they would be of no use in responding to the objection that God is a property. On the contrary, they would simply raise the objection in a different form. For saying that God is a set or function seems just as absurd as saying that God is an exemplifiable.

referents for expressions of the form ‘*a*’s *F*-ness’. Plantinga (1980), who seems to have been the first to consider this suggestion in the context of simplicity, develops it as follows:

Suppose we consider Socrates and wisdom: we can distinguish Socrates from wisdom and each of them from the state of affairs *Socrates’ being wise*—a state of affairs that obtains or is actual if and only if Socrates displays wisdom. Perhaps we could refer to *Socrates’ being wise* by the locutions ‘Socrates’ having wisdom’ or ‘the wisdom of Socrates’ or even ‘Socrates’ wisdom.’ And when Aquinas speaks of God’s life or God’s wisdom, perhaps we may take him as speaking of the state of affairs consisting in God’s being wise and having life. (Plantinga 1980, 48)

In effect, Plantinga is suggesting here that, instead of interpreting simplicity in terms of a property account of predication and abstract reference, we interpret it in terms of a “state-of-affairs account” of such phenomena:

(SA): If an intrinsic predication of the form “*a* is *F*” is true, then *a*’s *F*-ness exists, where this entity is to be understood as a state of affairs.

There is one respect in which Plantinga claims the state-of-affairs interpretation is clearly superior to any form of property interpretation. The state-of-affairs interpretation can (whereas the property interpretation cannot) immediately deflect the difficulty of explaining how God’s goodness, power, wisdom, and so on can all be identical with one another. For as he says “while it is obviously absurd to claim that wisdom and power are the very same property, it is not obviously absurd to hold that *God’s being wise* is the same state of affairs as *God’s being powerful*.”³⁰ Even so, Plantinga thinks, the state-of-affairs must ultimately be rejected. For states of affairs are abstract objects and hence no more capable than properties of creating the universe or possessing knowledge, awareness, power, love, or life.³¹ Again, states of affairs are essentially such as to obtain or fail to obtain, whereas substances (and in particular, persons) are not.

³⁰ Plantinga 1980, 49.

³¹ Plantinga 1980, 52.

In response, it is tempting to adopt the strategy suggested earlier by Leftow (1990), noting that even if the identification of God with a state of affairs *might* be taken to show that God is a certain type of abstract object, it might *just as well* be taken to show that certain states of affairs (such as *God's being wise* or *God's being powerful*) are concrete particular substances. Assuming we opt for the latter conclusion, however, the objection would seem to be avoided.

Note, however, that adopting this line of response requires us to reject the view that there is any categorial difference between states of affairs and substances—just as the earlier adoption of this strategy required us to reject the view that there is a categorial difference between properties and substances. Those, like Plantinga, who start off conceiving of states of affairs as *abstracta* will, no doubt, find the rejection of this sort of dualism implausible—indeed, just as implausible as the rejection of that between properties and substances. Even so, there are resources for responding to this claim that weren't available in the case of properties. For states of affairs *can*, even if properties cannot, be conceived of in a way that is amenable to their identification with substances. As is well known, David Armstrong has argued that the particulars of ordinary experience (what he calls “thick particulars”) are nothing but *concrete* states of affairs.³² In doing so, he appears to be suggesting that we conceive of substances roughly along the lines of what other philosophers call *facts*, *events*, or *property exemplifications*. But there is nothing obviously absurd about identifying particular substances with entities of this sort (or at least we may assume this is true). But, then, what objection can there be to conceiving of God in this way as well?

³² Cf. Armstrong 1997; for the distinction between ‘thin’ and ‘thick’ particulars, see 123-126. Gustav Bergmann held a similar conception of particulars. Cf. Wolterstorff 1970 for references and discussion.

The short answer is that such a conception of God conflicts with the standard understanding of divine simplicity. As we have seen, this understanding requires that God lacks *any* metaphysical parts, constituents, or complexity whatsoever. But concrete states of affairs, as they are typically conceived, are structured complexes having constituents.³³ Thus, an ordinary (thick) particular such as Socrates, on Armstrong's view, is a structured complex whose constituents are a bare substratum (or "thin particular") and various properties (namely, those that make up Socrates's nature). But, then, evidently, an absolutely simple God cannot be identified with a state of affairs of this sort.

