**Classical Theists Are Committed to the Palamite Essence-Energies Distinction**

**(Or, How to Make Sense of the Fact That God Does Not Intrinsically Differ Even Though He Can Do Otherwise)**

Abstract (100): A distinction attributed to Gregory Palamas involves claiming that God’s essence and energies/activities are distinct, yet equally ‘uncreated.’ Traditionally, this Palamite distinction was attacked by some Latin theologians as compromising divine simplicity. A classical view holds that no properties really inhere in God, because God enters into no composition of any kind, including composition of substance and accident.  God’s energies/activities seem like properties inhering in God or otherwise composing some kind of part of God. I will argue that, contrary to appearances, the Palamite distinction is a consequence of commitment to a classical view of divine simplicity.

Whether there exists a distinction between God’s essence and God’s energies is a question that is often taken to divide Eastern and Western, Orthodox and (Latin) Catholic, theology.[[1]](#footnote-1) The distinction is often called the “Palamite” doctrine, after the famous defender of the distinction, Gregory Palamas. Nevertheless, reference to God’s essence and energies is scattered throughout the Greek Fathers. As I present it here, the Palamite distinction involves claiming that God can be characterized in regard to His essence and energies/activities, where both of these characterizations are equally “uncreated.” However, a classical view found in Thomas Aquinas and the Latin tradition more generally holds that no properties really inhere in God, because God enters into no composition of any kind, including composition of substance and accident.[[2]](#footnote-2) The Palamite distinction appears to make God’s energies/activities akin to properties inhering in God, being somehow metaphysically distinct from Him or His essence. This has led many classical theists of the Latin tradition to reject the Palamite distinction as compromising divine simplicity. I will argue that it is, contrary to appearances, commitment to a “classical” view of divine simplicity that plausibly entails the Palamite distinction.

I am not here interested in giving a historical interpretation of the doctrine, and I will not therefore spend much time arguing that my interpretation of the distinction is the “right” way to interpret any of those authors. Yet I should note the vast historical baggage surrounding this Palamite distinction. Gregory is popularly revered by Eastern Catholic faithful and theologians, but the distinction between God’s essence and energies is not commonly employed by most Latin Catholic theologians. A popular story is that this fact points to an underlying theological difference between Orthodoxy and Catholicism: the Palamite distinction is the only reason for us to accept that humans can be “deified” through participation in God’s energies, [[3]](#footnote-3) whereas Catholics, through over-reliance on scholastic theology that insists on divine simplicity, have forsaken any real union with God.[[4]](#footnote-4) The history here is far more intensely complicated and the popular story a caricature. There have been Orthodox or Byzantine Catholic Thomist theologians in the past who accepted the distinction, even though it is true that there were many outspoken Thomists who attacked the Palamite distinction at the time of the failed reunion Council of Florence.[[5]](#footnote-5) Notwithstanding, the distinction still frequently operates as a bogeyman against Orthodox/Catholic reunion. What I hope to show is that Latin scholasticism on the Catholic side, of the Thomist variety, is as committed to the distinction as the Orthodox.

Because it seems to me that there are as many versions of the Palamite distinction as interpreters, and I aim at analyzing the systematic issues of whether the distinction is *coherent* and *truly said of God*, I will use merely two short texts of Palamas as a starting point. I am not claiming to offer a scholarly analysis of the text. My reason for selecting these texts is that they should be immensely puzzling if the dominant narrative is correct in holding that the Palamite distinction is intrinsically opposed to classical theories of divine simplicity. In these passages, Palamas proposes or assumes divine simplicity of the classical sortwithin a few lines of proposing the essence/energies distinction. If divine simplicity of the classical sort and Palamism are incompatible, this fact should strike us as deeply puzzling or incomprehensible. What follows is then my attempt, starting from a Thomistic (classical) account of divine simplicity, to reason toward something that looks very much like what Palamas is proposing in this passage. While I will argue that a Thomist is committed to the Palamite distinction as I present it, I will leave it otherwise an open question whether my distinction is the “real” Palamite distinction.

1. **Palamas’ Distinction**

The Palamite distinction is not only the claim that there is a distinction between God and His activities, as everyone will admit there is *some* distinction between what God is and what He does. A first clarification of what is distinctive about the Palamite distinction is that Gregory proposes that the essence and energies of God are equally “uncreated.” Obviously, the divine energies are not *creatures* distinctly caused to exist by God, and are instead as uncreated as God’s essence. But I will begin with this claim and show that the core idea of the Palamite doctrine is that God’s energies are as *equally fundamental* to God as His essence, in the sense that God cannot be adequately described without appealing to both His essence and energies.

