



ARAŞTIRMA MAKALESİ / RESEARCH ARTICLE

PLANTINGA AND ASH'ARITES ON DIVINE SIMPLICITY*

Nazif MUHTAROĞLU

Dr. Öğretim Görevlisi, Mimar Sinan Güzel Sanatlar Üniversitesi, Fen-Edebiyat Fakültesi, İstanbul

Dr. Instructor, Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University, School of Art and Sciences, Istanbul/Turkey

nazifm81@gmail.comorcid.org/0000-0001-8393-5626ror.org/04e9czp26**Abstract**

The doctrine of divine simplicity has been upheld across various religious traditions, including Christianity and Islam. The mainstream interpretation of divine simplicity identifies God with His attributes. I examine and discuss certain criticisms of this doctrine. I consider Alvin Plantinga's arguments from the recent Western literature, and certain arguments given by 'Abd al-Qāhir Baghdādī and Sa'd al-Dīn al-Taftāzānī from the Ash'arite tradition. After reconstructing these arguments, I discuss two main objections that can be directed to them.

Plantinga's criticism aims to indicate some unacceptable consequences of divine simplicity. First, if divine simplicity is accepted, then all the divine attributes would be identical with divine essence, and thus divine attributes would be identical to each other. That is to say, there would be only one attribute if they are all identical. However, this result is not easy to accept given the multiplicity of divine attributes such as omnipotence, omniscience, and omnibenevolence. Second, via similar reasoning, it can be shown that God is not a personal being who created the universe but an abstract object since properties are abstract objects. These absurd consequences follow from divine simplicity. If they are not to be accepted, divine simplicity must be rejected. These arguments exemplify the form of *reductio ad absurdum*, and the same form of arguing against divine simplicity is also found within the Ash'arite tradition.

On the one hand, 'Abd al-Qāhir Baghdādī argues that divine attributes would be identical if divine simplicity is accepted. The identity of divine attributes implies that their scopes are identical as well. However, the scope of divine power and divine knowledge cannot be identical since God knows Himself, but His power does not apply to Himself. Sa'd al-Dīn al-Taftāzānī, on the other hand, holds that attributes are not independent beings but can exist only as dependent upon something else. If divine attributes are assumed to be identical with divine essence, then divine essence would be a dependent being as attributes are. As we have seen, these arguments also purport to show some absurdities following from the doctrine of divine simplicity and deny this doctrine on the basis of those absurdities. Thus, they exemplify the form of *reductio ad absurdum* as Plantinga's arguments.

The first objection that could be directed against the above arguments aims to show that we cannot make any distinction in God since God is absolutely distinct from any other being. Thus, we cannot even differentiate between divine attributes and God's essence. If this is the case, all the arguments considered rely on a mistaken

* I would like to thank Safaruk Z. Chowdhury, David S. Jalajel and Edward O. Moad for their feedback on the earlier drafts of this paper.

presumption about some kind of distinction between God and divine attributes. I argue that this position is inconsistent with the doctrine of divine simplicity. Divine simplicity is a theoretical position that identifies divine attributes with God. To be able to make that identification, the doctrine already presumes some kind of distinction between God and divine attributes. The second objection does not deny that there is some kind of distinction. It aims to explain it in terms of the distinction between sense and reference as proposed by Frege and analogical predication as introduced by Aquinas. I argue that this attempt is futile and amounts to the first objection.

Keywords: Philosophy of religion, Kalām, Divine simplicity, Divine attributes, Alvin Plantinga, Ash'arites, 'Abd al-Qāhir Baghdādī, Sa'd al-Dīn al-Taftāzānī.

TANRI'NIN BASİTLİĞİ ÜZERİNE PLANTİNGA VE EŞ'ARİLER

Öz

Tanrı'nın basitliği doktrini Hristiyanlık ve İslamiyet'in de dahil olduğu çeşitli dini gelenekler tarafından savunulmuş bir düşüncedir. Tanrı'nın basitliği, ana-akım yoruma göre Tanrı'nın sıfatlarının Tanrı'nın kendisiyle aynı olmasını gerekli kılar. Bu makale, Tanrı'nın basitliği doktrinine karşı yöneltilen birtakım eleştirileri inceleyip tartışmaktadır. Dikkate alınan argümanlar günümüz Batı literatüründen Alvin Plantinga'ya ve Eş'ari gelenekten ise Abdülkâhir el-Bağdâdî ve Sa'düddîn et-Teftâzânî'ye aittir. Bu argümanların mantıksal yapısını açığa çıkaracak şekilde yeniden inşası yapıldıktan sonra onlara karşı getirilebilecek iki önemli eleştirinin nasıl yanıtlanabileceği hakkında öneriler sunulmaktadır.

