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# The Simple Beauty of the Trinity

In the introduction, I argued against basing a theology of beauty on the *analogia entis* and proposed that theology possesses its own resources to develop an aesthetics. This dogmatic approach to aesthetics makes use of the traditional notion of beauty as a transcendental by making the triune God revealed in Christ the center of its reflections, which leads to the question: how is beauty predicated of the triune being? If beauty were simply added to a list of divine predicates seemingly necessitated by a perfect being, it would not be clear how the resulting aesthetics would be Christian. The rules of abstract reflection on perfect being produce results too indeterminate to lead to Christian reflection on God. The sublime will eclipse beauty.[1] Following Jenson's cues, I do not focus on the formless beauty of an anonymous deity but on the beauty of the God of the Christian gospel. At stake in this claim is the beauty of the Christian God against the sublime.

1. David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 47.

Jenson's theology is irreducibly aesthetic. The role of beauty in his thought is not often recognized, but aesthetic threads are woven throughout his metaphysical proposals. Jenson proposes that faith's received notions of divinity need to be baptized by the gospel. Dogmatic aesthetics does not construct general proposals of divine beauty but speaks about the relation of beauty to the specifically triune God of the Christian gospel. Barth's principle holds for Jenson: "We have to learn to say 'God' in the correct sense. If we do not speak rightly of this Subject, how can we speak rightly of His predicates?"[2] If we are to predicate beauty of divinity, the conception of that divinity will direct everything that is said about beauty. The doctrine of God determines what we say about God's beauty and about beauty itself. For Jenson, the doctrine of the Trinity dictates aesthetics.

In this chapter, I will consider the beauty of the Trinity, which is a task that involves reconciling the concept of "proportion" in aesthetics with the concept of divine simplicity. I argue that Trinitarian theology provides its own account of internal proportionality within the divine being, observing with Jenson the Spirit's unique role as the beauty of God.

## Divine Simplicity and Beauty's Proportion

In an essay on beauty written in 1986, Jenson begins with Aquinas as representative of the Western tradition. "Beauty must include three qualities: integrity or completeness . . . right proportion or harmony; and brightness."[3] By brightness, Aquinas means clarity—as that of the splendor of the divine Word. As Jenson paraphrases: "That is beautiful which is a harmonious whole and is lucid in its harmony."[4] There is a fluidity to Aquinas' exposition of the three conditions.

2. Karl Barth, CD II/1:3.
3. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, ed. T. C. O'Brien, vol. 7 (London: Blackfriars, 1976), 133.

Though these conditions almost always remain present, he does not insist on their being joined in every instance of beauty—instead, one or another is often more prominent than the others. Jenson's stress falls on harmony. The priority of harmony is not arbitrary: brightness is predicated of the harmonious ordering of plural parts. By this ordering, a thing is made clear as it "shines itself forth to intelligence."[5] The qualities listed by Aquinas give Jenson a framework, which he utilizes to inquire after God's beauty in the internal harmony of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Jenson's emphasis on internal divine harmony raises some questions about the way in which beauty is predicated of God. In classical theology, the divine attributes are explained in accordance with a doctrine of divine simplicity. At its most basic, divine simplicity is the teaching that God is not a complex or composite being; God is not composed of parts. Augustine teaches that God "is what he has,"[6] which is commonly regarded as the foundational definition of divine simplicity.[7] According to the teaching of simplicity, God is identical with the divine attributes. Alvin Plantinga sees the foundation of this teaching in a "sovereignty–aseity intuition."[8] Since God is free from causal entanglements, divinity cannot be ontologically dependent upon anything else. For example, God is wise. So what is the relation of God to wisdom? If wisdom is a predicate attributable to God, a property that God could take or leave, then it possesses an ontological independence from God. Therefore,

4. Robert W. Jenson, "Beauty," in *Essays in Theology of Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 147.
5. Robert W. Jenson, "Deus Est Ipsa Pulchritudo," in *Theology as Revisionary Metaphysics*, ed. Stephen John Wright (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014).
6. Augustine, *City of God*, trans. R. W. Dyson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 462.
7. William E. Mann, "Divine Simplicity," *Religious Studies* 18:4 (1982): 451–71.
8. Alvin Plantinga, quoted by Thomas V. Morris, "On God and Mann: A View of Divine Simplicity," *Religious Studies* 21:3 (1985): 301.

if God is to be ontologically fundamental, having no ground in anything other than God's own divine nature, then "wisdom" must be identical with that nature if God is truly said to be wise. Following this logic, anything that is predicable of God is convertible with the divine essence.

A second notable feature of divine simplicity—made famous by Thomas Aquinas— follows from this line of argument. For God, essence coincides with existence, though for creatures it does not—a point that arises from a concern for aseity. If God's existence were conditional upon a distinct essence, then God would be ontologically dependent upon something extrinsic to divine being. To avoid this problem, medieval thinkers developed the idea that the being of God is identical with the essence of God, so that only a logical distinction obtains between "what" God is and the fact "that" God is. In reality, the two are the same. For creatures, however, the matter is quite different. Human existence is extrinsically determined because each creature receives its being from God.