Initially, to avoid a false start, it needs to be noted that Gregory ~~Palamas~~ explicitly subscribes to the view that God has no properties or accidents. In the following passage from his *One Hundred and Fifty Chapters* (as collected in the *Philokalia*),Palamas explicitly professes what seems like the classical view of divine simplicity: “An accident is that which comes into existence and passes out of existence, and in this way we can conceive of inseparable attributes as well.... But there is no such thing in God because He remains entirely changeless. For this reason nothing can be attributed to Him that is an accident.”[[6]](#footnote-6) Gregory rules out that God has either “separable” or “inseparable” accidents, which roughly correspond to “accidental” and “essential” intrinsic properties in contemporary metaphysics. Gregory’s argument as to why this is the case is unimportant. What is germane is that Gregory thinks any intrinsic property or accident is ruled out by divine simplicity. Finally, Palamas explicitly notes that, “the divine energy in God…is not essence, nor an accident….”[[7]](#footnote-7)

Palamas might be mistaken whether his doctrine entails the denial of a classical doctrine of divine simplicity, but the Palamite distinction is clearly *intended* to be compatible with that classical divine simplicity and we should interpret it charitably as such.[[8]](#footnote-8) The distinction is nevertheless *prima facie* hard to square with simplicity. So how does Gregory do it? Gregory proposes explicit considerations as to why the divine energies are not accidents in God. Interestingly, the context is that Gregory is responding to an objection that, given divine simplicity, there are different Gods in different possible worlds where God acts differently (this is a problem I return to later). If God acts differently in different possible worlds, God acquires a different intrinsic property in each of those worlds (e.g., “Creator of the Universe” versus “Never Created”) and so appears to differ in these different possible scenarios.

Gregory’s response is that there is a problem with how the objector understands God’s actions. Rather than energies being properties or accidents inhering in God’s essence, Gregory thinks divine energies/activities are what account for relational predications (like causal relations) being true of God:

…not everything predicated of God is said with regard to His essence; it can be said relatively, that is, with relation to something that is not God's essence. For example, the Father is spoken of in relation to the Son, for the Son is not the Father. And God is called Lord in relation to the subject creation, for God is Lord over beings that are in time and in the eternal age, and also Lord over the ages themselves. But this dominion is an uncreated energy of God, distinct from His essence in that it is said in relation to something else, something which He Himself is not.[[9]](#footnote-9)

We see that Gregory here holds clearly that God’s dominion over creation is as “uncreated” as God’s essence. But what is the relational nature of energies doing here? Obviously, it is not the case that God is essentially the Creator of the universe; otherwise, God would differ when He does not create. So, the material universe – what God causes – does not seem identical with the uncreated divine energy (“dominion”) by which God is Lord of creation.

And it is clear too that God’s essence is distinct from His ability or power to act as Lord and Master of creation, from the analogy to the Trinitarian Persons. “Father” and “son” are correlative relational terms, so that fathers don’t exist without sons and vice-versa, even though these relational terms indicate nothing about the essence of those fathers or sons (e.g., human or divine or animal father-son pairs). Thus, the personal names “the Father” and “the Son” name distinct relations, but both relations can characterize one God (so that Father and Son are one in essence). Gregory ~~Palamas~~ concludes his response to the objector by noting that divine energies involve a relational term being predicated of God and, for the same reason as in the case of Trinitarian relations, the divine energies do not violate divine simplicity: “Yet not all things said of God betoken His essence. For what belongs to the category of relation is also predicated of Him, and this is relative and refers to relationship with something else, and does not signify essence. Such is the divine energy in God.”[[10]](#footnote-10)

Gregory’s response might appear to trade one problem for another. If we avoid problems with energies violating divine simplicity because energies are not properties/accidents inhering in God, but relational beings instead (a view *not* shared by Aquinas, for whom relations are accidents if not subsistent, as the Trinitarian Persons are), how could it be the case that God’s *relations to created entities* are equally fundamental to God’s being as His essence? It would seem that a relation of this sort has the *relata* essentially, which would make created entities essential to being a divine energy. For example, if God is Lord because He has a relation to creation, how can this relation be uncreated if one of the *relata* of that relation is created? The universe need not have existed, and it was created in time, whereas God is outside of time. How is God having a relation of “Lord of creation” an *uncreated* energy of God, as fundamental to God’s nature as, e.g., being goodness itself, especially if God could have chosen *never to create*? At this point, I turn to how Thomas Aquinas deals with this problem and will show that his solution implies a similar distinction as that of Palamas.

1. **Thomas Aquinas**

Fortuitously, ~~Thomas~~ Aquinas discusses exactly the same case that Gregory ~~Palamas~~ does: God’s dominion over creation. Aquinas similarly explains God’s relation to creation as a relational fact about God that does not require a distinct property inhering in God’s essence. Initially, however, Aquinas’ explanation seems to diverge from that of Palamas because Aquinas calls this relation of God to creation a “mere being of reason”:

A man is really (and not merely conceptually) identical to himself, even though his relation [of self-identity] is a being of reason. And the explanation for this is that the cause of his relation is real—namely, the unity of his substance, which our intellect considers under the aspect of a relation. In the same way, the power to compel subjects is really in God, and our intellect considers this power as ordered to the subjects because of the subjects' order to God. It is for this reason that he is really said to be Lord, even though his relation is a mere being of reason. And for the same reason it is evident that he would be Lord [Creator, etc.] even if there were no created intellect in existence.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Aquinas is proposing that relations of God to the world are relevantly like relations of self-identity. As my relation to myself carries no ontological cost, viz., no separate relational accident that grounds my self-identity, so too God being Lord over creation involves no real relational accident in God. Neither are “real” relations. Rather, the relations that exist in cases of self-identity are “mere beings of reason.” Similarly, Aquinas claims, God’s creating the universe only involves an extrinsic relational change, like the relations involved in Cambridge changes. (Aquinas elsewhere more clearly explains that he means God has a purely logical relation to changes in creation.[[12]](#footnote-12))

At first glance, Aquinas and Palamas appear to analyze the same case very differently. For Palamas, God’s relation to creation is an uncreated energy, equally fundamental with the divine essence. By contrast, Aquinas thinks that the relation of God to creation is a “being of reason.” In fact, however, that contrast is not accurate. Palamas, to begin with, does not obviously identify the *relation* of God to creation as what is uncreated (which would concede the objection he is refuting), but rather speaks of God’s “dominion” over creation as uncreated. It seems reasonable to interpret Palamas as meaning: there is some real aspect of God in virtue of which it is true that creatures depend on Him (i.e., God’s power or energy), even though the contingent relation holding between God and His creatures is not an intrinsic property in God. Otherwise, either God necessarily creates or God changes in virtue of creating the world – neither of which would be accepted by Palamas.