Plantinga'nın Tanrı'nın basitliği doktrinine karşı getirmiş olduğu eleştiri, Tanrı'nın sıfatları ile aynı kabul edilmesi durumunun yol açacağı kabul edilemez sonuçlar üzerine kuruludur. Eğer Tanrı'nın zati ilahi sıfatlar ile aynı ise, bu durumda sıfatların hepsi zatiyla aynı olacak, bu sonuç ise sıfatların birbiriyle aynı olmasını beraberinde getirecektir. Bütün sıfatların birbiriyle aynı olması ise sadece tek bir sıfatın olması anlamına gelecektir ki bu hal Tanrı'nın kudret, bilgi vs. gibi farklı sıfatlarının inkârı demektir. Benzer bir akıl yürütmeyle, Tanrı'nın basitliği tezinin, sıfatların soyut nesnelere olmasından dolayı, soyut bir nesne olduğu, dolayısıyla evreni yaratabilecek kudret ve iradeye sahip şahsi bir varlık olmadığı sonucuna da yol açtığı gösterilebilir. Olmayana ergiye (*kıyâsu'l-hulf, reductio ad absurdum*) dayalı bu argümanların benzerlerini Eş'ari gelenekte de bulmaktayız.

'Abd al-Qāhir al-Bağhdādî, Tanrı'nın sıfatları ile aynı kabul edilmesi durumunda sıfatların da birbirleriyle aynı kabul edilmesi gerekeceğini, bu kabulün ise ilahi ilim ve kudretin taallukatının da aynı olması sonucunu doğuracağını söyler. Ne var ki Allah'ın zatını bildiği halde kudretinin zatına taalluk etmemesi bu iki sıfatın taalluklarının aynı olmadığını, dolayısıyla ilahi basitlik tezinin yanlışlığını gösterir. Sa'düddîn et-Teftâzânî'ye göre ise sıfatlar kendi başlarına kaim varlıklar değildir, ancak başka bir varlığa bağlı olarak var olabilirler. Eğer Tanrı sıfatlarıyla aynı kabul edilecek olursa, Tanrı'nın da benzer şekilde başkasına bağımlı bir varlık olarak kabul edilmesi gerekir. Görüldüğü üzere, her iki Eş'ari düşünür de Plantinga'nın argümanlarına benzer şekilde olmayana ergiye dayalı bir akıl yürütme yöntemini takip ederek Tanrı'nın basitliği doktrini eleştirmektedir.

Bu argümanlar, Tanrı ve sıfatları arasında bir ayrım olduğu varsayımından hareketle kurulmuştur. Nitekim hiçbir şekilde ayrım yapılamayacak olsa ne diye sıfatların ilahi zat ile aynı olduğu tezi savunulmaya çalışılsın. Bu argümanlara getirilecek eleştirilerin de böyle bir ayrımı büsbütün reddetmeden Tanrı ve sıfatları arasındaki ayniyeti açıklayan bir modele dayanması gerekir. Bu açıdan dikkate alınabilecek en seviyeli eleştiri, Frege'nin manâ (*Sinn/sense*) ve gönderim/mâsadak (*Bedeutung/referent*) ayrımına atıfla yapılacak bir ayniyet söylemine dayanabilir. Edward Feser bu ayrıma dayalı bir basitlik tezini Aquinas'ın analogik yüklemeleme teziyle destekleyerek savunmaktadır. Fakat böyle bir savunmanın da, yakından incelendiğinde, başarılı olamadığı görülecektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Din felsefesi, Kelâm, Tanrı'nın basitliği, Alvin Plantinga, Eş'ariler, Abdülkâhir el-Bağdâdî, Sa'düddîn et-Teftâzânî

Atıf / Cite as: Muhtaroglu, Nazif. "Plantinga and Ash'arites on Divine Simplicity". *Kader* 18/2 (Aralık 2020): 488-499. <https://doi.org/10.18317/kaderdergi.809068>

Introduction

The relationship between God and His attributes has been subject to a long historical controversy. One of the main approaches to this issue is known as divine simplicity, which has been upheld across various religious traditions including Christianity and Islam. A mainstream interpretation of divine simplicity maintains that God is identical with His attributes. For instance, God is identical with His knowledge or with His power. Alvin Plantinga has revived this historical debate and offered certain criticisms to the doctrine of divine simplicity. In the history of the *kalām*, it is remarkable that a similar - but not exactly the same- criticism was directed by the Ash'arites against the Mu'tazila. In what follows, I propose to explicate and discuss this criticism à la the one offered by Plantinga. First, I present how the idea of divine simplicity is articulated within the Christian theology mainly by relying upon Augustine and Aquinas. Second, I present the Mu'tazila view of divine simplicity as they are the main proponents of this idea within the Muslim *kalām*. Next, I unpack the criticisms of divine simplicity; first those of Plantinga and then the one proposed by two Ash'arite scholars, 'Abd al-Qāhir Baghdādī and Sa'd al-Dīn al-Taftāzānī. After comparatively evaluating these criticisms I address several objections to them. Finally, I point to how Plantinga and the Ash'arites converge in approaching the relationship between God and His attributes.