Of course, one could always *try* to modify the standard concrete-state-of-affairs conception in order to handle cases of simple substances. But even if successful, it would still seem that *no* state-of-affairs interpretation could succeed in rendering the doctrine of divine simplicity coherent. For this sort of interpretation is based on the general account of predication and abstract reference at SA, which takes *all* expressions of the form '*a*'s *F*-ness' to refer to states of affairs. As we have seen, however, traditional proponents of divine simplicity—thinkers such as Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas—all assume that, at least in the case of creatures, expressions of the form '*a*'s *F*-ness' can refer to properties. Thus, 'Socrates's justice', they say, refers to a quality that is distinct from and exemplified by Socrates. In order to make sense of this assumption, the defender of the state-of-affairs interpretation would have to allow that, at least in the case of creatures, states of affairs can be identified with properties. But that seems absurd on any conception of states of affairs: no state of affairs, whether simple or complex, can be exemplified, whereas properties are by nature exemplifiable.

³³ Cf. again Armstrong 1997.

This last criticism brings us to an important respect in which both the property and the state-of-affairs interpretations fail. As we can now see, both interpretations take for granted what might be called a ‘single-category account’ of predication and abstract reference—that is to say, an account according to which the entities such as *God’s justice* and *Socrates’s justice* belong to a *single* ontological category. All versions of the property interpretation take for granted that such entities belong to the category of *property*, whereas all versions of the state-of-affairs interpretation take for granted they belong to the category of *state of affairs*. The problem, however, is that the doctrine of divine simplicity cannot be interpreted solely in terms of either properties or states of affairs—or indeed in terms of entities belonging to *any* single ontological category. As our earlier discussion of Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas makes clear, the doctrine must be understood in terms of an account of predication and abstract reference that allows for expressions of the form ‘*a’s F-ness*’ to refer both to properties (as in the case of *Socrates’s justice*) and to concrete particular substances (as in the case of *God’s justice*). But no single-category account of predication can do that, since no single ontological category can include both substances and properties.

In the end, therefore, Plantinga appears to have been right—though not for the reasons he suggests—to suppose that the state-of-affairs interpretation is just as unacceptable as the property interpretation. Indeed, summarizing our results to this point, we may say that *no* interpretation that presupposes a single-category account of predication can possibly be used to make sense of divine simplicity—regardless of whether the single category in question is taken to be *property*, *state of affairs*, or any other.

3.2 *The Constituent Interpretation.* If we want to avoid the problems associated with interpretations of simplicity that take for granted a single-category theory of predication, we must adopt a new account of predication—one that allows us to characterize the referents of abstract expressions in a way that is consistent with their belonging to *different* ontological categories (in particular, the categories of *substance* and *property*). But what must such an account look like? In answering this question, we can do no better than to start with an account suggested by Nicholas Wolterstorff (1991).

According to Wolterstorff, contemporary difficulties with divine simplicity all stem from the fact that we now approach the doctrine from the perspective of a theoretical framework that is foreign to the one in which it was traditionally understood. Although Wolterstorff doesn't explicitly characterize the differences in terms of what these frameworks say about predication and abstract reference, it is clear that this is how he's thinking of them.³⁴ Consider, for example, how he contrasts the two frameworks with respect to what each says about the possession of natures or essences:

It has become habitual for us twentieth-century philosophers, when thinking of essences, to think of things *having* essences, and to think of these essences as certain properties or sets of properties. An essence is thus for us an abstract entity. For a medieval, I suggest, an essence or nature was just as concrete [and individual] as that of which it is the nature ... Naturally the medieval will speak of something as *having* a certain nature. But the *having* here is to be understood as *having as one of its constituents*. Very much of the difference between medieval and contemporary ontology hangs on these two different construals of "having". Whereas for the medievals, *having an essence* was, having an essence as one of its constituents, for us, *having an essence* is, having an essence as one of its properties: exemplifying it. (Wolterstorff 1991, 541-542)

³⁴ Wolterstorff speaks, at various points in his article, of the need for 'a theory of predication' in connection with divine simplicity, but what he means by this is a theory about the *semantics* of predication—one that will explain how a multiplicity of predicates with distinct senses or meanings can be predicated of a simple God. When I speak of the need for a theory of predication, however, what I have in mind is theory about the *metaphysics* of predication—one that explains the nature of the entities required both for the truth of predication and for the referents of abstract singular terms.

Wolterstorff's point in the passage seems to be this: whereas contemporary philosophers conceive of predication in terms of subjects exemplifying properties, the medievals conceive of predication in terms of subjects possessing constituents. Thus, when contemporary philosophers speak of essences (or more generally, of the referents of abstract expressions of the form '*a*'s *F*-ness'), what they have in mind are abstract (universal) properties. By contrast, when the medievals speak of such entities, what they have in mind are concrete (individual) constituents. As Wolterstorff sees it, therefore, contemporary philosophers approach the doctrine of divine simplicity from the perspective of a property (or property-as-universals) account of predication and abstract reference, whereas the medievals approach it from the perspective of what might be called 'the constituent account':

(CA): If an intrinsic predication of the form "*a* is *F*" is true, then *a*'s *F*-ness exists, where this entity is to be understood as a metaphysical constituent of *a*.