In fact, on further examination, Aquinas has a similar approach to the issue. Aquinas claims the relation of God to creation – the causal *relation* itself – is a being of reason, but he claims that the “cause of the relation” as existing *in* God is what permits us to predicate the relation of “being creator” to God: “in cases involving relations of reason—such as self-identity or God's relation to the world—the *relata* are related, not by their relations (since these are mere beings of reason and hence dependent on the activity of the mind), but by what he refers to here as the *cause of* their relations.”[[13]](#footnote-13) Thus, God has the power to cause creation to exist, even though God creating the universe does not imply any change in God (and so no accident/property of any kind), and God’s power is that which accounts for the relation between God and the world. The fact that there is one and the same causal basis for these logical relations (namely, God’s power) is what grounds the truth in virtue of which all God’s relations are predicable of one and the same thing. This is why we can predicate, for Aquinas, many causal relations in regard to one and the same power in God (e.g., “God created the trees and the bees”).

1. **Essence Energies?**

At this point, Aquinas and Palamas are in agreement that God’s energies or power are not real intrinsic properties of God, but are the cause of the relations which He brings about in causing created entities. Nevertheless, Palamas claims that there is a special distinction here between God’s essence and His energies, such that God’s essence is not identical to His energies. The energies of God are as “uncreated” as God’s essence. Further, despite Palamas’ claim above that God’s energies are relational, Palamas clearly rejects the intimation that God’s energies could be temporal or contingent.[[14]](#footnote-14) And the way Palamas employs the distinction indicates that this distinction is supposed to be a *fundamental* distinction in the way we predicate terms of God.[[15]](#footnote-15) I will not directly give an exposition of Palamas on these points, but instead turn to show the way in which a problem that besets an underexplored aspect of Thomistic thought about the divine attributes, a controversy about God’s freedom to act otherwise than He does, clarifies why we might want to posit the Palamite distinction even on the Thomistic model. In short, the Thomist should believe the same thing that Palamas does about the necessity of distinguishing divine power and action.

There would be problems if we understood the Palamite distinction, in the Thomistic sense, to be a *real* distinction in God. A “real” distinction is one, Aquinas says, where the relation is intrinsic but is essentially “toward” another.[[16]](#footnote-16) The Persons of God are real subsistent relations, because the Father is related essentially to the Son according to the appropriate relation of origin, and vice-versa. The Father is not a Father without the Son.[[17]](#footnote-17) But if the distinction between God’s essence and energies were “real” in this sense, the energies of God would either constitute a distinct supposit or *person* in God (a fourth Person of the Trinity), because God was necessarily related to Himself in some way; or God would create of necessity because God was necessarily related to something outside of Himself, i.e., a creature. Both of these alternatives would be straightforwardly heretical. For this reason, if there is a distinction between God’s essence and His energies, that distinction must be what Thomas calls a logical one. The way I have set up the distinction thus far gives us an easy heuristic for such a distinction: God Himself is the *x* that makes it true that *p* (the one *truthmaker*)for each set of predications about God’s nature and His activity. The distinctions we make between these divine names (including that between God’s essence and energies) are on the side of our concepts or predications, rather than being intrinsic to God.

Failing to apply the Thomistic term “real” to the Palamite distinction does not mean the distinction is not well-grounded or not fundamental – or even that it would be unreasonable to refer to the distinction as “real” in some contexts.[[18]](#footnote-18) For example, the distinction need not be *merely* logical, in the sense of being merely a distinction without a difference, as might be the case in referring to “Cicero” as “Tully.” What is being denied here is a metaphysical distinction in God’s being. While a metaphysical distinction may not exist such that God has relational accidents, I will propose that the importance of the Palamite distinction lies in the critical role that it plays in a fully developed account of God’s nature; not every logical distinction is interchangeable or plays the same theoretical role. Some distinctions in God’s nature may be non-fundamental logical distinctions, such as a distinction between God’s providence and His power, whereas others, like the Palamite distinction, point to fundamental ways that we divide the divine names.

