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'WHATSOEVER IS IN GOD, IS GOD':

THE ROLE OF SIMPLICITY IN THOMAS AQUINAS' DOCTRINE OF GOD

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When speaking of God, we must organize our thoughts into distinct attributes regarding his nature. But once we have begun to distinguish these attributes, we run the risk of introducing a division within our talk of God that does not correspond to God's singular unity. Nevertheless, we must speak discursively, moving from point to point. In order to ensure that our discursive God-talk does not degenerate into a mere montage of irreconcilable attributes, we must choose our starting point wisely. According to Thomas Aquinas, the divine attribute that sets the tone for proper speech about God is simplicity, for it determines our understanding of all the attributes of God.

In the preamble to his discussion of the attributes of God, Thomas indicates his intention to remove from God whatever does not befit him.[1] This begins naturally (in his mind) with simplicity. He then strikingly adds that "*because* whatever is simple in material things is imperfect and a part of something else, we shall discuss (2) His perfection; (3) His infinity; (4) His immutability; (5) His unity."[2] So Thomas explicitly acknowledges the primacy of simplicity among the attributes of God. As this paper intends to show, the determinative role of simplicity does not cease with the divine attributes, but persists throughout Thomas' doctrine of God in the *Summa Theologiae*.

In order to trace the role of simplicity, one must understand what this doctrine entails. Yet this is not an easy task, for the meaning of simplicity in Thomas is fervently debated. Therefore, we must begin with a discussion of alternative proposals for defining simplicity in contemporary literature. Instead of immediately taking sides in this debate,

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[1] Throughout this paper, I will refer to Thomas Aquinas by his name (Thomas). Although referring to Thomas by his place of origin (Aquinas) has become a commonplace that helps distinguish him from other figures in the history of theology, it is unnecessary in matters intra-Thomas.

[2] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* Ia q. 3, emphasis added. All translations are taken from Anton C. Pegis, *Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, Vol. 1 (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1945). Hereafter cited in-text by book, question and article.

the process of tracing simplicity's role throughout Thomas' doctrine of God will be used to test the suitability of competing definitions. Barring blatant inconsistency on Thomas' part, the definition that can best account for the role of simplicity in the *Summa* is most likely the best definition. Not surprisingly, these alternative understandings of simplicity correlate nicely with the general spectrum of contemporary Thomas scholarship. So a narrowly focused discussion of simplicity has the potential to contribute to broader debates surrounding Thomas' theology as a whole. Thus the aim of this essay is threefold: (1) to trace the role of simplicity in Thomas Aquinas' doctrine of God, (2) to let this role shed light on the meaning of simplicity, and (3) to contribute in a small way to the contemporary study of Thomas' theology.

Competing Definitions of Simplicity

A simple definition of simplicity is not difficult to attain. At one point Thomas describes simplicity as "whatsoever is in God, is God" (Ia q. 25, a. 1, obj. 2). All that is internal to God is identical with God. God is not a composition of numerous aspects; rather, God is wholly all that he is.[3] In other words, God *is* what God *has*. Most interpreters of Thomas can affirm this much without controversy.

But simplicity is considerably more complicated that this initial definition might suggest. In fact, the contention of this paper – that simplicity wields significant influence throughout the doctrine of God – depends on a rich and multifaceted understanding of simplicity. Yet the moment one begins to explicate such an understanding, controversy emerges.

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[3] Acknowledging the controversy surrounding male pronouns for God, I have elected to conform my language to Thomas' conventional practice in order to avoid confusion. Although the capitalized pronouns from Pegis' translation will be retained in the interest of accuracy, I will use lower case pronouns for God in my exposition. I do so neither out of irreverence nor from an ideological stance, but merely to avoid drawing undue attention to the controversial matter of gendered theological language.

The contrasting definitions of simplicity in current Thomas scholarship emerge in response to a long history of criticism leveled against the doctrine. It has been repeatedly pointed out that divine simplicity is incoherent, for if each of God's attributes are identical with God, then they must be identical with each other, which renders all the attributes meaningless. Furthermore, even if the charge of incoherence could be sufficiently answered, the problem of inconsistency arises since the notion of an utterly simple God appears incompatible with other Christian affirmations regarding God's being as personal, relational, and (most importantly) triune.[4]

In response to such criticisms, sympathetic interpreters of Thomas seek to reformulate the meaning of simplicity. One such attempt to insulate Thomas from criticisms of incoherence and inconsistency is to point out the larger doctrinal and spiritual purpose of simplicity. Gerrit Immink represents this move when he avers,

> we could also construe the doctrine of the divine simplicity in a broader sense, viz. in terms of a philosophical account of the unique mode of God's being. Then we could construe such a putative identification [of God with his attributes] not simply in terms of *an end in itself*, but rather as a *means* to an end: viz. as a way of expressing the sublime character of the Godhead and the sheer uniqueness of the divine being.[5]

A. N. Williams, in her excellent comparative study on deification in Thomas and Palamas, makes the same move: "The focus of Thomas' doctrine [of simplicity] lies in securing God's uniqueness."[6] In other words, we should not get distracted by questions of the internal coherence of divine simplicity; rather, we should turn our attention to the purpose of the doctrine.

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[4] These criticisms are leveled with great clarity by Alvin Plantinga in his Aquinas lecture, *Does God have a Nature?* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1980).