Wolterstorff's diagnosis of contemporary difficulties with simplicity seems plausible in light of our earlier discussion. The property account at PA *is*, as I've suggested, at the root of most contemporary puzzlement over the doctrine. Moreover, his suggestion that the medievals interpret the doctrine in terms of CA (rather than PA) seems promising. For unlike all the other accounts we've considered, CA characterizes the referents of abstract expressions of the form '*a*'s *F*-ness' in terms of an ontological type—namely, *constituent*—whose further specification can include both substances and properties. Thus, the view that results from interpreting simplicity in terms of CA—namely, that God is identical with each of his constituents, and hence has only one constituent, himself—seems perfectly coherent (at least if we allow for the notion of an "improper constituent", on the model of an improper part in mereology). Note, too, that

this view is consistent with the claim that expressions of the form ‘*a*’s *F*-ness’ refer to properties in the case of creatures. For there is no obvious absurdity in saying that creatures have properties among their (proper) constituents, whereas God does not. Indeed, insofar as CA is neutral with regard to the nature of the entities introduced by expressions like ‘*a*’s justice’, it clearly allows for a multiple-category theory of predication according to which, in some cases an expression of this sort refers to a property (namely, in the case of a creature such as Socrates), and in other cases it refers to a concrete individual (namely, in the case of God).

Of all the interpretations of divine simplicity currently on offer in the literature, Wolterstorff’s has done more, I suspect, than any other to convince people that the doctrine is coherent.³⁵ Even so, it seems to me that there is a respect in which the theory of predication and abstract reference underlying it is unacceptably incomplete. For even if it makes sense to say that expressions such as ‘Socrates’s justice’ or ‘Socrates’s nature’ refer to metaphysical constituents of Socrates, CA gives us no principled basis for distinguishing these constituents. But that seems problematic. After all, *Socrates’s nature* is not just any constituent of Socrates, but that constituent *in virtue of which* he is human; likewise, *Socrates’s justice* is not just any constituent of him, but that constituent *in virtue of which* he is just (as opposed to, say, human or powerful); and so on for the referents of every other such abstract expression. In general, we need a way of distinguishing these sorts of constituents, if only because in many cases they really are distinct. According to Aquinas, for example, the referents of ‘Socrates’s nature’ and ‘Socrates’s justice’ are not only distinct from each other but also distinct from Socrates. But it is hard to see how this can be explained unless we add something like the following: although ‘Socrates’s

³⁵ Cf., e.g., the approving remarks in Freddoso 2002, xxxiv-xxxv.

nature' and 'Socrates's justice' both refer to constituents of Socrates, 'Socrates's nature' refers to that constituent *which makes him* human, whereas 'Socrates's justice' refers to that constituent *which makes him* just.

Note that the same sort of problem arises in the case of God as well. For even if God is absolutely simple, and hence identical with each of his constituents, we can still draw a conceptual distinction between *God's nature* and *his justice* or *power* (for surely expressions such as 'God's nature', 'God's justice', and 'God's power' are distinct in sense, even if not in reference). But here again, it seems that we can draw the relevant sort of distinction only if we characterize the constituents in question as follows: *God's nature* is that constituent *in virtue of which* he is divine, and *his justice* and *power*, respectively, are those constituents *in virtue of which* he is just and powerful. But to describe God's constituents in this way is already to invoke a further notion—namely, that of a *truthmaker*. For as already hinted at in the case of creatures, to say that a given entity is *that in virtue of which* something is *F* is just to say it is that *which makes it F*, or alternatively, that which “makes it true” that it is *F*.

Evidently, therefore, in order to remove the incompleteness associated with Wolterstorff's constituent account, we must revise CA along the following lines:

(CA*): If an intrinsic predication of the form “*a* is *F*” is true, then *a's F-ness* exists, where this entity is to be understood as that (proper or improper) constituent of *a* which makes true “*a* is *F*”.

Once we revise the constituent account in this way, so as to make explicit reference to truthmakers, it becomes possible to distinguish (at least conceptually) the referents of 'Socrates's nature' and 'Socrates's justice', as well as the referents of 'God's nature' and 'God's justice'. For according to CA*, the referents of abstract expressions must be identified in relation to the predications they make true. But, then, wherever the

predications are distinct, there will be grounds for at least a conceptual distinction of the referents.

As we have seen, a basis for this sort of distinction is just what was needed to remove the incompleteness associated with Wolterstorff's constituent interpretation of divine simplicity. Once it is introduced, however, his interpretation no longer seems objectionable. For now the claim that God is identical with his nature will just amount to the claim that he is identical with that constituent which makes him divine—i.e., with his *divine-making* constituent; again, the claim that he is identical with his justice will amount to the claim that he is identical with his *just-making* constituent; and so on for every other such theistic identity claim. Notice, moreover, that the interpretation also enables us to make sense of the claim that God's constituents are each identical with one another. For now to say this will just amount to saying that God's divine-making constituent is identical with his good-making constituent, and indeed that God has only one constituent, himself, that makes true each of the (intrinsic) predications that can be truly made about him.