Why we might need a distinction of fundamentality in names of God is made clear when we consider a controverted problem in contemporary philosophy of religion. For a classical theist, God is simple such that God has no parts or accidents. God’s action, essence, and power are all identical. This raises a serious worry: God is supposed to be a free agent, who can do otherwise than He does. But God’s essence is immutable and unchangeable. If God’s action is identical to His essence, divine simplicity seems to entail that God acts necessarily rather than freely, contradicting the claim that God is free.[[19]](#footnote-19)

One solution to this problem in the contemporary literature was proposed by Kretzmann and Stump. After distinguishing the ways that God wills certain things of necessity (e.g., His own goodness), they point out that Aquinas holds that God nevertheless does not choose everything of necessity – in fact, God can do otherwise, having free choice.[[20]](#footnote-20) The choice to create is a paradigm case of God being free to do otherwise, but this does not conflict with the claim that God is changeless and immutable, existing outside of time. Indeed, God does not need to change in the actual world when He chooses to create – He can be such that, from eternity, He chooses to create. Nevertheless, Stump and Kretzmann claim that this does not mean God would be unchangeable across all possible worlds. In fact, “God is not the same in all possible worlds.”[[21]](#footnote-21) In sum, the Stump-Kretzmann solution to the problem is ~~then~~ to, first, restrict divine immutability to a denial that God changes across time. Then, although God is determinate and immutable in each world, given what He has chosen to actually do, they admit that God differs across each possible world, depending on what He does in each possible world.[[22]](#footnote-22)

We can turn to the YogācāraBuddhist philosopher Dharmakīrti to bring out a serious difficulty for Kretzmann and Stump’s proposal. One of Dharmakīrti’s objections to the existence of a creator God, as posited by some Indian philosophers, hinged on God having a *potential* to create.[[23]](#footnote-23) Hayes reconstructs the premise of the argument as follows: “if God is a creator of the universe, it must be admitted that he has a potential to create that exists prior to his actually creating anything. But if this is so, we must ask how that potential becomes realized.”[[24]](#footnote-24) And if the theist proposes nothing outside of God that actualizes God’s potential to act, then God Himself does so. This generates a contradiction, however, as God cannot be immutable; “But if God performs an action, then he must undergo change and thus cannot be permanent.”[[25]](#footnote-25)

Dharmakīrti’s conclusion is then that “a permanent, unchanging entity such as God would have to have exactly the same nature before the creation of the world as after; there would be no difference whatsoever between God as creator and God as a being that is not yet a creator.”[[26]](#footnote-26) Dharmakīrti uses temporal language, and seems to presume that God is acting at some definite time, but his point could nevertheless be adapted to remove the temporal references: God would, as a result of choosing to create ~~or creating~~, be different, and this would seem to conflict with the claim that God is not such that He *could* be different. Aquinas’ God, who is pure actuality or *esse*, has no passive potentiality in virtue of which He could be different.[[27]](#footnote-27) In addition, the point can be made even without adverting to a claim about God’s potentiality (Kretzmann and Stump agree that God has no potentiality). In his *De Ente et Essentia,* Aquinas argues that there can exist precisely *one* being, at most, whose essence is identical with its existence – God – because there would be nothing to differentiate one being of such a sort from another.

After giving some ways we differentiate things, Aquinas proposes that “if we posit a thing which is existence alone, such that this existence is subsistent, this existence will not receive the addition of a difference because it would no longer be existence alone, but existence plus some form. And much less will it receive the addition of matter because it would no longer be a subsistent existence, but a material existence. Whence it remains that such a thing, which is its own existence, cannot be but one.”[[28]](#footnote-28) If Kretzmann and Stump’s proposal that God’s nature is such that it differs in virtue of God’s acting otherwise, even if they restrict that claim across possible worlds and not across time, then it is possible for there to be a formal difference in God’s nature resulting from each God acting in distinct ways. But Aquinas’ inference in *De Ente* would then be fallacious, as it would be possible for there to be more than one God, each differing in respect to their nature. For this reason, we can see that Aquinas holds instead that God *necessarily* does not differ in respect to His nature.

W. Matthews Grant criticizes Kretzmann and Stump’s solution on much these same lines, instead proposing that the key to a solution lies in an Aristotelian maxim about causality, namely, that the “action of the agent is in the patient” and *not* in the agent.[[29]](#footnote-29) Thus, “the apparent conflict between divine simplicity and divine freedom results precisely from thinking of *creating the universe* as if it were such an intrinsic property, a determinate act or aspect in God, whether accidental or substantial.”[[30]](#footnote-30) God’s creating does not require that God acquire a new accidental property or being intrinsically and essentially different in worlds where He creates and worlds where He does not. To Dharmakīrti’s point, then, being a cause does require some change when acting and when not. And there is such a difference in the state of affairs when God acts and when He does not, but those changes are entirely in what God causes and not in God’s nature.

On one hand, Kretzmann and Stump might propose that Grant’s solution is problematic because this is just what it means not to will of necessity: that God’s choices could have been otherwise. But then it seems that God’s nature is going to need to have contingent properties, such that in some worlds He is a Creator and others not, in order for His will to be free. On the other hand, Dharmakīrti would not likely accept Grant’s Thomistic-Aristotelian claims about causality and might argue that we have no good grounds for believing a cause like God is metaphysically possible; if divine causation is supposed to be *sui generis* in being the only instance of causation exercised without intrinsic change in the agent, and we reason to the possibility of this divine causation from other cases of causation (as in a cosmological argument), then it looks like there might be grounds to question whether the inference to the existence of that kind of *sui generis* causation is question-begging. And we have grounds for this worry in Aquinas because, as Grant makes clear, Aquinas *deduces* the manner in which God causes the universe from the doctrine of divine simplicity – because we have to deny accidents in God, we must deny that God’s mode of creation involves ~~no~~ change in God’s nature.[[31]](#footnote-31) As a consequence, Grant’s response shifts the problem elsewhere: if we accept that God is simple, and so that He must act in the way Grant has proposed, how is it true that God can do otherwise? Or, to elaborate the question, *how* is it true *both* that God is simple and that God can do otherwise?