If divine simplicity holds, then beauty must be predicable of divinity in a way that is not accidental to divine being but identical with the essence of God. Furthermore, we must consider how divine simplicity fits with the aesthetic notion of proportion. When examined in relation to divine being, the transcendentals have traditionally been treated as correlates to divine simplicity. However, divine simplicity raises problems that were less obvious in the discussion of the transcendentals. These problems come into focus when the teaching of divine simplicity is situated alongside traditional thinking about the Trinity. How are we to reconcile the apparent complexity of the triune being with the traditional notion of simplicity? Is it a transgression of divine simplicity to say that God is beautiful in the inward proportion of the triune persons? Oliver Crisp states that the literature on divine simplicity tends to

evade this question by coming at the topic from only one angle: "Many of the treatments available prefer to deal with the doctrine of divine simplicity as it bears upon the God of the philosophers rather than the God of faith."[9] As Thomas V. Morris argues, the doctrine is "clearly Parmenidean in pedigree."[10] Despite the appearance that the doctrine of divine simplicity foregrounds the old disagreement between Parmenides and Heraclitus, the comparison is misleading. Divine simplicity in Christian theology attempts to articulate the doctrine of the Trinity, and the doctrine of the Trinity does not attempt to resolve the one with the many; it is neither Parmenidean nor Heraclitian. The doctrine of the Trinity is instead the Christian reflection on the nature of the God revealed in the history of Israel and the church, which is centered on the revelation of the Trinity in the history of Jesus.

Stephen R. Holmes demonstrates that modern treatments of the doctrine become confused when they discuss simplicity without also addressing more general ontological questions. He draws attention to the fact that the discussion of simplicity is complicated by the presumption of a common ontology,[11] Holmes shows that the doctrine of divine simplicity can deliver different results depending on the underlying ontological assumptions. Colin Gunton argues that the greatest theological problem with divine simplicity arises from the attempt to derive the notion from Plato rather than from Trinitarian doctrine.[12] It cannot be presumed that general conceptions of deity derived from philosophical principles have any relevant bearing on Christian theology. How does the simple deity of

9. Oliver D. Crisp, "Jonathan Edwards on Divine Simplicity," *Religious Studies* 39:1 (2003): 23.
10. Morris, "On God and Mann," 299.
11. Stephen R. Holmes, "'Something Much Too Plain to Say': Towards a Defence of the Doctrine of Divine Simplicity," *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 43:1 (2001): 137–54, 139.
12. Colin Gunton, *Act and Being: Towards a Theology of the Divine Attributes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 42–43.

Platonic philosophy, for instance, relate to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity?

In the doctrine of the Trinity, the internal difference of God poses a challenge to the notion of a simple divine essence. At this point, the problem presents itself as a mathematical puzzle. How can one be three? The theological tradition has shown great creativity in attempting to reconcile these numbers. However, the puzzle is further complicated when we move from pure mathematics to a consideration of divine attributes. How is wisdom or beauty predicated of God? If we speak of the God of the philosophers, then we can maintain the simplicity of God by finding an acceptable way to predicate beauty of a singular essence. Within a Trinitarian understanding of God, however, how is beauty to be predicated of the divine persons? If God is beauty, is it possible to speak of the beauty of the Son in distinction from the beauty of the Father or the Spirit? Is the beauty of the Son identical to the beauty of the Father and the beauty of the Spirit, or is divine beauty the proportion of the relations between them?

Jonathan Edwards is a significant source of Jenson's aesthetic grammar. By making the triunity of God constitutive of divine beauty, Edwards contends that God is inwardly complex, though not composite. This account of beauty owes a debt to the Western tradition that counts proportion among the qualities of beauty. While Edwards's ontology favors the inner complexity of the Godhead, his *modus operandi* is that of idealism: "God is a mind, or perhaps better, a mind which is an act."[13] That is, the Father has a perfect thought of himself, and this emanation is so perfect that it is God all over again. This is the procession of the Son. In similar fashion, the Holy Spirit is the subsistent perfect love for, and delight in, this

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13. Crisp, "Jonathan Edwards on Divine Simplicity," 32.

idea of himself.[14] The proportion and interplay of the divine persons forms the basis for a theology of beauty. Edwards uses "excellency" as the language of beauty: "One alone cannot be excellent. . . . Therefore, if God is excellent, there must be a plurality in God."[15] Edwards does not employ this idea as a deductive argument for the Trinity but as the appropriate way of describing beauty in God. Divine excellency is harmonious. Therefore, the language of plurality is not meant to "imply a plurality of essences or being"; instead, "asserting plurality in God [makes] room for particularity in intimate union."[16] Because the harmony of God's being is the very harmony of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, God—in his triunity—appears "glorious" to Edwards and leads to "exalting thoughts of God."[17] Harmony and glory correspond to Aquinas's qualities of proportion and brightness. Harmony requires parts, and only the triune God possesses the inward complexity of genuine differentiated identities subsisting in perfect unity: a harmonious whole. This theological use of the rule of aesthetic proportion alters the meaning from the classical order of discrete parts and recasts proportion for a specific theological outcome.