[5] Gerrit Immink, "The One and Only: The Simplicity of God," in Gijsbert van den Brink and Marcel Sarot, eds., *Understanding the Attributes of God, Contributions to Philosophical Theology*, Vol. 1. (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1999) 100, emphasis original.

[6] A. N. Williams, *The Ground of Union: Deification in Aquinas and Palamas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) 41.

But is this move a genuine response to the problems associated with divine simplicity? Even if the connection between simplicity and uniqueness could be established (which is not uncontroversial[7]), such a connection is a red herring. One must not confuse the *purpose* of a doctrine with its *meaning*. Of course, the purpose of simplicity is important. As we shall see, simplicity has a crucial role to play in securing and developing other doctrines. Thomas most likely has this larger purpose in mind from the beginning. But the meaning of simplicity cannot be reduced to this purpose. Such a move is a case of misdirection and thus an inadequate response to criticism.

In contrast to such attempts to change the subject, some interpreters take on the task of a thoroughgoing reformulation of the doctrine of simplicity. These reformulations can be roughly divided into two camps. On the one hand, there are those who treat the doctrine of simplicity as a linguistic rule that guides us toward proper religious speech. On the other hand, there are those who affirm a robustly ontological definition of simplicity as an assertion about God's being. The former understands simplicity as regulative, the latter constitutive. The former places simplicity in the linguistic domain, the latter in the ontological domain. The former camp is represented by Burrell and Kerr,[8]

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[7] It is not wholly obvious that simplicity secures God's uniqueness. Anthony Kenny suggests that simplicity is an attribute of all solely spiritual beings in *Aquinas on Being* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002) 142, 147n. Eleonore Stump argues that simplicity is an attribute of numbers and thus not an exclusive characteristic of God, *Aquinas, Arguments of the Philosophers* (New York: Routledge, 2003) 97.

[8] For an understanding of simplicity as a witness to the limits of theological language, see Fergus Kerr, *After Aquinas: Versions of Thomism* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2002) 58-59, 76-77. Both Burrell and Kerr bear a family resemblance to the proposal sketched by Victor Preller in *Divine Science and the Science of God: A Reformulation of Thomas Aquinas* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967). It is worth noting that a number of theologians sympathetic to Karl Barth have followed Preller, Burrell, and Kerr in employing a regulative-linguistic understanding of simplicity. See Stephen R. Holmes, "'Something Much Too Plain to Say': Towards a Defence of the Doctrine of Divine Simplicity," *Neue Zeitschrift fur Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 43 Bd. S (2001) 137-154; Christopher A. Franks, "The Simplicity of the Living God: Aquinas, Barth, and Some Philosophers," *Modern Theology* 21:2 (April 2005) 275-300.

the latter by Stump and Wippel.[9] Since Burrell and Stump each offer a sustained

treatment of simplicity at the beginning their respective books on Thomas, these two will

be taken as representative cases of the alternative approaches to divine simplicity.[10]

Burrell begins with the maxim that God is inherently unknowable, and then

proceeds to ask what kind of religious language is appropriate when gesturing toward

such an unknown God. Burrell takes this starting point from Thomas' own statement that

he is inquiring into what God is not (Ia q. 3).[11] Burrell suggests that Thomas uses

philosophy as therapy in a manner similar to Wittgenstein.[12] Doctrines point out what we

can and cannot say. In the case of simplicity (or "simpleness" as Burrell prefers it), we

are taught the limits of everything we say about God. "Simpleness does not name a

characteristic of God, but a formal feature of God as 'beginning and end of all things.' It

is a shorthand term for saying that God lacks composition of any kind. And that bit of

metaphysical jargon is itself a shorthand way of remarking that no articulated form of

expression can succeed in stating anything about God."[13] Simplicity thus points to the

limits of theological language. Such limits do not close off religious talk, but rather help

us to respect the mystery of God even as we speak of him. The significance of simplicity

is found in the way it regulates all attribution of predicates to God. The linguistic pay-off

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[9] For a robustly metaphysical account of theological language in Thomas Aquinas, see John F. Wippel, *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas: From Finite Being to Uncreated Being. Monographs of the Society for Medieval and Renaissance Philosophy*, No. 1 (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2000) 501-575.

[10] The former linguistic-regulative camp is often called the "apophatic" interpretation of Thomas. Although this camp certainly emphasizes the apophatic elements of Thomas' discourse, this moniker is misleading. Apophatic theology proceeds to speak of God by saying what God is not. Simplicity (non-compositeness) is by definition an apophatic doctrine. Thus, an apophatic procedure is operative in both the linguistic-regulative and ontological-constitutive camps. The difference lies not in the relative importance of apophaticism in Thomas, but rather in the specification of what a doctrine is saying or doing once it has been affirmed.

[11] David B. Burrell, *Aquinas: God and Action* (South Bend, IN: Notre Dame Press, 1979) 13.

[12] D. Burrell, *Aquinas: God and Action* 15.

[13] D. Burrell, *Aquinas: God and Action* 18.

of the doctrine of simplicity is nicely summarized by Burrell: "The best we can do is to employ the principle of complementarity as a working rule: whenever I say that God is wise, I must be prepared to say as well that God is wisdom, and vice versa."[14] Everything we attribute to God must be stated with both concrete and abstract nouns out of respect for the limits of our language.