We can make the issue clearer in giving a variation on Grant’s response that does not involve appeal to the nature of causality. Tomaszewski has highlighted a modal fallacy affecting some contemporary arguments against divine simplicity which object that there is a “modal collapse.” For example, the classical theist holds that God is identical with His attributes, such as His act of creating. But then, if God is necessary, and He is identical with His act of creation, God’s act of creation is necessary. But, as Tomaszewski points out, “modal contexts are referentially opaque, which means that substitution into them does not generally preserve the truth of the sentence into which such a substitution has been made.” [[32]](#footnote-32) Just such a substitution is made in the argument that God creates necessarily, from the claim that God is necessary to the claim that His act is necessary.[[33]](#footnote-33) (The same would apply to other instances of modal predication – for example, that God is necessary does not entail that it is necessary that God wills or knows *x*).

Dhamarkirti’s objection does not strictly require the claim about the nature of causality as much as this apparently plausible intuition we might have about God’s activities: God’s action, if it is to refer to God, must be *intrinsic* to God as much as God’s power to act. If we hold that divine immutability (*pace* Kretzmann and Stump) requires not only that God does not change across time, but also that God is identical in all possible worlds, then referring to God as the creator must do so in every possible world – i.e., rigidly.[[34]](#footnote-34) But, as Dharmakīrti’s point goes, we could not rigidly refer to the same God in worlds where He creates and where He does not, if God’s acts are intrinsic to Him. Yet Tomaszewski shows what is wrong with that reasoning:

While God’s act is indeed intrinsic (and therefore identical) to Him, ‘God’s act of creation’ designates that act, not how it is in itself, but by way of its contingent effects. That is, whether ‘God’s act of creation’ designates God’s act depends on the existence of a creation which is contingent, and so the designation is not rigid. And since the designation is not rigid, the identity statement is not necessary, as it must be in order to validate the argument from modal collapse. This is parallel to the way in which ‘the Creator’ designates God, not how He is in Himself, but rather by way of the contingent effects of His act.[[35]](#footnote-35)

This answer is exactly what we found Aquinas himself explaining when he noted that, even though designating God, e.g., as Creator, is done by means of God’s (contingent) effect, creation implies no “real relation” of God to His contingent effects.[[36]](#footnote-36) “Real relation” is taken by Aquinas to mean that God does not acquire any intrinsic properties in virtue of bringing about His effects, so that God merely has a “logical” or external relation to what He creates. This would be to say, *pace* Kretzmann and Stump, that the properties relevant to God’s freedom to act otherwise, e.g., as being Creator, are mere “Cambridge properties,” not intrinsic accidents in God or His nature.[[37]](#footnote-37)

Nevertheless, such a response needs to be expanded. Consider the general case where we say that God is *acting,* simpliciter. The latter kinds of predication do not involve a created term. Yet God is identical with His action; “God’s action is not distinct from His power, for both are His divine essence….”[[38]](#footnote-38) To say that God is powerful or is acting, as Aquinas says, directly designates the divine substance.[[39]](#footnote-39) Yet predications concerning God’s power and His activity involve *relations* of God to other things – insofar as the divine nature is capable of or actually producing a given effect. It is necessary, for instance, that God has the power to create a universe distinct from Himself. These claims make it *appear* as if God has unactualized potential given the powers He is not manifesting, or effects He is not currently producing.

What is required, to make sense of these predications on the classical model of divine simplicity, is to separate the way we talk about God as acting and as powerful. When Aquinas discusses the way we designate God as being powerful, he notes that

in God the idea of power is retained, inasmuch as it is the principle of an effect; not, however, as it is a principle of action, for this is the divine essence itself; except, perchance, after our manner of understanding, inasmuch as the divine essence, which pre-contains in itself all perfection that exists in created things, can be understood either under the notion of action, or under that of power; as also it is understood under the notion of “suppositum” possessing nature, and under that of nature.[[40]](#footnote-40)

God’s power is never such that God has unactualized potential – for He is pure act – and so to say that God is powerful is to refer to God as being a principle by which many possible effects can be produced, not as something He ever “actualizes” in some cases and not in others.

Therefore, Aquinas says that God is powerful insofar as God is a principle of effects, but that the principle of God’s action is the divine essence itself. But he then tentatively advances a proposal for making sense of a further distinction. Aquinas proposes that, even though God’s power and action are really identical with God Himself,[[41]](#footnote-41) we are referring to God in two different respects or notions (*rationes*)when we say He acts and when we say God is powerful. After the manner of the way *we* refer to God, God’s essence can be designated either under the notion of power or action, where God’s nature is *powerful* and God as a concrete particular (supposit) is *acting*. In this way, then, God can be considered as both powerful and as acting.

