

A Brief Introduction to Divine Simplicity

[Notes adapted from Brian Davies, *Philosophy of Religion: A Guide and Anthology*, pp. 533-8]

1. What is divine simplicity?

The claim that God is simple is an ancient one. It is endorsed by several of the early Christian fathers. It is defended by a variety of medieval Jewish, Christian and Islamic thinkers and also by many contemporary philosophers and theologians.

But what might it mean to say that God is simple? A famous account of divine simplicity comes in St. Augustine's *The City of God*. Here Augustine says:

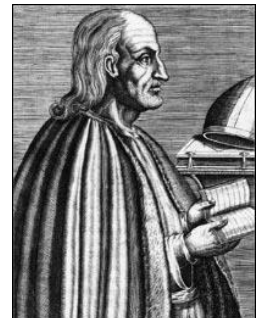


There is then one sole Good, which is simple, and therefore unchangeable; and that is God. By this Good all good things were created; but they are not simple, and for that reason they are changeable. ... The reason why a nature is called simple is that it cannot lose any attribute it possesses, that there is no difference between what it *is* and what it *has*, as there is, for example, between a vessel and the liquid it contains, a body and its colour, the atmosphere and its light or heat, the soul and its wisdom. None of these *is* what it contains; the vessel is not the liquid, nor the body the colour, nor the atmosphere the light or heat; nor is the soul the same as its wisdom. (*The City of God*, XI, 10).

Augustine shows us that when philosophers say that God is 'simple' they are saying two things:

- i) *God is unchanging (immutable)*
- ii) *God does not possess different properties or attributes*

God's essence and attributes are one and the same. Hence Anselm writes: 'The supreme nature is simple: thus all the things which can be said of its essence are simply one and the same thing in it' (*Monologion* ch. 17). Anselm acknowledges that those who believe in God use many different statements when speaking of his nature. They say, for example, 'God is good', 'God is just' and 'God is wise'. But, so Anselm argues, we should not think of God as something with really distinct attributes.



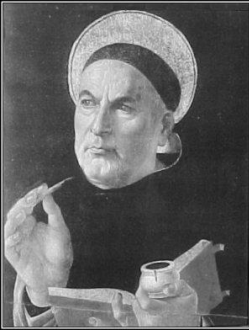
An example by Brian Davies: Consider Fred

Fred might be tall, dark and handsome. But what if he shrinks, goes grey and loses all his looks? Would he still be Fred? Most people would say that Fred can exist over a long period of time even though he undergoes many changes (thereby acquiring and losing many attributes). They would say this because they would want to distinguish between Fred and the attributes he possesses at any given time. They would want to say that being Fred can be distinguished from (and is distinct from) being tall, dark and handsome. This means that Fred and his attributes are not one and the same thing.

According to Anselm, however, this is just what cannot be said of God. For him there is no difference between God and anything we might want to call 'the attributes of God'.

2. Essence and existence

Some philosophers have, however, also wanted to say more than this. They have wanted to add that God is simple in the sense that there is no real distinction between God's nature (or essence) and God's existence.



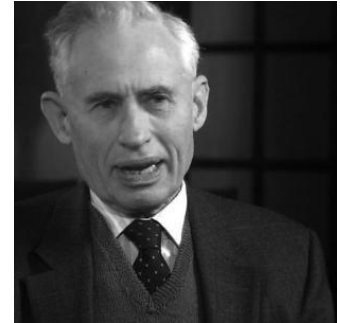
We can see how this idea is an extension of the points above. If God is simple in the sense that he is immutable and has no attributes distinct from himself, existence must belong to God by nature. On this account, God is simple because 'the existence of God is his essence' (Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Ia. 13. 11). To say that God is simple is to say that he is not a composite of different attributes, but neither is he a composite of 'essence' and 'existence.'

This idea links with a classic argument for the existence of God, known as the ontological argument.

3. Divine simplicity in more recent religious philosophy

Richard Swinburne is one of the most well-known philosophers of religion in the latter half of the twentieth century. In *The Existence of God*, Swinburne argues the hypothesis of theism 'postulates the simplest kind of person that there could be'.

He uses the notion of divine simplicity to justify belief in a God who is infinitely powerful (omnipotent) and all-knowing (omniscient).



- i) The hypothesis that God is omnipotent and omniscient is a simpler hypothesis than there is a God who has such-and-such limited power (for example, the power to rearrange matter, but not the power to create it).
- ii) It is simpler in just the same way that the hypothesis that some particle has zero mass, or infinite velocity is simpler than the hypothesis that it has a mass of 0.34127 or some unit, or a velocity of 301,000 km/sec. A finite limitation cries out for an explanation of why there is just one particular limit, in a way that limitlessness does not. There is a neatness about zero and infinity that particular finite numbers lack.
- iii) Yet a person with zero powers would not be a person at all.
- iv) *Conclusion:* So in postulating a person with infinite power the theist is postulating a person with the simplest kind of power possible.