This predominantly linguistic-regulative understanding of simplicity can be contrasted with the robustly ontological-constitutive approach of Eleonore Stump. In explicit contradiction to the agnostic stance of folks like Burrell, Stump begins by arguing that Thomas "relies heavily on positive claims about God."[15] She argues that Thomas' statement in Ia q. 3 concerning our inability to say what God is has been misinterpreted. "The expression *quid est* ('what it is') is a technical term of medieval logic" that does not include all positive affirmations.[16] Furthermore, Thomas explicitly rejects agnosticism in Ia q. 13.[17]

Under these epistemic conditions, Stump is able to define simplicity as a positive claim about God's being. She summarizes the ontological import of divine simplicity in terms of three distinct but interrelated claims: (1) God cannot be a physical entity.[18] This first claim straightforwardly negates physical composition in God. The result of this negation is the positive affirmation of God's spirituality. (2) God does not have any intrinsic accidental properties.[19] The second claim relies on the distinction between substantial and accidental properties. Although God may take on *extrinsic* accidental

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[14] D. Burrell, *Aquinas: God and Action* 25.
[15] E. Stump, *Aquinas* 97.
[16] E. Stump, *Aquinas* 95-96.
[17] E. Stump, *Aquinas* 94.
[18] E. Stump, *Aquinas* 96.
[19] E. Stump, *Aquinas* 96-97.

properties in conjunction with his willing of contingent realities, none of God's *intrinsic* properties are accidental. Every property of God is a necessary and substantive quality of his being. (3) "[W]hatever can be intrinsically attributed to God must in reality just be the unity that is his essence."[20] Unlike creatures, God's being and attributes cannot be separated into the categories of genus and species. There is no genus named "God" that is characterized by specific attributes. God truly is all of God's attributes. Terms like "goodness" and "wisdom" more than simply characterize God. As the originator of goodness and wisdom, God *is* goodness and wisdom.[21]

The wide divergence between these two definitions of divine simplicity should be evident. But which one is right? Which definition most adequately corresponds to Thomas' understanding of simplicity? The difficulty in answering this question is that, given the scope of Thomas' work, textual evidence can be marshaled in support of either definition. Furthermore, Thomas' resonance with conflicting medieval sources can be used to locate Thomas on divergent trajectories. In light of these larger interpretive obstacles, I will narrow my focus to the role of divine simplicity within Thomas' doctrine of God as developed in qq. 2-43 of his *Summa Theologiae*. By focusing on the role of simplicity in relation to other doctrines, the adequacy of the competing definitions can be assessed. Can a linguistic-regulative understanding of divine simplicity account for Thomas' use of simplicity in his doctrine of God? Or is an ontological-constitutive understanding of God's simplicity required to make sense of its use? To these questions we shall turn as we trace the role of simplicity in Thomas' doctrine of God.

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[20] E. Stump, *Aquinas* 97.

[21] Stump explored similar arguments in her earlier article co-authored with Norman Kretzmann, "Absolute Simplicity," *Faith and Philosophy* 2:4 (October 1985) 353-382. Although this has proved to be an influential and widely referenced essay, I have focused on the chapter concerning simplicity in her book because it more directly concerns Thomas and is a later and thus more definitive statement of her position.

Simplicity and the Five Ways

The first step in tracing the place of simplicity in Thomas' doctrine of God is an assessment of its relationship to the entry point of Thomas' doctrine of God: the Five Ways. As we shall see, simplicity forms the argumentative basis of the remaining divine attributes as well as plays a crucial function in developing the divine operations and persons. But what is the basis of simplicity itself? The description of God as first being yielded by the Five Ways in q. 2 is the starting point for Thomas' argument for simplicity. Thomas takes this God-concept as given and seeks to remove all that does not befit it. He proceeds by way of negation in order to arrive at a positive description of God. Unlike his treatment of some other attributes, in the case of simplicity Thomas does not begin by asking whether God is simple. Rather, he first proceeds through a series of six potential compositions within God that would block the attribution of simplicity to him. He begins with the more evident negations and moves to the less evident ones. In each case, he builds upon the notion of God as first being demonstrated in q. 2.

In the first two articles Thomas rejects the notion that God is a body or is composed of matter and form. These are more evident to Thomas because he is merely negating physicality as unbefitting of divine being. In other words, he is asserting the spirituality of God by means of the *via negativa*. But this is not a general procedure of *via negativa* applied to an intuitive concept of God, but one executed with specific reference to the notion of God as first being. Immediately in the *responsio* in article 1, Thomas invokes the first being of Ia q. 2, a. 3. He offers three ways to argue that God is not a body: (1) the unmoved mover cannot be a body because such would render it moveable, (2) the first being is pure act and therefore cannot be a body because embodiment entails

potentiality, and (3) it is unbefitting of the noblest being to be a body as evidenced by the fact that the body is the lower part of composite beings. These three ways draw on the description of God set forth by the Five Ways (Ia q. 2, a. 3), especially the first and fourth ways. The second article expands on the first by eliminating from God not only physicality but also matter, so that God is pure form. In the *responsio*, Thomas refers again to God as pure act and as highest being, adding also a reference to God as first efficient cause (the Second Way of Ia q. 2, a. 3), which is used to argue that God is essentially an agent and thus pure form. The argument for the simplicity of God commences on the basis of God as prime being.