Aquinas’ appeal to the distinction between how we refer to God under the notion of both nature and supposit has received attention from Eleonore Stump, who argues that we ordinarily think of such predications as incompatible. To predicate something as a nature is to predicate abstractly (“Goodness”), whereas to predicate something as a supposit is to predicate concretely (“a good [thing]”).[[42]](#footnote-42) Ordinarily, no kind of thing is such as to be both an abstract universal and a concrete particular. Aquinas claims, however, that *neither* set of concrete or abstract predications is sufficient to capture the divine essence; rather, *both* must be used to name God truly.[[43]](#footnote-43) Stump proposes that Aquinas is not enmeshed in contradiction, but doing a sort of “quantum theology.” Aquinas makes the claim that God belongs to no *genus* and that we have no grasp of God’s quiddity or essence. When we recognize that God lies outside of the ordinary genera signified by our abstract terms, then the *way* we utilize these contrasting modes of predication is not contradictory when applied in such a case – the use of an abstract term for God does not rule out the possibility that we can predicate a particular term of God as well.[[44]](#footnote-44)

The reason we need both sets of predications – abstract and concrete – is a fact about our manner of predication, not a fact about God. Nevertheless, this distinction between modes of predicating terms of God is what we would call a *fundamental* one, because it is ideologically, not metaphysically, fundamental.[[45]](#footnote-45) As Aquinas’ tentative proposal made clear, this distinction in modes of predication is precisely what is required to speak both of God’s power and His action, without an ensuing modal collapse where God’s actions become necessary and He cannot do otherwise. Even though God is such that His power, essence, and action are identical, important truths about God are lost in failing to draw the appropriate ideological distinctions between how God’s essence accounts for the truths of various propositions about His activity and power.

While I have refrained from textual interpretation of Palamas, it is important to note that Aquinas’ proposal that there is a fundamental logical distinction between these ways of predicating that God is His act or His power has echoes explicitly in ~~Gregory~~ Palamas’ *Triads*. Palamas accuses his opponents of heresy in holding that God’s activities could be contingent, with temporal beginning or end, which would indicate that he cannot believe creation is an essential *relata* in the relational being of God’s energies.[[46]](#footnote-46) Further, Palamas repeatedly proposes that God’s power “transcends” His essence because those terms which signify God’s power do not adequately signify His essence. What it is to be God is more than to be powerful; being God also involves, for example, being active. This is why Palamas insists we need to hold such a distinction between God’s essence and His energies.[[47]](#footnote-47) Palamas is putting his finger on an important issue: a classical theist does not think that God is merely a will or, *contra* Plantinga’s reading of divine simplicity, that God is an attribute.[[48]](#footnote-48) The Palamite distinction, then, between God’s energies and His essence can be seen to be a fundamental one because it allows the classical theist to hold together various divine names that would be insufficient individually – God is neither His essential power nor His act, but both. In what follows, I will try to expand upon Aquinas’ tentative proposal to show how the classical theist is committed to such a distinction between God’s essence and energies in explaining two ways that God *makes true* various kinds of predications about Him.

1. **The Proposal**

The way I will fill in the details of Aquinas’ tentative proposal builds on the “divine truthmaker simplicity” position defended separately by Timothy Pawl and Jeff Brower.[[49]](#footnote-49) They employ the notion that God is a single truthmaker – an *x* which makes *p* true – for many propositions about God that appear to describe God’s properties: e.g., God is wise, merciful, loving, etc. These predications, unlike propositions about God’s causal acts, are made true solely in virtue of having God as their truthmaker. Pawl and Brower’s position has received criticism.[[50]](#footnote-50) Noël Saenz proposes this difficulty for the divine simplicity truthmaker theorist:

… why is it that the truth of one predication, that God is wise, depends on the truth of another, that God is divine, rather than the other way around? In short, why [“God is wise because God is divine”] rather than ["God is divine, at least in part, because God is wise”]? This question must have an answer. That one predication is true in virtue of another predication is not a fundamental fact. Predications, and their exemplifying a dependence order, are not brute, primitive, entities or facts. Perhaps there is nothing that explains why certain properties obtain in virtue of other properties, but predications are not properties.[[51]](#footnote-51)

My proposal is that the divine truthmaker theorist has a way to answer these criticisms by appeal to the Palamite distinction. The Palamite distinction, recall, is not a fundamental *metaphysical* distinction in God that would make it true that some predications depend on another. Instead, the Palamite distinction is a fundamental *ideological* one, involving facts about how we predicate terms of God.

God is simple because He has no accidents in Him which could act as distinct truthmakers, and, in fact, God is such that we do not know *what* He is (we can express this metaphysically by saying that God belongs to no natural kind and has no *genus*). Despite these claims of classical theism, there are different ways in which God Himself acts as a truthmaker for different classes of propositions, given the fundamental distinction in ways we humans predicate terms of Him. An appeal to ideological fundamentality can help resolve Saenz’s question why it might be true to say “God is wise because He is divine” but not “God is divine because He is wise.” Both these terms refer to God’s essence, or the divine nature, abstracted from relation to anything other than God (except potentially). Those terms, then, that are more intensionally *abstract* are those that are more fundamental when referring to God’s nature, given the way that we lack access to the nature of God’s perfections. Aquinas makes an argument along these lines that “being” (*esse*) is the primary name for referring to God’s essence, because “being” is the most abstract term we can use to describe any nature.[[52]](#footnote-52) While it would go beyond this paper to defend the claim, it seems plausible, on this explanation, that “divinity” refers more abstractly than “wisdom,” explaining why we would hold that it is true to say “God is wise because He is divine,” rather than the other way around.