1. Divine Simplicity in Christian Theology

In Christian theology as well as in many other traditions, God is considered to be fundamentally different from the universe. God is the creator; the universe is the created realm. God is absolutely independent of anything; the universe is a dependent being. Many things in the universe also depend upon the parts out of which they are constituted. A car is dependent upon the tires, the metallic body, the engine, etc. So, being dependent upon something seems to be a defect that cannot be ascribed to God. So, many theologians abstain from the view that God has any part. As the arguments goes, God must be simple. Otherwise, His absolute perfection and transcendence cannot be maintained.

A common way to formulate God's simplicity attempts to eliminate any distinction that can be made with respect to God by identifying apparent distinctions with God (or God's essence) Himself. A distinction between God's essence and His attributes or differences between various divine attributes is eliminated this way. Behind this move lies the presumption that any such distinction would imply the existence of parts in God, which in turn render God dependent upon these parts.

Let us see how Augustine formulates this idea of divine simplicity: God 'is what he has.'¹ In God, quality and substance are one and the same.² Thus, according to Augustine, God

¹ Augustine of Hippo, *The City of God Against the Pagans*, trans. D. Wiesen (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), 3/462.

² Augustine, *The City of God*, 3/468.

(or God's substance) is identical with his attributes. Likewise, Aquinas confirms that there is no distinction in God, and specifically no distinction between divine essence and existence.³ After having presented the mainstream Christian idea of divine simplicity we move to the Mu'tazila view.

2. Divine Simplicity in The Mu'tazila Kalām

God is one and unique, He has no partners. This is the idea of *tawhīd* and regarded as one of the essential pillars of the Islamic creed. The Mu'tazila uphold this idea and even call themselves *ahl al-'adl wa'l-tawhīd* (people of [God's] justice and uniqueness). The Mu'tazila scholars think that affirming many attributes in God has a dangerous result. If divine attributes are considered to be eternal, then there would be many eternal beings besides God. Therefore, this would contradict the core principle of *tawhīd*: that there is only one eternal being. For that reason, early Mu'tazilite scholars such as Abū al-Hudhayl al-'Allāf tried to eliminate the multitude of eternal beings (*ta'addud al-qudamā'*) either by considering some divine attributes to be created (such as divine will and speech) or by identifying some of them with God Himself (such as divine power and knowledge).⁴ Let's ignore their view on the created status of divine will or speech for the sake of the issue of divine simplicity that is the issue analyzed in this paper. Abū al-Hudhayl's identification of divine knowledge and power with God resembles what Augustine and Aquinas proposed with respect to all divine attributes or distinctions to be made in God. Thus, in this approach, God is identical with His power. God is also identical with His knowledge. Since we have completed the presentation of divine simplicity as understood by Christian theologians and early Mu'tazila *mutakallimūn*, we can move on to the criticisms offered to this view.

3. Plantinga's Criticisms of Divine Simplicity

In his *Does God Have a Nature?* Plantinga considers the doctrine of divine simplicity and offers two criticisms. His interpretation of divine simplicity parallels the mainstream Christian understanding. According to Plantinga, divine simplicity implies that God is fundamentally devoid of complexity. We can make no distinction in God. His nature cannot be distinguished from His existence, nor is His existence distinguishable from His

³ Thomas Aquinas, "Disputed Question of the Power of God, 7", *Thomas Aquinas: Selected Writings*, ed. and trans. Ralph McInery (London: Penguin Books, 1998), 307; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. The English Dominican Province (London: Sheed & Ward, 1948), 1/ 14-20.

⁴ Catarino Belo, "Mu'tazilites, al-Ashari and Maimonides on Divine Attributes", *Veritas Porto Alegre* 52/3 (September 2007), 119-120. Daniel Gimaret, "Mu'tazila", *Encyclopaedia of Islam New Edition*, ed. C. E. Bosworth, etc. (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 7/ 783; Id, *La doctrine d'al-Ash'ari* (Paris: Les éditions du Cerf, 1990), 276. Note also that this view ascribed to Abū al-Hudhayl is not accepted by all the Mu'tazilites. Later scholars of this school formulated relatively different views on the relation between God's essence and His attributes.

properties such as goodness, wisdom, power.⁵ Thus, God is the same thing as his properties, for instance goodness.⁶

The first criticism goes like this.