Even without further comment, it should be clear that the revised constituent interpretation goes considerable distance toward rendering the doctrine of divine simplicity coherent. It does not succumb to any of the problems plaguing the other contemporary interpretations of simplicity. Nor is there is anything obviously absurd about saying that God is himself the truthmaker for each of the true (intrinsic) predications that can be made about him. I will have much more to say about the coherence of this sort of interpretation in the next section of the paper. Before I can do so, however, I need make clear that in moving from the original to the revised constituent

interpretation of simplicity, we have in fact introduced a new type of interpretation—one whose acceptability has nothing to do with constituents.

3.3 The Truthmaker Interpretation. Although the revised constituent interpretation makes reference to both constituents and truthmakers, it is, I now want to suggest, the notion of *truthmaking* (rather than *constituency*) that is really doing the important theoretical work. That this is the case is clear from the fact that the revised constituent interpretation at CA* can be re-stated without any reference to constituents whatsoever without any loss of plausibility. Thus, consider the following “truthmaker account” of predication and abstract reference:

(TA): If an intrinsic predication of the form “*a* is *F*” is true, then *a*’s *F*-ness exists, where this entity is to be understood as the truthmaker for “*a* is *F*”.

Clearly, what we have here is exactly like CA* except that it drops the requirement that truthmakers be constituents of any sort. Note, however, that when we interpret the doctrine of simplicity in terms of it, we arrive at the same view that makes the revised constituent interpretation seem so promising—namely, that God is identical with the truthmakers for each of his (intrinsic) predications. The only difference is that we now arrive at this view directly, without any intermediate reference to constituents.

The fact that the truthmaker interpretation of simplicity can be adequately stated without any reference to constituents (but not vice versa), confirms that it is the notion of *truthmaking* (rather than *constituency*) that is crucial for interpreting the doctrine of simplicity. Indeed, it suggests that to the extent the revised constituent interpretation succeeds as an interpretation, it does so precisely because it is a *species* of the truthmaker interpretation. But if this is correct, there would appear to be no reason to appeal to

constituents in the first place, especially if one thinks, as I do, that it is the truthmaker account, rather than any form of constituent account, that represents the actual views of medievals such as Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas on predication and abstract reference.³⁶

We have now arrived at what I take to be the only type of interpretation that can succeed in making sense of divine simplicity—namely, the truthmaker interpretation. Of course, I have yet to say anything substantive about the notion of a truthmaker itself. The notion will already be familiar to many, insofar as it is a widely accepted part of much contemporary discussion in metaphysics. Even so, a few clarificatory comments are in order.

Despite the misleading connotations suggested by its name, the notion of a truthmaker is not to be understood in terms of (efficient) causality. On the contrary, it is to be understood in terms of broadly logical necessitation—as is evident from the fact that contemporary philosophers habitually speak of truthmakers as *entailing* the truth of certain statements or predications.³⁷ Although this way of speaking strikes me as perfectly acceptable, it is sometimes objected to on the grounds that only truths (or truthbearers) can entail one another. To remove any possibility for misunderstanding, therefore, I offer the following (partial) analysis of truthmaker in its place:

(TM): If an entity *E* is a truthmaker for a predication *P*, then *E* is necessarily (or essentially) such that *P*.³⁸

In line with TM, we may speak of the relationship between a particular truthmaker and the predication it makes true in terms of necessitation rather than entailment. Here again,

³⁶ The suggestion that the medievals accept a truthmaker theory of predication is not original to me, but is explicitly defended in Fox 1987.

³⁷ See, e.g., Armstrong 1997, 13; Bigelow 1998, 125.

³⁸ Cf. Bigelow 1988, 126; Fox 1987, 188; Oliver 1996, 69; and Rodrigue-Pereyra 2002.

however, it must be kept in mind that the necessitation in question is not causal but broadly logical.