In the second two articles, Thomas turns to the less evident question of the equation of God with his essence and his being (Ia q. 3, a. 3-4). These affirmations are crucial to attaining a robustly metaphysical notion of simplicity, and not merely the negation of physical materiality arrived at by the first two articles. Thomas argues for the equation of God with his essence by stating that since God is pure form, he does not need matter to individuate him. Thus God is an instance of his own essence, rather than an instantiation of a distinguishable essence. God is his own nature. Interestingly, Thomas does not explicitly refer to God as prime being in Ia q. 3, a. 3. The notion of God as first being is nevertheless in the background, as he draws on the notion of God as pure form, which for him is unquestionably based on God as first being (Ia q. 3, a. 2).

The explicit basis on the notion of God as first being returns with considerable force in Thomas' argument that essence and being are the same in God (Ia q. 3, a. 4). He offers three ways of arguing for this equation: (1) the rift between essence and being does not apply to a first efficient cause who is the basis of the being of all other essences (a

reference to the second of the Five Ways), (2) the absence of potentiality in God eliminates the possibility of God's essence requiring a distinct coming into being (a reference to the first of the Five Ways), and (3) a distinct coming into being for the essence of God would render his being a participated being, which is impossible because God is the "first being" in which all other beings participate (a reference to the fourth of the Five Ways). God is both his own essence and his own being, a conclusion Thomas draws directly from the description of God as first being demonstrated in Ia q. 2, a. 3.

In the next pair of articles, Thomas removes genus and accidents from God (Ia q. 3, a. 5-6). Whereas the first four articles slowly build an argument for the simplicity of God, articles five and six function as a response to possible objections. Traveling along the *via negativa*, Thomas makes sure to remove any potential composition from God. Thus he argues that God transcends every genus on the basis of the actuality of God (Ia q. 3, a. 5) and that God has no accidents on the basis of God as "absolute primal being" (Ia q. 3, a. 6). At this point in the argument, Thomas begins to rely more heavily on conclusions reached in the first four articles. Yet the explicit argumentative basis of the concept of God as first being remains.

In the final two articles, Thomas finally arrives at a direct affirmation of God as altogether simple (Ia q. 3, a. 7). One would expect this article to draw from the cumulative negations of the previous articles. Yet, of the five arguments provided, only the first refers to the preceding articles. The remaining four argue from God as first being, uncaused cause, pure act, and absolute being. So, although Ia q. 3 is in some sense a linear argument, even at its conclusion Thomas is still basing his argument on the notion of God proposed by the Five Ways.

Since Thomas' argument for simplicity in Ia q. 3 rests so significantly on the conclusions of Ia q. 2, a. 3, one must ask whether the transition can be made so smoothly. There is a striking dissimilarity between q. 2 and q. 3 in the form each affirmation takes. The argument in q. 2 works like this: within each of the Five Ways, Thomas first argues that *x* exists, *x* standing for one of the five different yet united notions of God as first being. He then finishes each of the Ways by the nominative move that *x* is what all call God. So the Five Ways taken as a whole demonstrate the existence of a first being and name this being "God." This structure of the argument presents a problem: even if the arguments for the existence of *x* work, the identity of *x* with God remains unsubstantiated.

This problem has immediate ramifications for the argument for divine simplicity. In Ia q. 3, Thomas takes for granted that the first being is God, and then proceeds to negate what does not befit God as first being. A subtle shift in form occurs, as Thomas no longer states that the first being is God, but that God is the first being. He has shifted from the argument "*x* is God" to the argument "God is *x*."

q. 2: *x* exists, *x* is God.

q. 3: God is *x*, *y* does not befit *x*, therefore God is non-*y*.

The shift would not necessarily be a problem if the equation between *x* and God was established. But it is not. The problem in q. 3 is that Thomas has not sufficiently demonstrated that the project of eliminating what does not belong to the first being is the same as the project of eliminating what does not belong to God. The most important link in the argumentative chain (namely that the being we are talking about *is* God) is at best weak and at worst missing entirely. Thus the status of the conclusions of q. 3 is that the

first being is simple. The question whether God is this first being and thus also simple remains unanswered.

Although the evaluative task of identifying a potential weakness in the argumentative basis for divine simplicity is important, it is beyond the scope of this paper. More germane to the interpretive task at hand is what this argumentative basis tells us about Thomas' understanding of simplicity. Which of the aforementioned approaches to simplicity best accounts for Thomas' decision to base his argument for simplicity on the Five Ways?

The strongly metaphysical character of the argument from God as first being cannot be overlooked. Certainly simplicity could be understood as a rule for appropriate speech about the kind of God described in q. 2. But this is not how Thomas proceeds. Thomas argues that the being whose existence was proven in q. 2 *must* be a simple being. Simplicity befits not only our talk of God, but also the being of God. Thomas seems to be doing more than merely gesturing towards the kind of speech possible. Rather, he seems to be actually describing something, albeit by means of negation. However, one could argue that Thomas' arguments *for* simplicity can be contrasted with his arguments *from* simplicity. Perhaps Thomas uses these metaphysical arguments to get the linguistic rule of divine simplicity up and running and then sets aside any ontological claims once he begins to apply this rule to our speech about God. Although a constitutive definition of simplicity appears more likely at this point, only an analysis of the role of simplicity in the remainder of Thomas' doctrine of God in the *Summa Theologiae* can sufficiently illumine its meaning and significance.