- (1) God is identical with each property He has. (Thesis of divine simplicity)
- (2) Each divine property is identical with each other divine property. (Transitivity of identity)
- (3) If all divine properties are identical with each other, then there is only one divine property.
- (4) Thus, God has only one property. (The logical conclusion of (2) and (3) by Modus Ponens)
- (5) But, there are many divine properties, which are not identical with each other. (Divine power and mercy are not identical.)
- (6) Divine simplicity thesis is false. (4, 5 contradiction)

Given (4) and (5) are contradictory, by *reductio ad absurdum*, Plantinga denies (1) and claims to have shown that the thesis of divine simplicity is false.⁷

To appreciate this argument, let us focus on some key premises and extend them for more clarity. Premise (2) states that each divine property is identical with each other divine property. This conclusion follows from our basic understanding of identity relation and what divine simplicity implies. Let "G" stand for God and each of His properties are symbolized by "a", "b", "c", and so on. For instance, "a" is divine power, "b" is divine wisdom. Premise (1) states the following:

G = a

G = b

G = c ...

Given these statements are identity statements, it follows that a = b, b = c, ... Again, given the statements we obtained are still identity statements, it follows that a = c, and so on. As a result, a = b = c... All divine properties are identical with each other. We acquired this conclusion by means of the identity relation, which is a transitive relation. It is transitive in the sense that what is identical to G in the first step would be identical with whatever is identical with G in the second step. Thus, a = b. This goes indefinitely this way. Since all divine properties are identical, they are the same, therefore there is only one property as stated in the 3rd and 4th premises. However, we meaningfully talk about many divine attributes: power, knowledge, will, mercy, etc. There is a contradiction in question, and whatever leads to a contradiction is false.

Plantinga's second criticism can be reconstructed as follows:

⁵ Alvin Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1980), 27.

⁶ Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?*, 28.

⁷ Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?*, 47.

- (1) God is identical with each property He has. (Thesis of divine simplicity)
- (2) If God is identical with each of His properties, He is a property. (since each of His properties is a property)
- (3) If God is a property, God is not a personal being but a mere abstract object. (by definition)
- (4) No property could have created the world, no property could be omniscient, or know anything at all. (by definition)
- (5) God is a personal being. God is powerful, wise, etc. and created the world. (by definition)
- (6) Divine simplicity thesis is false. (4, 5 contradiction)

Following the same argumentative strategy here as well, Plantinga denies (1) on the basis that (4) and (5) are contradictory.⁸ Let us unpack this argument, too. The key premise in this argument seems to be the second one. Plantinga relies on the intuition that each divine property is a property. There are many types of properties. Being red and beautiful are properties of a rose, which is a finite being. Being perfectly wise and powerful are properties of God, as an absolute being. Yet all these various properties are regarded as properties. If God is identical with the property of divine wisdom, as the argument goes, God is a property. This inference relies upon the principle of the indiscernibility of identicals. According to this principle, if two things are identical, whatever is true of one of them, it is also true of the other. Thus, whatever is true of divine wisdom is also true of God. Divine wisdom is a property, so is God.

Properties are considered to be abstract objects like numbers, they are not concrete beings and of course not personal beings. Abstract objects do not engage in causal relations with concrete entities. This is what is understood of “properties”. By definition, then, properties cannot hold whatever is traditionally ascribed to God. God, as understood in three monotheistic religions, created the universe. He is characterized as a personal being as this creation takes place in accordance with His knowledge, will, power, etc. So, God is not an abstract object. In both arguments, Plantinga seeks to illuminate that divine simplicity leads to contradictory conclusions. Therefore, it is quite problematic to accept that doctrine. Let us move on to the criticisms of the Ash‘arite *mutakallimūn*.

4. Ash‘arite Criticisms

The first criticism I consider comes from ‘Abd al-Qāhir al-Baghdādī. He takes into account *Abū al-Hudhayl al-‘Allāf’s* view on divine power and knowledge. Al-Baghdādī presents *al-‘Allāf’s* view as follows: God is knower by means of knowledge, yet His knowledge is His essence. God is powerful by means of power, yet His power is His essence. On the basis of what is said, *al-‘Allāf* accepts the idea of divine simplicity with respect to divine power and knowledge. From this view, al-Baghdādī derives the conclusion that God’s essence is

⁸ Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?*, 47.

identical with divine knowledge and power. He gives an interesting argument against this idea. If God's essence is identical with divine knowledge and power, then the scope of divine knowledge and the scope of divine power must be the same. Since God Himself falls within His knowledge (as He knows Himself), God must be included under the scope of His power as well.⁹ This is unacceptable to both Ash'arites and the Mu'tazila. It is not difficult to see why. Considering God to be under His power implies contingency and change. Under this assumption, divine power can change God Himself or even destroy His essence. That result is obviously against divine eternity and perfection. Let us reconstruct this argument step by step.