It is important to note that TM is intended to provide only a *partial* analysis of the notion of truthmaking. This point is important because a complete analysis of truthmaking in terms of entailment or necessitation would lead to obvious absurdities, including the absurdity that necessary truths—such as “ $2 + 2 = 4$ ”—can have any existing thing whatsoever as their truthmakers. But if TM does not provide a complete analysis of the notion of truthmaking, the question arises as to what else is required for something to qualify as a truthmaker? This is a difficult question, one to which different answers have been given in the literature. Some, such as Gonzalo Rodriguez-Pereyra (2002), claim that the notion of a truthmaker is primitive, and hence does not admit of non-circular analysis or definition.³⁹ Others, however, attempt to define truthmaker in terms of more familiar notions. Thus, Greg Restall (1996) suggests that we can define truthmaking in terms of the notion of non-classical or “relevant” entailment.⁴⁰ Again, Barry Smith (1999 and 2002) claims that we can define it in terms of *representation* or *projection*, a notion that he describes as the dual of necessitation.⁴¹ Although I myself prefer the primitive truthmaking account, we needn’t decide here among the competing views. For our

³⁹ Thus, according to Rodriguez-Pereyra (2002, 34), the best we can do is to say that an entity *E* is a truthmaker for a predication *P* if and only if *E* is an entity *in virtue of which* *P* is true, and then illustrate what we mean by ‘being true in virtue of’ with examples.

⁴⁰ According to Restall (1996, 339), an entity *E* is a truthmaker for a predication *P* if and only if *E* *really* entails (or is *really* necessarily such) that *P*, where he suggests that ‘real entailment (or necessity)’ is to be understood along the lines of Anderson and Belnap’s notion of relevant entailment. Rather surprisingly, however, when Restall actually states his account of real entailment, he explicitly defines it in terms of truthmakers: *A* really entails *B*, he says, if and only if, in every world *W*, every truthmaker for *A* is a truthmaker for *B*. Obviously, this account of non-classical entailment won’t do as a *reductive* analysis of the notion of truthmaking.

⁴¹ Smith’s definition of truthmaking can be characterized succinctly as follows (cf. Smith 2002, 232): an entity *E* is a truthmaker for a predication *P* if and only if *E* is necessarily such that it is a part of the total projection of *P*, where ‘the total projection of *P*’ is to be understood as ‘the sum of all those entities projected by *P*’ and an entity *E* is projected by *P* just in case both *P* and *P* entails that *E* exists.

purposes, it will suffice merely to adopt the following principle: if an entity *E* necessitates the truth of a predication *P*, then *E* is at least a candidate—perhaps even a *prima facie* good candidate—for *P*'s truthmaker.

It should be clear, in light of the foregoing, that to characterize an entity as a truthmaker is to characterize it in terms of a certain metaphysical function or role—that of necessitating (in a certain way) the truth of the predications it makes true. In this respect, 'truthmaker' is similar to other sorts of functional characterization one finds in philosophy. Just as functional characterizations in the philosophy of mind, for example, enable us to prescind from the precise nature of mental states (such as pain), so too the characterization of an entity as a truthmaker enables us to prescind from the precise ontological category to which it belongs.

All of this is, of course, directly relevant to the doctrine of divine simplicity. For as we've seen, insofar as the doctrine requires us to identify God with *his nature*, *goodness*, *power*, *justice*, and so on, it must be interpreted in light of a theory of predication and abstract reference that permits the referents of abstract expressions of the form '*a*'s *F*-ness' to refer to entities belonging to the category of *substance* (namely, God himself). Given what we have said about truthmakers, however, we can see that TA is just such a theory. In taking the referents of abstract expressions to be truthmakers, it places no restriction whatsoever on the nature or ontological category to which they belong. For the same reason, the referents of such expressions can, at least in principle, be identified not only with concrete particulars in the case of God, but also with properties in the case of creatures.

4. *The Truthmaker Interpretation Defended*

If my argument to this point has been successful, it will be clear that the truthmaker interpretation of simplicity provides us with an account of the doctrine that is *prima facie* coherent. In this final section, I complete my defense of the truthmaker interpretation by responding to some of the most obvious and worrisome objections it faces. I then conclude by arguing that, in addition to being coherent, the truthmaker interpretation provides us with the only coherent interpretation of simplicity.

4.1 The Truthmaker Interpretation and Contingency. According to the truthmaker interpretation, God is identical with the truthmakers for each of the true (intrinsic) predications that can be made about him. Thus, if God is divine, he is identical with that which makes him divine; if he is good, he is identical with that which makes him good; and so on in every other such case. Now, since nothing can be regarded as identical with anything other than itself, this interpretation just amounts to the claim that God *is* the truthmaker for each of the predications in question.

This interpretation of simplicity seems promising if we focus on predications such as “God is divine”, “God is good”, and “God is powerful”. For in each of these cases, God can plausibly be regarded as their truthmaker. According to classical theism, God is essentially divine, good, and powerful. That is to say, he is divine, good, and powerful in all possible worlds in which he exists, and hence is such as to necessitate the truth of the corresponding predications. But this, as we have seen, is all that’s required to make him a candidate for their truthmaker.

