EUTHYPHRO, GOD’S NATURE, AND 
THE QUESTION OF DIVINE ATTRIBUTES

An Analysis of the Very Complicated 
Doctrine of Divine Simplicity

by Jules Grisham

Simplicity offers advantages for constructive rational theology... [yet] it seems outrageously counter-intuitive, or even incoherent.
– Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann

We know that all of Scripture is about salvation, about Jesus (Luke 24:27, John 5:39, Romans 15:4, 2 Timothy 3:15-16). If the doctrine of simplicity is a biblical doctrine, then we can be sure that it will have some connection with salvation, and we should seek until we find it... If it is not biblical, it should be opposed.
– John Frame

But for God, to be is the same as to be strong, or to be just, or to be wise, and to be whatever else your may say of that simple multiplicity, or that multiple simplicity, whereby his substance is signified.
– Augustine

INTRODUCTION

What is God?” This is the fourth question in the Westminster Shorter Catechism, and every student who hopes to graduate from Reformed Theological Seminary with a Masters of Divinity in hand is expected to know the answer: “God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.” What is interesting about this answer, from the vantage of this paper’s focus, is that neither the adjective “simple” nor the noun “simplicity” are listed among these divine attributes. So a student new to the study of Christian philosophy and philosophical apologetics might be forgiven for being rather

2 John Frame, The Doctrine of God (Oviedo, FL: Reformed Theological Seminary [as yet unpublished draft; used as text for his Systematic Theology–Doctrine of God class], 2000): 13.
surprised to discover that, for many thinkers and theologians throughout the long course of Church history, divine simplicity is one of the key attributes – if not the key attribute – of God! The poor student may have read the Bible all his life in preparation for the seminary, and yet would probably never have deduced from its pages alone that:

Simplicity is not in conflict with the doctrine of the Trinity, for the term “simple” is not used as an antonym of “twofold” or “threefold,” but of “compound.” Hence, this simplicity does not conflict with the doctrine of the Trinity, for the divine being is not composed of three persons, neither is each person composed of God’s being plus the personal property; but the one and only uncompounded (simple) being exists in three persons; every person or personal property is distinct from God’s being not “in the object” but “in reason”; every personal property is indeed a “real relation,” but does not add “something real” to the “essence.” The personal properties “do not compose but only distinguish.”

We quote this passage from Bavinck at this point merely to demonstrate in a lighthearted manner the philosophically technical, linguistically precise, and theologically complex environment into which one enters as he seeks to explore what is called, with no apparent irony intended, the doctrine of divine simplicity. Yet we will dare to venture into these waters for a while, because the issues, however obscure from the vantage point of the layman or new student, are crucially important in the right elaboration of Christian doctrine.

Specifically, we hope in this brief study to explain the doctrine of simplicity as it has been elaborated through the ages, and to discuss some of the causative factors in that elaboration; we will then examine problems with the doctrine, and will analyze four responses to these problems which have been put forward to resolve them; and, finally, we will argue this paper’s thesis, that the doctrine of simplicity as elaborated in its strong form by Thomas Aquinas and by later scholastics is incompatible with God’s own revelation of himself in Scripture. Methodologically, we will be exploring the question of the relation of God’s attributes to God himself, e.g., of his nature to his sovereignty. And in the final analysis, it will be our contention that the innumerable problems and conundrums raised by consideration of these issues can be resolved by regrounding our thinking about God’s unity not upon Neoplatonic notions of impersonal perfection, but upon biblical notions of personal perfection.

---

DIVINE SIMPLICITY DEFINED

Speaking of this categorical distinction between personal and impersonal, we would begin by noting that “God” is not a proper name. Our God has provided us with a number of names that reveal him in his personal, covenantal relation to us (YHVH, for example), but God is not one of them. Rather, “God” functions, theologically speaking, “as a special kind of descriptive expression.”\(^5\) That is, “God,” while not entirely impersonal, is yet a descriptive term, a sort of umbrella concept, whose meaning incorporates various attributes (e.g., omniscience, omnipotence, omnibenevolence, etc.) that we ascribe as uniquely and necessarily belonging to such a being. Now, every substance, every individuated instance of an essence (i.e., every hypostatization) – in short, every “thing” – possesses properties, or characteristic qualities, that make the thing what and as it is. For example, a door may be “red.” Now this quality of redness is not essential to the door, but only \textit{accidental}; we could paint it green, but it would remain the same in essence (i.e., it would still be a door). The property of “door-ness,” however, must surely be considered an \textit{essential property} of the door, such that, if it were to be removed, the door would no longer be a door.

For the purposes of this paper we shall be focusing on issues concerning the essential properties – i.e., the divine attributes – of God. Divine attributes are those essential properties of God that cannot be removed without also entailing the non-existence of God. For example, the fact that God exists in a Lordship relation to Jules Grisham is not essential to God’s very being as God; it could surely have been otherwise (and for that I am so thankful of his grace!) But conversely, it cannot possibly be otherwise that God is omnipotent, for this is essential to the very concept of God. Therefore, omnipotence is one of God’s divine attributes; it is an essential property of God, in the absence of which God would not be God but a mere claimant to the title. Berkhof describes these attributes as “real determinations of the divine being, or, in other words, qualities that inhere in the being of God.”\(^6\) Attributes, in short, describe and reveal the essence of God. They reveal God’s nature.