- (1) God's essence is identical with divine power and knowledge. (Divine simplicity thesis)
- (2) Divine power is identical divine knowledge. (transitivity of identity)
- (3) The logical scope of divine power is identical the logical scope of divine knowledge. (Corollary of 2)
- (4) God Himself or His essence is included within the scope of divine knowledge. (by definition of divine knowledge)
- (5) God Himself or His essence is included within the scope of divine power. (3, 4 the principle of the indiscernibility of identicals)
- (6) God Himself or His essence cannot be included within the scope of divine power. (otherwise it goes against divine eternity and perfection)
- (7) Divine simplicity thesis is false. (5, 6 contradiction)

As we have seen, in constructing this argument, al-Baghdādī appeals to the transitivity of identity and the principle of the indiscernibility of identical as Plantinga does. Al-Baghdādī derives a conclusion even *al-'Allāf* cannot accept. In his book, he even reports that *al-'Allāf* could not say anything when such an argument was presented to him.¹⁰ Like Plantinga, al-Baghdādī denies divine simplicity by a *reductio* argument.

Let me present one more argument that can be reconstructed from al-Taftāzānī. In *Sharh al-'Aqā'id*, after reporting that the Mu'tazila identified certain divine attributes with God's essence, al-Taftāzānī derives many conclusions from this idea. One of them is very interesting: the Necessarily Existent (i.e. God) cannot subsists on His own.¹¹ He means to say that identifying attributes with God's essence leads to the conclusion that God cannot subsists alone since the attributes cannot subsists alone but need a being to be able to exist. In other words, in al-Taftāzānī's argument, divine simplicity renders God a dependent being. Let us reformulate this argument as well.

- (1) Divine attributes are identical with God's essence. (Divine simplicity thesis)
- (2) Divine attributes are dependent beings. (since all attributes are dependent.)

⁹ 'Abd al-Qāhir al-Baghdādī, *Usūl al-Dīn* (Istanbul: Matbaatu'l-Dawla, 1928), 91.

¹⁰ Baghdādī, *Usūl al-Dīn*, 91.

¹¹ Sa'd al-Dīn al-Taftāzānī, *A Commentary on the Creed of Islam*. tr. Earl Edgar Elder (New York: Columbia University Press, 1950), 50-51.

- (3) God is a dependent being. (1, 2 the principle of the indiscernibility of identicals)
- (4) God is independent of anything. (by definition of God)
- (5) Divine simplicity thesis is false. (3,4 contradiction)

This argument appeals to the principle of the indiscernibility of identicals only as a bridge principle and resembles only the second argument of Plantinga. Recall, al-Baghdādī's argument appeals to both the principle of the indiscernibility of identicals and transitivity of identity. Thus, it could be regarded as a more complex argument than that of al-Taftāzānī. As such al-Baghdādī's argument carries the intuitions behind both of the two arguments presented by Plantinga. Al-Taftāzānī's argument also derives a conclusion (i.e. that God is a dependent being), which cannot be accepted by the Mu'tazila. Like the arguments above, it has a form of *reductio ad absurdum* that denies divine simplicity on the basis of a contradiction. After having seen these criticisms, let us evaluate some possible objections to them.

4.1. Objection 1

A proponent of divine simplicity could say that the arguments given above rely on a problematic presumption. The arguments presume that we can make distinctions in God, especially between His essence and attributes. Only on the basis of this distinction, we can talk about the absurd consequences derived in sequences of logical reasoning. However, divine simplicity is so fundamental and absolute that we cannot make any distinction whatsoever in God. As the main presumption of the arguments in question is false, all the arguments lose their logical force.

This objection seems apparently convincing but upon close examination it loses its convincing power. If we cannot make any distinction whatsoever in God, we cannot talk about divine attributes either. We cannot talk about divine power, divine knowledge, divine will etc. There are occasions and contexts in which we can meaningfully talk about certain divine attributes and not certain others. When something good happens to us, we immediately feel gratitude and remember divine mercy and omnibenevolence. When something extra-ordinary happens, we incline to think about divine power. When we ponder upon the complicated order and design in micro and macro scales of the universe, we appreciate divine wisdom and knowledge. In addition, in Scriptures, there are references to all these various attributes. So, it is not a good move to categorically eliminate many divine attributes from the discourse, in which we can talk about God intelligibly.

Furthermore, if one insists that we cannot make any distinction whatsoever in God, that person cannot even say that God is identical with His attributes. The latter is a theoretical statement and presumes that some kind of distinction between God's essence and divine attributes is legitimate. If one thinks that the link between God's essence and His attributes are beyond our grasp, one needs to support the doctrine of divine ineffability. That is to say, the relationship between God's essence and His attributes is ineffable. On

the basis of divine ineffability, one cannot support the doctrine of divine simplicity since it is an intelligible theoretical position. We can understand what the proponents mean by this doctrine. Yet some proponents of divine simplicity are aware of this difficulty and accept that there is some kind of a distinction between God's essence and His attributes. They try to explain this distinction away so that they can render God's essence and His attributes identical in a certain sense. Let us see objections coming from this approach.