Simplicity and the Divine Attributes

What role does simplicity play in Thomas' development of the attributes of God? Among the five attributes explored by Thomas in Ia qq. 3-11, why single out simplicity? What makes divine simplicity so special? At first glance, such a focus might appear to be based on a fallacious assumption: Thomas treats simplicity first among the attributes; therefore, simplicity is the most important attribute. But placement alone does not determine status. The *Summa Theologiae* does not necessarily build an edifice brick by brick; rather, Thomas already holds certain metaphysical assumptions to which he appeals. So its placement at the head of the metaphysical attributes of God does not automatically assign primacy to divine simplicity.

In this particular case, however, the order of presentation corresponds to the order of argumentation. Divine simplicity is treated first for a reason. In his discussion of the remaining attributes (qq. 4-11), Thomas makes repeated appeals to conclusions drawn in q. 3. Such an observation would be inconclusive had Thomas made equivalent appeals to other divine attributes through the course of his argument. Thomas comes back again and again to simplicity as an argumentative basis for divine attribution, while each of the remaining attributes are, for the most part, temporarily set aside once they have been proven.

Now it would be misleading to imply that simplicity is the *only* basis for the remaining attributes, as if perfection, infinity, immutability and unity can simply be squeezed out of the hard-won attribute of simplicity. The dominant recurring argumentative basis for each of these attributes is the notion of God as first being. Every question in this section makes reference to at least one of the Five Ways from q. 2. The

attributes of God are demonstrated by removing what does not befit the being whose

existence was previously demonstrated by the Five Ways. This applies especially to

Thomas' argument for divine simplicity, as we have already seen. But alongside the

arguments from God as first being one finds over a dozen arguments from God as simple.

For instance, in Ia q. 4, a. 2, Thomas argues that the perfections of all things are in

God by appealing to God's self-subsistent being as described in Ia q. 3, a. 4. He replies to

the objection that creatures cannot be compared to God because God has no genus (Ia q.

4, a. 3) by recalling that God transcends every genus (Ia q. 3, a. 5). Thomas argues that

God alone is essentially good on the basis of the fact – established in Ia q. 3, a. 4 & a. 6 –

that "God's essence alone is his being" (Ia q. 6, a. 3). He appeals to the notion from Ia q.

3, a. 4 that "God is his own subsistent being" in order to defend the attribution of infinity

to God (Ia q. 7, a. 1). Thomas discusses the non-composite nature of God in the course of

defending the omnipresence of God (Ia q. 8, a. 2, obj. 3 & ad. 3). His second way of

proving the immutability of God argues from the absence of composition in God as

established in Ia q. 3, a 3: since composition is co-extensive with movement, ruling out

the former requires one to rule out the latter (Ia q. 9, a. 1). Thomas applies the doctrine of

simplicity to his understanding of God's eternity: "Nor is He eternal only, but He is His

own eternity … God is His own uniform being; and hence, as He is His own essence, so

He is His own eternity" (Ia q. 10, a. 2). Thomas' first line of defense for the equation of

being and unity is an appeal to the simplicity of God (Ia q. 11, a. 1). The first "source"

from which the unity of God can be demonstrated is divine simplicity: since God is his

own nature, God is simultaneously God and *this* God, thus ruling out polytheism (Ia q.

11, a. 3). Thomas argues that God is supremely one on the basis of the fact that he is

"supremely undivided … since He is altogether simple, as was shown above" (Ia q. 11, a. 4). As these examples indicate, divine simplicity forms the basis for much of what Thomas has to say about the manner of God's existence in qq. 4-11.

No other divine attribute figures so widely in this section's arguments. Thomas does argue from primary attributes to secondary and derivative attributes, as would be expected.[22] Of the five attributes listed in the preamble to qq. 3-11, three entail a secondary attribute: perfection entails goodness (Ia q. 6), infinity entails omnipresence (Ia q. 8), and immutability entails eternity (Ia q. 10). Only simplicity and unity lack explicit secondary attributes, although the evidence suggests that all of the attributes could be regarded as secondary to simplicity. In his discussion of each of the secondary attributes, Thomas makes appeal not only to simplicity but also to the primary attribute from which it flows. These are the only major cases within this section where Thomas argues from a basis other than God as first being or God as simple.

There are three minor cases where Thomas argues from divine perfection to another primary attribute. In his arguments for the infinity (Ia q. 7, a. 1), immutability (Ia q. 9, a. 1), and unity (Ia q. 11, a. 3) of God, Thomas offers multiple "ways" or "sources" of demonstration. Among these one finds reference to divine perfection or, after having introduced infinity, "infinite perfection." I dare to classify these as minor because in all three cases one of the other sources is divine simplicity. So even when Thomas appeals to an attribute other than simplicity, it never stands alone. Divine simplicity is the backbone of the metaphysical attributes of God.

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[22] I use the terms "primary" and "secondary" in a logical, not ontological sense. I am simply indicating the derivative relationship between these attributes as explicitly identified by Aquinas.