As we shall see, the concept of God’s nature and its relation to God himself can become tangled in philosophical questions and concerns, but for now let us simply identify “nature” as the totality of a substance’s essential properties. “By the term nature,” Reymond writes, “I refer to the complex of attributes or characteristics that belongs to or inheres in any given entity and makes it to be what it is in distinction from everything else.” Now we begin to touch on the matter of simplicity as Reymond continues:

Sometimes God’s attributes are represented as standing in relation to God in the same sense that pins are related to a pincushion. This is erroneous thinking in the extreme. While a pin, which has a nature all its own, and without changing in any way the essential nature of the pin cushion, the attributes of God are essential to the nature of God. They comprise the characteristics of God that distinguish him as God. It is precisely in the sum total of his attributes that his essence as God finds its expression. With them he is distinguished as God from all other entities. Without them, either collectively or singly, he would simply cease to be God.7

Reymond’s point is that these properties of God are not parts of God; they are not other substances of which God is merely partaking, but are rather of God’s own being, defining and declaring what he is, and without which, as we’ve said, he would not be God. John Frame agrees, writing that “defining or essential attributes of God should not be considered parts of him, but are rather perspectives on his essence. In that sense, God is ‘simple.’”8

When we speak of God’s simplicity then, in the most elementary sense, we are speaking of his not having parts, of his non-compositeness. “We use the term,” Berkhof explains, “to describe the state or quality of being simple, the condition of being free from division into parts, and therefore from compositeness.”9 The crucial implication which arises from this characterization is that God cannot be divided into more elementary parts (or particles, as it were); it means that the Godhead is not like the nucleus of a lithium atom, consisting of three protons fused into a composite unity (which protons themselves are further divisible into their constituent quarks, and so on), but rather that the Persons are non-composite in their essential unity, and inseparable. Divine simplicity means that “God’s essence and perfections are not distinct, and that the attributes are not superadded to his essence.”10 And it is this absence of parts that thus distinguishes God from all the rest of his creation. All created things, being finite, are necessarily composite, built up of more basic stuff; but God alone is infinite, without parts, unable to add to or lose from that perfection of fullness. Simplicity is necessarily unique to God. Here is Bavinck on the issue:

Irenaeus calls God “all thought, all perception, all eye, all ear, the one entire fountain of all good things…” God is pure essence, without accident; compared to him all creaturely being is non-being. With creatures there is a difference between being, living, knowing, willing; there is a difference of degree among them; there are some creatures that have being only; others that have life also; still others that have a mind besides. But God is

8 Frame, Doctrine of God, 355.
9 L. Berkhof, Systematic Theology, 62.
10 Ibid.
one in every respect. *He is whatever he has.* He is his own wisdom, his own life; being and life are one in him.\(^{11}\)

Again: “He is what he has,” such that whatever God is, he is completely and simultaneously.\(^{12}\) Thus, beyond asserting the obvious fact (given his spiritual nature) that God has no physical parts, and more specific than the assertion that God’s properties (his attributes) are not constituent parts within a composite entity, the doctrine of simplicity in its full form is “the belief that God is identical with his nature or his properties.”\(^{13}\) And it is on this point, as we shall see, that assorted problems arise. The doctrine has been opposed on two basic grounds: first, that it is guilty of being overly speculative, non-Scripturally derived, metaphysical abstraction; and second, that it conflicts with the biblical revelation on the triunity of God.\(^{14}\)

Emil Brunner, for example, comes down especially hard on the entire concept, criticizing the general trend of the Protestant Scholastics to ground their entire systematic theological formulations in this idea of *simplicitas Dei,* and arguing that the notion only arises “if we make the abstract idea of the Absolute the starting-point for our thought. This is simply the undifferentiated *Monas* of Neo-Platonism modified by Theism.”\(^{15}\) Again: “Here [in speaking of simplicity], we are not dealing with an Attribute of God at all, but with the fact that the idea of the Absolute permits no differentiations.”\(^{16}\)

As we shall see, Brunner makes a powerful point here. The question that we ought to keep in mind as we delve deeper into the doctrine of simplicity as it was formulated in both its medieval and contemporary contexts is: Is the line of thought it follows grounded in Scripture’s revelation of God-as-Lord, or in philosophical notions far removed from that? We hope to show that while simplicity is indeed an important doctrine, insofar as it points to the essential unity of God, yet it goes too far in asserting and demanding God’s absolute simplicity. For now, however, we will give Berkhof the last word in this section, because in the passage that follows he gives us a final restatement of simplicity’s definition and points us to the problems which had necessitated its formulation in the first place:

It is commonly said in theology that God’s attributes are God himself, as he has revealed himself to us... It was further asserted by the Scholastics that the whole essence of God is identical with each one of the attributes, so that God’s knowing is God, God’s willing is God, and so on. Some of them even went so far as to say that each attribute is identical with every

\(^{11}\) Bavinck, *Doctrine of God,* 168. Italics mine.
\(^{12}\) Ibid., 121.
\(^{13}\) Nash, *The Concept of God,* 85.
\(^{14}\) Bavinck, *Doctrine of God,* 169.
\(^{16}\) Ibid., 294.
other attribute, and that there are no logical distinctions in God. This is a very dangerous extreme. While it may be said that there is an interpenetration of the attributes in God, and that they form a harmonious whole, we are moving in the direction of Pantheism, when we rule out distinctions in God, and say that his self-existence is his infinity, his knowing is his willing, his love is his righteousness, and vice versa.\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{17} L. Berkhof, \textit{Systematic Theology}, 45.