4.2. Objection 2

A supporter of divine simplicity may bring an objection to these arguments in the following way. Of course, there is a distinction between divine attributes such as divine power and divine knowledge. However, this is a distinction in our understanding, which does not imply anything about God. This response would be rather weak because if the distinction in question is only in our understanding without having a link to reality, then it would be completely arbitrary and a fiction of mind. Then there is no point to talk about God. So, there must be a ground that makes me conceive divine power differently from divine knowledge if I want to get rid of this arbitrariness pitfall.

A better response would link the distinction made in mind to reality and maintain that it arises from the different ways God's essence is related to certain things. When God's essence concerns the things known (*ma'lumāt*), it is called "knowledge". When it concerns the things to be made or created (*maqdurāt*), it is called "power". So, this fact does not imply plurality in God's essence or a multitude of divine attributes.

An updated version of this view, which has been defended by Edward Feser recently, appeals to Frege's distinction between sense and reference.¹² Before understanding Feser's view, let us remember Frege's famous distinction. Frege tried to explain the difference between two types of identity statements, (a=a) and (a=b), by this distinction. How is it possible that the following two statements establish an identity link yet differ in cognitive value?

- (p) The Morning Star is the Morning Star.
- (q) The Morning Star is the Evening Star.

Whereas p is known a priori and does not give us new information, q is known a posteriori and is informative. Yet both of them are true because both "the Morning Star" and "the Evening Star" refers to the same planet, namely Venus. Frege's solution to this puzzle is that "the Morning Star" and "the Evening Star" have different senses but the same referent. These two descriptions refer to the same heavenly body, the planet Venus. Their referents are the same. However, the way they refer to this planet are different. In other words, the senses of the definite descriptions with which they are associated are

¹² Edward Feser, *Five Proofs of the Existence of God* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2017), 77.

different. “The Morning Star” is the last heavenly body seen before the sunrise. “The Evening Star” is the first heavenly body seen after the sunset.¹³

Feser says that “the One’s omnipotence”¹⁴ and “the One’s intellect” refer to the very same thing, to a single, simple or noncomposite reality although their senses are different. In other words, God’s power and knowledge have different senses but the same referent. Thus, consider the following two statements Feser gives:

- (s) The One is omnipotent.
- (z) The One is an intellect.

According to Feser, although (s) and (z) do not mean the same, they can be about the same reality. Let us examine these statements in detail and see to what extent they resemble Frege’s statements of (p) and (q). Concerning s, the One, i.e., God, is attributed the attribute of omnipotence. Concerning z, God is identified as an intellect. However, both p and q are identity statements in which the referents of two definite descriptions are identified. The statement (s) is not an identity statement. It is formulated in a regular subject-predicate sentence. (z) seems to be an identity statement in which God is identified as an intellect but not the only unique intellect. Let us do our best to reformulate Feser’s statements above so that they resemble Frege’s identity statements:

- (s’) God is the omnipotent being.
- (z’) God is the omniscient being.

Now, both (s’) and (z’) have a similar structure to (p). In (p), the referents of “the Morning Star” and “the Evening Star” have been identified. They refer to the same thing though via different senses. Similarly, in (s’) the referents of “God” and “the omnipotent being” are identified. These expressions have the same referent with different senses. So is the case with (z’) in which “God” and “the omniscient being” have the same referent. Now, the omnipotent being can do anything possible. The omniscient being knows everything. Although “the omnipotent being” and “the omniscient being” have different senses they refer to the same being, namely God. And obviously there is no problem with the identity understood these lines.

The problem arises when we return Feser’s original formulations. If we examine his statements of s and z closely enough, we can see that they are not subject to Frege’s analysis. That is to say, the original statements of Feser cannot appeal to Frege’s distinction between sense and reference to support divine simplicity. Concerning (s), the referents of “the One” –“God”- and “omnipotent” are not identified. Rather, God is ascribed the attribute of omnipotence. “Omnipotent” is an attribute and different from the one who has this attribute. Concerning (z), the expressions “the One” and “an

¹³ Gottlob Frege, “Über Sinn und Bedeutung”, *Zeitschrift für Philosophie und philosophische Kritik* 100 (1892), 25–50; Gottlob Frege, “On Sense and Reference”, trans. M. Black, *Translations from the Philosophical Writings of Gottlob Frege*, eds. P. Geach-M. Black (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), 56–78.