Thomas' way of arguing from simplicity to the remaining attributes is important for appreciating the role of simplicity in his doctrine of God. Unlike some of his conclusions, the doctrine of simplicity does not become a factor in an equation that can be assumed as he moves on to other matters. Rather, Thomas explicitly and repeatedly uses simplicity to develop his doctrine of God.

Thomas' mode of argumentation also helps to answer the question of the meaning of simplicity. If one were to adopt a linguistic-regulative understanding of divine simplicity, what kind of argument would be expected? The argument would likely begin with the sorts of things we are inclined to say about God. Philosophical and religious terms such as perfection, goodness, infinity, eternity, etc. would be proposed. After initially ascertaining whether such terms befit God, simplicity would be brought in to regulate their use. The principle of complementarity would be employed to ensure that each term is used in multiple ways to gesture towards the mystery of God and remind us of the limits of our God-talk. In terms of the formal structure of Thomas' presentation, simplicity would belong in the objections and replies to objections.

This is definitely *not* Thomas' form of argument. Simplicity is not brought in to regulate the use of the remaining attributes; rather, it serves as the basis upon which the remaining attributes are affirmed. As we have seen, Thomas argues *from* simplicity *to* perfection, goodness, infinity, omnipresence, immutability, eternity, and oneness. The presence of additional supporting arguments (especially those formed on the basis of God as primal being) suggests that these arguments are not cases of strict derivation. However, the direction of the argument clearly moves from simplicity to the remaining attributes. Not surprisingly, then, arguments from simplicity are found predominantly

within the *responsio*, or main body, of articles in which they appear. Thus, it would appear that Thomas' mode of argumentation presupposes a constitutive understanding of divine simplicity in addition to any regulative function it may exercise. Thomas appears to be doing more than linguistic therapy; he is making ontological claims about God's being.

Although the role of simplicity within the divine attributes sheds considerable light on its meaning, the constitutive aspect of simplicity becomes all the more clear by observing its deployment in the context of the divine operations (Ia qq. 14-25) and divine persons (Ia qq. 27-43). The role of simplicity in these two interrelated sections of the *Summa Theologiae* will serve to highlight the constitutive role simplicity plays in Thomas' doctrine of God.

Simplicity and the Divine Operations

After topping off his development of the divine attributes with a discussion of knowing and naming God (Ia qq. 12-13), Thomas turns to an extended treatment of operations within God (Ia qq. 14-25). These operations are necessary actions within the eternal life of God that may have contingent effects. Although they are "actions," they are internal to God's being.

For Thomas, the two pillars of divine operation are God's knowledge and God's will. The section is structured around these twin pillars. Thomas begins with God's intellect (Ia q. 14), a long question containing many articles followed by a discussion of ideas, truth, falsity and life in God (Ia qq. 15-18). Thomas then turns to God's will (q. 19), which is developed in terms of God's love, justice and mercy (Ia qq. 20-21). Having concluded his discussion of God's intellect and will independently, Thomas treats those

actions that issue forth from both intellect and will: providence and predestination (Ia qq. 22-24). Here he begins to address God's transitive operations, which also include the power of God (Ia qq. 25). Thomas concludes his treatise on the divine unity with a short question on divine beatitude (Ia 11. 26).

What role does simplicity play within Thomas' discussion of divine operations? We will focus our attention on the function of simplicity in the questions regarding God's intellect (Ia q. 14) and God's will (Ia q. 19). Such a focus is a result not only of the aforementioned importance of intellect and will within the section on divine operations, but also of the crucial role played by intellect and will in the transition from the divine essence to the divine persons, as will be explored below. Given the significance of simplicity in the doctrine of God up to this point, it should not be surprising that Thomas explicitly appeals to simplicity in his development of God's knowing and God's willing. Simplicity is not a fringe doctrine serving a special purpose among the divine attributes; rather, it remains at the heart of Thomas' doctrine of God.

In the fourth article of question 14 on God's knowledge, Thomas asks whether the act of God's intellect is his substance. This question is important to Thomas, because if God's act of knowing is something other than his very being, a distinction will be introduced within the Godhead, thus undermining the divine unity. Or, conversely, knowledge could be regarded as a relation between God and his creation, but then God's act of knowing would not be eternal and thus God would be dependent on creation in order to have an object of knowledge. So, for Thomas, God's intellectual operation must be an aspect of his very substance.

How does Thomas argue that God's act of knowing is an immanent act identical with God's substance? Not surprisingly, he appeals to the doctrine of divine simplicity. In the *sed contra*, Thomas quotes Augustine's statement, "In God to be is the same as to be wise." He then equates wisdom with understanding and restates the formula accordingly: "in God to be is the same thing as to understand." He then adds that "God's being is His substance, as was shown above. Therefore the act of God's intellect is His substance." Thomas is clearly referring to the identity of being and substance in God as developed in the question on simplicity (Ia q. 3, a. 4). In the *responsio*, Thomas explains the identity of God with his act of understanding: "Thus it follows from all the foregoing that in God intellect, the object understood, the intelligible species, and His act of understanding are entirely one and the same" (Ia q. 14, a. 4). The immanence of the divine intellect – a principle so central to Thomas – is argued for by an appeal to divine simplicity. God's knowledge *is* God, and we know this on the basis of divine simplicity.