A problem arises, however, when we turn our attention to predications like “God knows that human beings exist” or “God chooses to create the universe”. These predications certainly appear to be intrinsic. According to the truthmaker interpretation, therefore, God must be their truthmaker. But do we really want to say that? To do so would require our also saying that God alone is sufficient for their truth, and hence that the truths themselves are cases of essential predication—which, in turn, entails that God could not have failed to know or will the things he actually knows or will. Such a conclusion will no doubt strike many theists as absurd.

There are two things to be said in response to this objection. The first is that, it is not at all clear that the objection goes through. Granted, if we assume that predications like “God knows that human beings exist” or “God chooses to create the universe” are genuinely intrinsic, then the truthmaker interpretation will give us no choice but to say that they are also essential. It is possible, however, to resist this assumption, and to argue instead that such predications are really cases of contingent, extrinsic predication.⁴² Indeed, this strategy seems to me not only plausible, but also the one adopted by Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas.⁴³

The second thing to be said, however, is that strictly speaking, this objection concerns the *plausibility* not the *coherence* of divine simplicity. There is nothing internally inconsistent—and so nothing absurd in *that* sense—about saying that God could not have known or willed otherwise than he actually knows or wills. On the contrary, this view seems perfectly intelligible, and has in fact been defended by a

⁴² Cf. O’Connor 1993 for an argument that this can be done with predications involving contingent divine volitions, and cf. Brower forthcoming and Pruss 2003 for arguments that this can be done with predications of both types. For a different sort of response to this objection, cf. Stump 2003.

⁴³ Cf. e.g., Aquinas’s discussion in *Summa Theologiae* Ia, q. 19, a. 3.

number of classical theists (including perhaps each of the following: Plato, Plotinus, Abelard, and Leibniz). No doubt, the view will strike many theists as “absurd” insofar as it conflicts with other things they take themselves to know about God. But that is just another way of saying it will strike them as highly implausible. Strictly speaking, therefore, even if the objection goes through, it doesn’t threaten the basic project that I’ve undertaken here, which is that of making sense of divine simplicity. While I do hope that what I have to say will help to shift contemporary discussion of the doctrine away from questions about its coherence to questions about its plausibility, my central aim here is to defend its coherence.

4.2 The Truthmaker Interpretation and Abstract Reference. There are no doubt a number of other objections that might be raised against the truthmaker interpretation and more properly concern its coherence. Here I want to focus on just two, both of which concern TA, the account of predication and abstract reference underlying it.

Objection 1: I have claimed that TA is a categorially neutral account of predication and abstract reference, and hence that in principle it places no restriction on the nature of the referents of expressions of the form ‘*a*’s *F*-ness’. Moreover, I have argued that these referents can be plausibly identified with concrete particular substances—indeed, God himself—in the case of God. But is it really possible to say that the referents of such expressions can be identified with properties in the case of creatures, as the traditional doctrine of divine simplicity requires?

Yes, provided we have the right metaphysical account of properties. What makes it possible—indeed, plausible—to say (e.g.) that ‘God’s justice’ refers to God himself is

that the referent of this expression, on TA, is the truthmaker of an *essential* predication, “God is just”. Notice, however, that in the case of creatures, the same sort of expression, (e.g.) ‘Socrates’s justice’, will typically refer to the truthmaker of an accidental or *contingent* predication. For the same reason, we cannot typically say in this sort of case that the referent of the expression is a concrete individual. Socrates, for example, cannot be regarded as the truthmaker for “Socrates is just”, since he does not even necessitate its truth—or so it would seem. But then what is the truthmaker in such cases?

As it turns out, there is more than one way to answer this question. David Armstrong, for example, has argued that the truthmakers for contingent predications must be regarded as facts (or concrete states of affairs).⁴⁴ On this view, the referent for an expression such as ‘Socrates’s justice’, understood as a device for picking out the truthmaker of “Socrates is just”, will be the *fact that Socrates is wise*. Obviously this answer will be of no use if we want properties to be the referents of such expressions. But this is not the only answer that can be given. One can also argue, as C. B. Martin does, that the truthmakers for contingent predications are non-transferable tropes—that is, concrete individual properties that are essentially dependent on the subjects of which they are the properties.⁴⁵ This sort of trope nominalism seems to me to represent the view of properties most commonly endorsed by medieval philosophers.⁴⁶ If I am right about this, however, then the referent of ‘Socrates’s justice’ *can* be identified with a property—one

⁴⁴ See Armstrong 1989 and 1997.

⁴⁵ See Armstrong 1989, esp. 116-119. For a more complete development and defense of this view, see Mulligan, Simons, and Smith 1989.