We can go beyond Saenz’s objection to see that the Palamite appeal to a distinction between essence and energies helps us in more than one way. Whereas terms like “divinity” and “wisdom” are abstract properties, both of which refer to God’s essence directly, there are other terms that do so indirectly because they are relational terms, such as “Creator.” To say that God is “Creator” or “First Efficient Cause” are relational terms does not mean that they tell us nothing about what God is in Himself. Even though relational terms do not function like predicating an intrinsic property of God, these relational terms refer to God by way of His relations to other things. For example, when we learn that God actually functions as a concrete agent, causing the universe, we can reason to facts about God’s power. But facts about God as powerful – e.g., that He can perform a miracle – are distinct from what He actually does.[[53]](#footnote-53)

God, a single truthmaker, makes true both kinds of propositions. The distinction between God’s essence and God’s energies explains two things. First, it explains why truths about God’s activities depend on God’s essence, despite God being a single truthmaker for both truths. Given human conceptual divisions, *agents* perform actions. Consequently, claims about activity depend on agents. This is the case even when, in God, God is identical with His action and so there is no fundamental metaphysical distinction between God’s act and His essence. The dependence hierarchy among the divine names is a feature of ideology, not metaphysics. Second, the distinction explains why we cannot merely refer to one set of divine names, and so why there is an order of dependence among divine names. This requires a “reduplication” of certain sets of divine names across various categories of terms, between relational and non-relational terms, as well as between concrete and abstract terms. It would be false to think that God is an abstraction, because He is a *concrete* or particular being, but it would be as erroneous to think that God is merely a being like any other. Aquinas’ quasi-definition or characterization of God as “*esse ipsum subsistens*” therefore includes not only predicating *esse* of God (an abstract term), but also that God is *subsistens* (a concrete term). In the same way, it would be erroneous to speak of God as acting without saying that He is powerful.[[54]](#footnote-54)

Thomists are among those classical theists who are self-consciously committed to the claim that God has no accidents. But, given that view of divine simplicity and the view that God has free will to act other than He does, the Thomist then needs to say it is true that God can do otherwise, even though He is identical with His action. It seems to me that Aquinas’ own solution on this point, even as a tentative proposal, is best interpreted as leading to embrace of the Palamite distinction. [[55]](#footnote-55) For this reason, it seems that the Palamite and the Thomist are committed to exactly the same doctrine of God, although they have arrived at similar conclusions by different routes.[[56]](#footnote-56) If my account is coherent and faithful to the classical theistic Latin tradition as well, my reading of the Palamite distinction would be valuable in reconciling two prominent intellectual traditions in Catholicism and Orthodoxy.[[57]](#footnote-57)

More generally, my argument illustrates why the classical theist should not only find my distinction between God’s essence and energies plausible, but should be *committed* to that distinction.The reason is that the classical theist shouldbe able to give an explanation for the semantics of the divine names without appeal to *any* metaphysical distinction intrinsic to the divine nature. The Palamite distinction accounts for ideologically fundamental divisions among the divine names, explaining the way in which they depend on each other even, even while affirming classical divine simplicity and so without positing any such metaphysical distinction in God Himself. I have not advanced any detailed textual support for my interpretation of the Palamite distinction in the corpus of Palamas’ texts, but, as I have indicated, there are good reasons to believe this reading is faithful to his thought.[[58]](#footnote-58) Even if my proposal were not faithful to Palamas, the proposal is independently defensible and at least illustrates that we have not adequately explored either classical accounts of divine simplicity or that of Gregory Palamas.[[59]](#footnote-59)[[60]](#footnote-60)