The same principle of immanent operation in God is indicated in Thomas' treatment of God's will. Interestingly, Thomas does not argue for this principle at length. In a manner that parallels his exposition of the triune persons, Thomas simply asserts that what applies to the intellect also applies to the will. If God's will can also be shown to be immanent to God, then the strict ontological identity between God's operation and his being applies in this case as well. Thomas makes such an explicit assertion at the end of the *responsio* to the first article of the question on God's will: "And as His knowing is His own being, so is His willing" (Ia q. 19, a. 1). In Thomas' mind, this does not require comment because it necessarily follows that any immanent operation of a simple God must be identical with God's very being. So, once again, the doctrine of simplicity

provides a critical point of departure for understanding a divine operation. God's will *is* God, and we know this on the basis of divine simplicity.

Identifying the role of simplicity within the context of divine operations serves to substantiate a constitutive understanding of simplicity. Thomas' mode of argumentation relies on an appeal to simplicity as an ontological claim about God. Simplicity does not merely regulate our talk of God's operation, ensuring that we speak in an analogical manner that respects the mystery of God. Simplicity does, of course, perform this role. But it does so much more than that. Thomas appeals to simplicity in order to make the substantive claim that God's knowledge and God's will are identical with God's very being. As we shall see, positing such an ontological identity is crucial for the transition from divine operations to divine processions. The role of simplicity in this transition and throughout the treatise on the Trinity is the concern of the final section of this paper.

Simplicity and the Divine Persons

Although significant in its own right, Thomas' elucidation of the divine operations serves an important architectonic function by supplying a bridge from the one divine essence to the three divine persons. Thomas identifies God's internal acts of knowing and willing with the eternal processions of the Son and the Spirit. In knowing Godself, God generates the Word. In willing Godself, God spirates Love. These processions imply subsistent relations within God. These subsistent relations are persons in God.[23]

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[23] Despite major differences in the structure of their arguments and in the form of their respective psychological analogies, Thomas follows the basic contours of Augustine's presentation in his *De Trinitate*. Thomas says "we have followed him in this," referring to Augustine's explanation of "the trinity of persons by the procession of the word and of love in our own mind" (Ia q. 32, a. 1, obj. 2). It is not a coincidence that Thomas cites Augustine's *De Trin* numerous times in his treatment of God's knowledge (Ia q. 14). We have every reason to suppose that Thomas' development of divine knowing and willing has the doctrine of the trinity in view.

The validity of such a move from divine operations to divine persons depends largely on the doctrine of simplicity. The doctrine of simplicity is what establishes these processions as identical with God's very being. The deity of the persons produced by the processions rests on the fact that all that is in God, is God. Even if Thomas did not reference simplicity in his discussion of the trinity, the important role of simplicity would be presupposed. Yet Thomas does explicitly and repeatedly reference simplicity throughout the treatise on the Trinity.

The starting-point of Thomas' doctrine of the Trinity is the divine processions (Ia q. 27). Thomas' movement of thought is from processions to relations and from relations to persons. So the unmistakable prominence of simplicity in the question on processions is telling. Simplicity is referenced a number of times in this question. In the first article, Thomas replies to the objection that "supreme simplicity" precludes procession by pointing out that "whatever proceeds within by an intelligible procession is not necessarily distinct" (Ia q. 27, a. 1, ad. 2). In the second article, Thomas refers to the divine being as "self-subsisting" in order to explain how the procession of the Word in God can be a generation without introducing another subject within God (Ia q. 27, a. 2, ad. 3). In the third article, Thomas answers that there can be other processions in God besides that of the Word on account of the fact that the multiple operations in God are unified in God's singularly simple essence: "All that exists in God, is God… Therefore the divine nature is communicated by every procession which is not outward" (Ia q. 27, a. 3, ad. 2). The phrase "All that exists in God, is God" is a shorthand definition of divine simplicity. In the fifth and final article, Thomas uses the language of simplicity to defend why intellect and will imply only two rather than many processions: "As was above

explained, God understands all things by one *simple* act; and by one act also He wills all things. Hence there cannot exist in Him a procession of Word from Word, nor of Love from Love" (Ia q. 27, a. 5, ad. 3, emphasis added). These numerous explicit references show the crucial role of simplicity in securing the divine nature of that which proceeds in God.

It is telling that Thomas does not merely use simplicity to make the transition from operations to processions, but continues to reference it as he moves on to the trinitarian relations and persons. While treating divine relations, Thomas makes the startling claim that relation in God is the same as God's essence. Such a claim is not so startling, however, in light of divine simplicity. Everything that is in God, including his own internal relations, is identical with his very being. Thomas refers to simplicity in his argument against those who regard God's trinitarian relations as accidental: "Now whatever has an accidental being in creatures, when considered as transferred to God, has a substantial being; for there is no accident in God since everything in Him is His essence…. [R]elation really existing in God has the being of the divine essence in no way distinct therefrom" (Ia q. 28, a. 2). The identity of relations with God's essence relies on the notion of divine simplicity.