⁴⁶ Cf., e.g., the following remarks of Aquinas:

It is not necessary that if *this* is a man and *that* is a man, then they both have numerically the same humanity, any more than two white things have numerically the same whiteness; but it is necessary that the one be similar to the other in that it has a humanity just as the other does. It is for this reason that the intellect, considering humanity not as belonging to this thing, but as humanity, forms a concept that is common to all. (*Scriptum super libros Sententiarum* II, d. 17, q.1, a.1)

such that, in all possible worlds in which it exists, Socrates exists and is just—despite the fact that ‘God’s justice’ must be identified with a concrete particular (namely, God himself).⁴⁷

Objection 2: Even if it is true in principle, on TA, that expressions of the form ‘*a*’s *F*-ness’ can be taken to refer to entities in different ontological categories (including properties and concrete particulars), it might still seem deeply problematic, if not absurd, that divine simplicity requires specific instances of this type of expression, say ‘*a*’s justice’, to refer to entities of such radically different kinds as non-transferable tropes in one context (namely, ‘Socrates’s justice’), and concrete particulars in another (namely, ‘God’s justice’). After all, predications of the form “*a* is just” seem to have the same basic meaning regardless of whether ‘*a*’ refers to Socrates or to God.

There are three things to be said in response to this objection. First, it must be emphasized that from the perspective of the truthmaker account, the form or syntactical type of an expression such as ‘*a*’s justice’ is irrelevant to the specific ontological category of its referent. According to TA, an expression such as ‘*a*’s justice’ is an expression derived from a nominalization of a simple predication of the form ‘*a* is *F*’. As such it is, as it were, a kind of technical term whose referential properties must be understood in terms of its relation to the predication from which it derives: it just refers to whatever makes true its corresponding predications (in this case, ‘*a* is just’). In principle, therefore, there is nothing about the expression’s form or syntactical type which rules out the possibility of its referring to accidental properties or tropes in one case, and to concrete particulars in

⁴⁷ If it is asked in virtue of what Socrates’s justice and God’s justice (or better, God himself) resemble, the answer will be of the same general sort that is usually offered by trope-nominalists. They resemble just in virtue of being the concrete individuals they are. End of story.

another—provided, of course, that both of these types of entity can plausibly be regarded as playing the role of truthmaker the relevant type of predication.⁴⁸

The second thing to be said is that there are examples, deriving from the broadly medieval metaphysical framework in which the doctrine of divine simplicity is formulated, which lend support to the idea that an expression of a single syntactical type could refer to both accidental tropes and concrete particulars. To take just one such example, suppose we have a kettle of hot water boiling over an open fire. In that case, each of the following predications will be true:

(4) The water is hot.

(5) The fire is hot.

Now provided that we are willing to grant the possibility that both fire and water are substances, as the medievals themselves do, then claim 4 may be regarded as a case of accidental predication, and hence as requiring an accidental trope for its truthmaker, whereas claim 5 may be regarded as a case of essential predication, and hence as requiring only a particular substance, the fire, for its truthmaker. But, then, if we follow TA in inventing abstract nominalizations for their truthmakers, then in the case of claims 4 and 5 we will end up with expressions of a single syntactical type, namely, ‘*a*’s heat’, which will refer to entities in both the relevant ontological categories. Moreover, since these entities play the same functional role—that of explaining why something is hot—despite their being of different categories, they are rightly said to belong to the same (functional) kind, *heat*, and hence to serve as the referents for the same type of expression.

⁴⁸ Cf. *Summa Theologiae* Ia, q. 13, aa. 4-5, where the fact that such different types of entity can plausibly be said to play this role leads Aquinas to conclude that predicates such as ‘just’ apply to God and creatures only *analogously*.

The third and final thing to be said is that, if we help ourselves to one further aspect of the medieval metaphysical framework mentioned above—in particular, a substantive conception of metaphysical kinds standardly adopted by medieval philosophers—we can see why, even in the case of God and creatures, it might seem utterly unproblematic for expressions of the same syntactic type (e.g., ‘*a*’s justice’) to refer to both accidental properties and concrete individual substances. According to Aquinas, for example, metaphysical kinds are to be understood in broadly functional terms: things belong to the metaphysical kinds they do in virtue of possessing certain powers or capacities (namely, those that are definitive of their kind). In fact, a thing’s *nature*, as he understands it, just is that which grounds its kind-defining powers or capacities.⁴⁹ Now in the case of a creature such as Socrates, whose justice can clearly wax and wane, it is one thing to be human, and another thing to be just. Thus, Socrates cannot be just solely in virtue of possessing human nature (and hence the distinctive capacities definitive of the metaphysical kind *human being*). On the contrary, in order for him to be just, he must come to *actualize* certain features of his distinctively human capacities, which will involve the acquisition of certain contingent properties or non-transferable tropes—say, knowledge and virtue. In the case of God, by contrast, things are different. For unlike humanity, God’s nature, as Aquinas sees it, is such that its very possession necessitates the actualization of the capacities specific to it—which include the capacities for being perfectly just, powerful, good, knowledgeable, wise, and so on.