¹⁴ “the One” in this context refers to God.

intellect” do not uniquely pick the same referent. So, their referents are not identical either. In order to be able to use Frege’s distinction between sense and reference, one has to introduce two expressions that purport to refer to the same thing. The expressions within (s) and (z) do not even purport to refer to the same thing. And there is a reason why Feser formulated the statements this way. According to him, divine simplicity implies that there is no distinction between God’s intellect, omnipotence, and eternity. All of them are one, single reality. This is why he suggests that “the One’s omnipotence” and “the One’s intellect” refer to the very same thing.¹⁵ By eliminating the difference between the predicate of “omnipotence” and the definite description of “the omnipotent being” one already assumes divine simplicity. But, if this is the case, Feser presumes the legitimacy of the thesis of divine simplicity, which is supposed to be shown. Thus, it is futile to appeal to Frege’s distinction of sense and reference to back up his thesis. Apparently, “the One’s omnipotence” and “the One’s intellect” refer to different attributes. One needs an argument to see that their referent is the same. Furthermore, I have shown how al-Baghdādī’s argument makes it clear that the attributes of omnipotence and omniscience cannot be taken as identical because of the difference in their extensions although there is only one being who has these attributes.

The distinction between divine power and knowledge cannot be eliminated by pointing to the different realms with which God’s essence is related. The different realms in question are the extensions of divine attributes such as the realm of things known and the realm of things done. Although these different realms depend on a single source (i.e. God’s essence), they are fundamentally different and cannot be reduced to each other. The scope of divine knowledge involves God’s essence but the scope of divine power does not. Given this fundamental difference between the scopes of the divine attributes in question, they cannot be regarded as identical or reduced to another ontological unit. Feser does not even address this argument since probably this point is not apparent to him. He tries to make sense of divine simplicity by appealing to Aquinas’s analogical predication.¹⁶

According to Aquinas, the terms that describe the states of humans such as “power” and “knowledge” apply analogically to God. Analogical predication is a middle-ground between univocal and equivocal predication. When I say that my child and your child become friends, the term “child” is used univocally. It means the same in each appearance of the sentence above. When I say that the bank, I used to sit in the park is empty but the bank at the corner of the street is open, the term “bank” is used equivocally. “The bank in the park” and “the bank at the corner of the street” have different meanings. The former is something upon which you can sit. The latter is an institution one may use to deposit money. When a term is used analogically, it does not exactly mean the same as the original use of the term. Neither does it mean something

¹⁵ Feser, *Five Proofs of the Existence of God*, 77.

¹⁶ Feser, *Five Proofs of the Existence of God*, 78.

totally different. Consider the term “healthy.” Let us say that I am not sick but healthy. Now, when I say that exercising is healthy, the use of “healthy” does not have the exact sense of the term above. Neither is it entirely different. I mean to say that exercise leads to health or preserves the health.

Following Aquinas’s intuition on analogical predication, Feser argues that God’s power, intellect and goodness are analogous to human’s power, intellect and goodness. These divine attributes are not utterly unrelated to human attributes. Neither are they exactly the same. Feser says: “what we call God’s power, intellect, and goodness (as well as other divine attributes) are all ultimately one and the same thing looked at from different points of view, whereas what we call power, intellect and goodness in us are not the same thing.”¹⁷

Feser appeals to analogical predication to make sense of divine simplicity but does not show us in which respect divine attributes resemble their counterparts in humans. We may consider the former to be attributes of an eternal and absolute being whereas the latter to be attributes of finite beings. Thus, humans exemplify the attributes in question imperfectly, but God has them perfectly. For instance, humans know a finite range of things but God knows everything. From this perspective, however, the divine attributes can be differentiated from each other since their scopes are different. Considering them to be identical threaten the intelligibility of divine simplicity as pointed out by Plantinga’s and the Ash‘arites’ arguments above. If divine attributes are considered so different from human attributes that they are identical to each other, then it is improper to appeal to analogical predication. It seems, if this is the case, one makes use of equivocal predication. In this case, we face the problem of understanding the new meanings of the attributes as applied to God, and we go back to the issue of the ineffability of God. In a nutshell, neither Feser’s appeal to the distinction between sense and reference, nor his appeal to analogical predication, helps him to support the doctrine of divine simplicity.

5. The Relationship Between God’s Essence And Divine Attributes

Plantinga holds that God has a nature. That is to say, there are certain attributes God has essentially. It is impossible that God can lose those attributes. Since Plantinga rejects the doctrine of divine simplicity, he does not identify God’s nature with God Himself. Plantinga does not give a detailed analysis of the relationship between essential divine attributes and God Himself.¹⁸

The Ash‘arites also hold that God has certain attributes essentially and these attributes are not identical with God’s essence. Their famous formula about the relationship between attributes and God is as follows: “They are not He nor are they other than He” (*wa hiya lā huwa wa lā ghayrahu*).¹⁹ By saying that they [divine attributes] are not He [God],

¹⁷ Feser, *Five Proofs of the Existence of God*, 78-79.

¹⁸ Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?*, 140-141.

¹⁹ Taftāzānī, *A Commentary on the Creed of Islam*, 51.

they mean that they are not identical with God's essence. Hence, the denial of the doctrine of divine simplicity. By denying that they are other than He, they mean to say that divine attributes are not part of created reality. What is other than He belongs to the created realm.