However, Edwards may overemphasize the separation of the divine persons. The way in which this Trinitarian logic fits with the doctrine of divine simplicity is unclear. As Amy Plantinga Pauw describes it, Edwards expresses ambivalence toward the tradition of simplicity and did not seem to subscribe to a strict version of the doctrine of simplicity.[18] While some divine attributes are easily

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14. Jonathan Edwards, "Miscellany 94" in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards,* ed. Thomas A. Schafer, vol. 13 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 262ff.

15. Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Wallace Earl Anderson, vol. 6 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 84.

16. Amy Plantinga Pauw, *The Supreme Harmony of All: The Trinitarian Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 70.

17. Jonathan Edwards, "Personal Narrative," in *A Jonathan Edwards Reader*, ed. John E. Smith, Harry S. Stout, and Kenneth P. Minkema (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 292.

understood through the grammar of divine simplicity, it is nonsensical to understand certain other attributes as identical with the divine essence. In Edwards's words: "If a man should tell me that the immutability of God is God or that the omnipresence and the authority of God, is God, I should not be able to think of any rational meaning of what he said."[19] Does this claim entail a rejection of divine simplicity? Disputing Pauw's claim, Crisp argues that divine simplicity was indeed important to Edwards, though his particular version of simplicity is idiosyncratic and its relationship to the doctrine of the Trinity remains in unresolved ambiguity.[20] Holmes believes that the ambiguity arises because there is no common "essence" in Edwards' theology, just the three persons.[21] Crisp disagrees, saying that "it is difficult to see what Edwards could mean by affirming a doctrine of the Trinity with no shared essence that does not entail tritheism."[22] Instead, Crisp claims that Edwards' theology does have a demonstrable divine essence. Edwards's primary method of dealing with attributes involves predicating them of the divine persons. Here, the doctrine of simplicity works in a straightforward manner. Attributes such as "wisdom" are predicable of the persons and identical with God. Edwards then introduces the notion of "modalities," attributes that are not predicates of the divine persons but are modalities of God's being. According to Edwards, these modalities—such as "immutability" and "omnipresence" in the quote above—do not accord with the doctrine of divine simplicity.

18. Pauw, *The Supreme Harmony of All*, 69.
19. Jonathan Edwards, *Essay on the Trinity*, in *Treatise on Grace*, ed. Paul Helm (Cambridge: Lutterworth, 1988), 119.
20. Oliver D. Crisp, "Jonathan Edwards's God: Trinity, Individuation, and Divine Simplicity," in *Engaging the Doctrine of God: Contemporary Protestant Perspectives*, ed. Bruce L. McCormack (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 103. See also, Crisp, "Jonathan Edwards on Divine Simplicity."
21. Stephen Holmes, *God of Grace and God of Glory: An Account of the Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 69.
22. Crisp, "Jonathan Edwards's God," 97.

What becomes of them? Is God not omnipresent? Crisp notes that these modalities are not discarded but "retained as part of the divine essence."[23] As a result, the account is incomplete and unable to render resolute answers to modern questions.

The occasional nature of Edwards' writings makes the task of identifying an authoritative stance on divine simplicity difficult. Moreover, Edwards did not manage to piece together a complete doctrine of the Trinity in his relatively short life. Nevertheless, Crisp underscores the fact that the question of whether an ontology can sufficiently "distinguish the persons of the Godhead, whilst retaining their essential simplicity . . . goes to the heart of the tradition of divine simplicity in general."[24] The difficulty with Edwards's ontology is a microcosm of the greater difficulty surrounding divine simplicity within theological discourse at large.

## Simplicity in Jenson

Jenson has a complicated relationship with the doctrine of divine simplicity, neither explicitly rejecting nor unequivocally accepting the doctrine. However, a notable shift can be detected in the tone of his explicit references to simplicity over the course of his career. In his mid-career publication of *The Triune Identity*—his constructive proposal for the future of the doctrine of the Trinity born from a year of reading nothing but patristic and medieval thought[25]—, he launched an excoriating critique of Augustine's particular use of the notion of simplicity.[26] The most vociferous critique of Augustine found in Jenson's entire corpus, it reappears in the first volume of

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23. Crisp, "Jonathan Edwards's God," 99.
24. Crisp, "Jonathan Edwards on Divine Simplicity," 37.
25. Jenson, "A Theological Autobiography, to Date," *Dialog* 46:1 (2007): 54.
26. See the discussion of his critique below.