⁴⁹ See MacDonald 1990 for relevant texts and discussion.

Hence, solely in virtue of possessing his nature, God will not only be just, but also omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly just, wise, and so on.⁵⁰

In the end, therefore, there appears to be nothing incoherent about saying that both God and creatures are just, despite the fact that God is identical with his justice, whereas creatures are distinct from and only accidentally related to theirs. No doubt, there are other objections that could be raised to the truthmaker account, and hence to the interpretation of simplicity that relies on it. But since these are, at least as far as I can tell, the most powerful and obvious ones—apart from those that can be raised against truthmaker theory itself, whose coherence I am taking for granted in this paper⁵¹—I conclude that the truthmaker interpretation of simplicity is not only coherent, but even plausible in certain respects.

4.3 The Only Coherent Interpretation? I have now completed my defense of the truthmaker interpretation of divine simplicity. Before concluding, however, I want to indicate briefly why, in addition to making sense of the doctrine, the interpretation that I have defended also seems to offer the *only* possible way of rendering it intelligible.

All the interpretations of simplicity that we have examined other than the truthmaker interpretation fail because they rely on the wrong account of predication and abstract reference. From the failure of the property and states-of-affairs interpretations we learn that the traditional doctrine of divine simplicity cannot be made sense of apart from a *categorially neutral* account of predication and abstract reference. From the failure of

⁵⁰ These sorts of considerations lead Aquinas to say that, strictly speaking, there is no potentiality in God, but only actuality.

⁵¹ Perhaps the chief threat to truthmaker theory comes from the so-called *Slingshot argument*, which purports to establish the emptiness or uselessness of the notion of truthmaking. For discussion of this argument, as well as a response on behalf of truthmakers, see Rodriguez-Pereyra 2001.

the constituent interpretation, however, we learn that category neutrality is not sufficient to make sense of the doctrine. What is needed is an account that is both *thin* enough to preserve the categorial neutrality of referents of expressions of the form ‘*a*’s *F*-ness’, while at the same time *thick* enough to enable us to distinguish such referents when they are either in fact distinct (as in the case of *Socrates’s nature* and *Socrates’s goodness*) or merely conceptually distinct (as in the case of *God’s nature* and *God’s goodness*). That is to say, what is needed is a general theory of predication and abstract reference that meets each of the following conditions:

(C1): True (intrinsic) predications of the form “*a* is *F*” guarantee the existence of entities (such as *God’s justice* or *Socrates’s justice*) that can be referred to by abstract expressions of the form ‘*a*’s *F*-ness’.

(C2): The entities referred to by such expressions are of a type whose instances can plausibly be both (i) identified with concrete particular substances (as in the case of *God’s justice*) and properties (as in the case of *Socrates’s justice*); and (ii) distinguished (at least conceptually) from one another.

Truthmakers, however, appear to be the only type of entity that obviously meets both of these conditions. We can, if we choose, appeal to such entities directly, as in the case of the truthmaker interpretation of simplicity, or we can appeal to them indirectly, as in the case of the revised constituent interpretation. But either way, it appears that we have no choice but to appeal to them.

I conclude, therefore, that the truthmaker interpretation is not only *sufficient* for making sense of divine simplicity, but also *necessary*. Those who remain unconvinced may take the arguments of this paper as a challenge either to identify the source of incoherence in the truthmaker interpretation, or to provide a counterexample to my claim that it is the only coherent interpretation of simplicity that can be given.

4.4 Conclusion. In this paper, I have argued that the doctrine of divine simplicity makes sense if—and apparently only if—we are prepared to interpret it in terms of a truthmaker account of predication. For only interpreted in this way can it meet C1 and C2, the two conditions necessary for any coherent interpretation of simplicity. I have also argued, however, that once we interpret the doctrine in terms of a truthmaker account, it turns out to be not only coherent, but also plausible in certain respects.

If my arguments have been successful, we have, at long last, a way of resolving the chief contemporary difficulty with divine simplicity. Indeed, if I am right, this difficulty does not trace (as Wolterstorff’s interpretation suggests) to any fundamental disagreement about whether properties are constituents, but rather traces (as mine suggests) to a fundamental disagreement about the ontological commitments of predication and abstract reference. Thus, if contemporary philosophers want to understand the doctrine of divine simplicity, they need only enter imaginatively into that theoretical account according to which the entities required for the truth of predications and for the referents of their corresponding abstract expressions are truthmakers. However, once we have entered this framework—and I don’t think this requires *too* much imagination, given the central role that truthmaking plays in much contemporary metaphysics—it turns out that we are in a position not only to appreciate the coherence of the doctrine of divine simplicity, but also a good bit of medieval metaphysics and philosophy of language as well.⁵²

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⁵² [Acknowledgements]

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