One may think that the Ash'arite formulation in question may be self-contradictory. However, this judgement would be superficial. The Ash'arites do not deny mutually exclusive predicates here. If I say for instance, "this stone is neither black nor non-black", then this statement would be contradictory. The predicate of being black and being non-black are mutually exclusive and exhaust all logical possibilities. If one denies them to a certain body together, then a contradiction arises because a body must exemplify one of them. Yet, if I say "this stone is neither black nor white", this statement is not contradictory because the predicates of being black and being white are not mutually exclusive. The stone may be gray without being either black or white. Likewise, according to the Ash'arites, divine attributes' being identical with God and being distinct from Him are not mutually exclusive. In their understanding, being distinct from God means being created. Yet the attributes may be related to God in a different relationship from the one being identical with Him.

So, the two complementary sentences in the Ash'arite formulation show what is not acceptable about the relationship between God's essence and His attributes. In other words, they are negative statements stating what is not proper to ascribe to God. But what is the positive status of this relationship? Can we say something definite about God and His attributes so that we can grasp the link between them more clearly and positively. The most the Ash'arites say is that divine attributes are added to God's essence and dependent upon Him.²⁰ For sure, the dependence in question is not a kind of causal relation. Otherwise, divine attributes would be caused by God and become part of creation. This is unacceptable for the Ash'arites. Yet, they do not clarify the nature of the dependence relation in question. At the end, they finalize their account of the relationship between God's essence and divine attributes by some kind of *via negativa*.

Conclusion

As we have seen, the doctrine of divine simplicity has been severely criticized both in Christian and Islamic traditions. There are structural similarities between the criticisms proposed by Alvin Plantinga and those of 'Abd al-Qāhir Baghdādī and Sa'd al-Dīn al-Taftāzānī. All of these criticisms display a *reductio ad absurdum* type of argument, i.e. they try to derive a contradiction from divine simplicity by means of some bridge principles. Some arguments appeal to the transitivity of identity, some others appeal to the principle of the indiscernibility of identicals. I have reconstructed these arguments in order to show their logical structure as clearly as possible. After reconstructing these arguments, I have discussed two main objections that can be directed to them. The first objection aims

²⁰ Taftāzānī, *A Commentary on the Creed of Islam*, 50-51.

to show that we cannot make any distinction in God since God is absolutely distinct from any other being. Thus, we cannot even differentiate divine attributes and God's essence. If this is the case, all the arguments above relies on a mistaken presumption about some kind of distinction between God and divine attributes. Yet, I argued, this position is inconsistent with the doctrine of divine simplicity. Divine simplicity is a theoretical position that identifies divine attributes with God. To be able to make that identification the doctrine already presumes some kind of distinction between God and divine attributes. The second objection assumes that there is some kind of distinction and aims to explain it in terms of Frege's distinction between sense and reference and Aquinas's analogical predication. I argued that this attempt is futile and boils down to the first objection.

References

- Aquinas, Thomas. "Disputed Question of the Power of God, 7". *Thomas Aquinas: Selected Writings*. ed. and trans. Ralph McInery. 290-342. London: Penguin Books, 1998.
- Aquinas, Thomas. *Summa Theologica*. trans. The English Dominican Province. 5 vols. London: Sheed & Ward, 1948.
- Augustine. *The City of God Against the Pagans*. trans. D. Wiesen. vol. 3. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968.
- Baghdādī, Abd al-Qāhir al-. *Usūl al-Dīn*. Istanbul: Matbaatu'l-Dawla, 1928.
- Belo, Catarino. "Mu'tazilites, al-Ash'arī and Maimonides on Divine Attributes". *Veritas Porto Alegre* 52/3 (September 2007), 117-131.
- Feser, Edward. *Five Proofs of the Existence of God*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2017.
- Frege, Gottlob. "Über Sinn und Bedeutung", *Zeitschrift für Philosophie und philosophische Kritik* 100 (1892), 25-50.
- Frege, Gottlob. "On Sense and Reference". trans. M. Black. *Translations from the Philosophical Writings of Gottlob Frege*. eds. P. Geach-M. Black. 56-78. Oxford: Blackwell, 3rd. ed., 1980.
- Gimaret, Daniel. "Mu'tazila". *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (New Edition). ed. C. E. Bosworth, etc. 7/ 783. Leiden: Brill, 1993.
- Gimaret, Daniel. *La doctrine d'al-Ash'ari*, Paris: Les éditions du Cerf, 1990.
- Plantinga, Alvin. *Does God Have a Nature?* Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1980.
- Taftāzānī, Sa'd al-Dīn al-. *A Commentary on the Creed of Islam*. trans. Earl Edgar Elder. New York: Columbia University Press, 1950.