The doctrine of simplicity is referenced a number of times throughout Thomas' extended treatment of the divine persons (Ia qq. 29-43). While establishing the interrelationship between person, hypostasis and essence in God, Thomas utilizes the doctrine of simplicity to make his point: "Therefore hypostasis and person add the individual principles to the notion of the essence; nor are these identified with the essence in things composed of matter and form, as we said above when considering the divine

simplicity" (Ia q. 29, a. 2, ad. 3). In the next question, Thomas deals with the problem of

plurality of persons in God (Ia q. 30). In the first article, Thomas raises the objection that

a plurality of divine persons seems to be incompatible with the utter simplicity of God's

being. He replies by stating: "The supreme unity and simplicity of God exclude every

kind of plurality taken absolutely, but not plurality of relations; for relations are

predicated relatively, and thus they do not imply composition in that of which they are

predicated" (Ia q. 30, a. 1, ad. 3). Here one can see that Thomas' definition of persons as

subsistent relations not only draws on divine simplicity, but also is tailor-made to avoid

the problem of inconsistency.[24]

Lastly, we can note the role of simplicity in Thomas' treatment of the persons in

relation to the essence (Ia q. 39). Simplicity is so prominently featured in the body of the

first article of this question that it is worth quoting at length:

> The truth of this question is quite clear if we consider the divine simplicity. For it
> was shown above that the divine simplicity requires that in God essence is the
> same as *suppositum*, which in intellectual substances is nothing else than person.
> But a difficulty seems to arise from the fact that while the divine persons are
> multiplied, the essence nevertheless retains its unity…. But as it was shown
> above, in creatures relations are accidental, whereas in God they are the divine
> essence itself. Thence it follows that in God essence is not really distinct from
> person, and yet that the persons are really distinguished from each other. For
> person, as was above stated, signifies relation as subsisting in the divine nature.
> But relation, as referred to the essence, does not differ from it really, but only in
> our way of thinking; while as referred to an opposite relation, it has a real
> distinction by virtue of that opposition. Thus there are one essence and three
> persons" (Ia q. 39, a. 1).

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[24] Thomas' reply can be presented as evidence against Stephen Holmes' claim that the tradition
never noticed the contemporary objection that simplicity is incompatible with the doctrine of the trinity
("'Something Much Too Plain to Say'" 140). Clearly, Thomas does see the problem and responds to it.
Holmes is correct in stating that the tradition held simplicity and the trinity together. Yet he misses the
mark by asserting that the contemporary objection arises from a misunderstanding of simplicity – an
assertion Holmes uses to opt for a more "apophatic" definition of simplicity. I would argue that the
problem underlying the contemporary criticism is not a misunderstanding of simplicity as much as a
misunderstanding of Thomas' doctrine of the trinity. Thomas has defined relations in a way that does not
impinge on divine simplicity. Moreover, as shown above, the very divinity of the persons has been affirmed
by means of an argument from simplicity: since these processions are internal to God, they must *be* God.

Thomas once again uses simplicity to advance a claim about the triune being of God. In this case, simplicity requires that person and essence are the same in God, although we can and must distinguish them in our minds. Furthermore, the persons can be distinguished from each other by means of their mutually opposing relations. Yet the divine being is one. Here we can see that simplicity continues to impact Thomas' explication of the doctrine of the trinity from beginning to end.

What are the implications of simplicity's role in the doctrine of trinity for our understanding of the meaning of simplicity? It should be evident by now that only a constitutive definition of simplicity could perform the tasks set for it by Thomas. It seems unlikely that simplicity as a regulative principle could help Thomas make the transition from operations to processions or help to fill out his description of relations and persons in the manner traced above. For Thomas, the doctrine of simplicity is an ontological claim about states of affairs, not only a rule for proper speech. Since God's being is a simple being, certain things must be true about the nature of God's triunity. Simplicity certainly does govern speech, but it does so much more: it supplies the backbone for Thomas' elucidation of the doctrine of the trinity.

Conclusion

Having traced the role of simplicity from the beginning to the end of Thomas' doctrine of God, the constitutive status of the doctrine of simplicity has been confirmed. Although the function of divine simplicity as a linguistic rule need not be ruled out, a reductively regulative account of simplicity cannot account for the work it performs throughout the doctrine of God. The linguistic-regulative interpretation of Thomas has become attractive to contemporary readers for varied and sometimes divergent reasons.

Such readings do bring to light linguistic elements of Thomas' discourse, but are insufficient in accounting for the claims and arguments Thomas makes.

Interestingly, interpreters who argue for a linguistic minimalism in Thomas often align themselves with those who emphasize the place of the doctrine of the trinity in Thomas' thought. As this study has shown, however, a constitutive account of divine simplicity actually serves Thomas well in his development of the doctrine of the trinity. It is unfortunate that those who approach Thomas in this robustly ontological way so often focus a disproportionate amount of attention to the treatise on the divine unity.[25] A potential contribution of this essay is to distinguish the trinitarian revival in Thomas studies from certain revisionist readings of Thomas. One need not commit oneself to the latter in order to affirm the best insights of the former. But far more important than any potential to parse current Thomas scholarship is the light this essay has shed on the doctrine of simplicity by tracing its role in Thomas' doctrine of God.

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[25] This criticism cannot be leveled at Gilles Emery, who gives ample attention to the Trinity in Thomas yet does not align himself with the so-called "apophatic" interpreters of Thomas. See "Essentialism or Personalism in the Treatise on God in St. Thomas Aquinas?" *The Thomist* 64 (2003) 521-563; and *Trinity in Aquinas* (Ypsilant, MI: Sapientia Press, 2003).

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