1. As an Eastern Catholic, I want to refrain from implying that Eastern theology is the exclusive preserve of the Orthodox churches – it is a shared patrimony of East and West, Orthodox and Catholic. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Although Scotus might offer a dissenting note, holding that divine simplicity does not rule out various formal distinctions in the Godhead; c.f., Mark Spencer, “The Flexibility of Divine Simplicity: Aquinas, Scotus, Palamas,” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 57:2 (July 2017), 123-139. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. There is a further claim I will not explore here: that, while God’s essence is unknowable, human beings can, through grace, participate in the divine energies and become like God (i.e., “deified”). It seems to me if we make sense of the primary distinction I deal with in this paper, the solution to this second question should be fairly obvious. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The contrast is highlighted much more frequently by educated Orthodox priests or believers rather than Catholics; for an example, “By the fourteenth century, the Roman Church generally rejected the teaching of Saint Gregory Palamas about God’s grace being the uncreated energies of God. … The scholastic theology of the West had adopted a new speculative and philosophical approach that pursued the knowledge of God through reasoning rather than the way of knowing that comes from the experience and revelation of God.  The West adopted Aristotelian logic and lost the patristic distinction between the essence and energies of God; something that has primarily persisted to this day” (“The Eastern Orthodox Theology of Grace: An Interview with Fr. Michael Shanbour,”*Ancient Faith Ministries*, online, https://blogs.ancientfaith.com/behind-the-scenes/2016/11/08/eastern-orthodox-theology-grace-shanbour/). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Marcus Plested presents a clear and immensely helpful history of the reception of Thomas Aquinas’ thought among Greek theologians. He also notes that a prominent Greek theologian, Gregorios Scholasticos, interpreted the essence/energies distinction in line with Scotus’ formal distinction, much as Spencer (op. cit.) proposes to do. See Marcus Plested, *Orthodox Readings of Aquinas*, 1st ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Gregory Palamas, “Topics of Natural and Theological Science and on the Moral and Ascetic Life: One Hundred and Fifty Texts,” in *The Philokalia: The Complete Text*, Volume 4, edited and translated by Palmer, G. E. H.; Ware, Kallistos; Sherrard, Philip (Faber and Faber, 1999), #127. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Marcus Plested has recently compiled, from a series of Gregory’s other writings, a veritable *florilegium* of how Gregory explicitly defends divine simplicity in the strong and classical sense, in addition to his repeated claims that the Palamite distinction follows from divine simplicity properly understood; “St. Gregory Palamas on the Divine Simplicity,” in *Modern Theology* 35:3 (July 2019): 508-521. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Gregory Palamas, “Topics of Natural and Theological Science and on the Moral and Ascetic Life: One Hundred and Fifty Texts,” #125. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Thomas Aquinas, *De potentia* *Dei,* q. 7, a. 11, ad 3–5. [translation in Brower, “Medieval Theories of Relations,” cited below] [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *Summa Theologiae* [hereafter, ST] (trans. English Dominican Fathers, Benzinger Bros., 1920)I, 1. 13, a. 7, resp.: “there is nothing to prevent these names which import relation to the creature from being predicated of God temporally, not by reason of any change in Him, but by reason of the change of the creature; as a column is on the right of an animal, without change in itself, but by change in the animal.” [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Jeffrey Brower, "Medieval Theories of Relations," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*(Winter 2018 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2018/entries/relations-medieval/, sec. 5.2. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Gregory Palamas, *The Triads,* trans. John Meyendorff (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1983), 93-96. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. *Triads*, 92-93: “I should like to ask [Barlaam of Calabria] why he claims that only the divine essence is without beginning, whereas everything apart from it is of a created nature, and whether or not he thinks this essence is all-powerful. That is to say, does it possess the faculties of knowing, of prescience, of creating, of embracing all things in itself; does it possess providence, the power of deification and, in a word, all such faculties, or not? For if it does not have them, this essence is not God, even though it alone is unoriginate. If it does possess these powers, but acquired them subsequently, then there was a time when it was imperfect, in other words, was not God. However, if it possessed these faculties from eternity, it follows that not only is the divine essence unoriginate, but that each of its powers is also. Nonetheless, there is only one unoriginate essence, the essence of God; none of the powers that inhere in it is an essence, so that all necessarily and always are in the divine essence. To use an obscure image, they exist in the divine essence as do the powers of the senses in what is called the common spiritual sense of the soul. Here is the manifest, sure and recognised teaching of the Church!” [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. ST I, q. 28, a. 4, esp. ad. 1, 2, & 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. C.f., ST I, q. 27, a. 1, resp. & ST I, q. 33, a. 3, ad. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. For example, if Palamas is found to use a Greek term indicating the distinction is “real”, it is not *ipso facto* apparent that he is ruling out my Thomistic proposal, given the varied technical vocabulary involved [*pace* John Demetracopoulos, who claims Palamas’ distinction is “real.” See his “Palamas Transformed” in *Greeks, Latins, and Intellectual History 1204-1500*, eds. M. Hinterberger and C. Schabel (Leuven: Peeters, 2011), esp. 272-276. Yet it remains unclear to me, in the texts Demetracopoulos cites, that Palamas is claiming more than I am presenting here. For example, Demetracopoulos cites the 150 Chapters, # 75, as an instance of Palamas identifying the distinction between God’s essence and energies as on the same level with the distinction between Persons of the Trinity, but I do not see Palamas equating the reality of each distinction when he merely notes: “Three realities pertain to God: essence, energy, and the triad of divine hypostases,” (op. cit. in the *Philokalia*)]. David Bradshaw, cited below, offers important considerations to doubt the claims of Demetracopoulos and others on this point. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. This problem is well-known in the Thomistic tradition. The following are some significant sources in the history of the problem, as documented by Fr. Peter Totelben in his *The Palamite Controversy: A Thomistic Analysis* (licentiate thesis submitted to the Dominican House of Studies, Washington, DC, 2015, p. 90, fn. 214): The *Salmanticenses* claimed “the explanation of the quiddity of the free acts of God is of the highest difficulty, and thus many of the most weighty doctors teach that it is not possible to have an understanding of it in this life; it is reserved for heaven.” (*Cursus Theologicus* [Paris: Vivès, 1876], vol. 2, tract. 4, disp. 7, dub. 1, p. 101). The eighteenth century Dominican Charles-René Billuart agreed: “This knot is the most intricate sacred enigma of all of theology, of which the human mind is unequal to completely solving . . . Behold the highest difficulty which even theologians of the most exceeding genius twist and are compelled to go off into various opinions.” (*Cursus Theologiae*, vol. 1, diss. 7, a. 4, p. 245). A summary of the relevant texts of Aquinas is given in John Wippel, “God’s Freedom to Create or Not,” in *Metaphysical Themes in Thomas Aquinas II*, Studies in Philosophy and the History of Philosophy 47 (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2007), 218–39. Classical Thomistic treatments of this problem can also be found in John of St. Thomas, *Cursus Theologicus* (Paris: Desclée, 1937), disp. 24, aa. 3-7, pp. 76-136; Billuart, *op. cit.*, vol. 1, diss. 7, aa. 2-4 (p. 256-66); Salmanticenses, op. cit., tract iv, disp. iii-viii (vol. 2, pp. 35-137); and Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange*, God: His Existence and Nature*, trans. Bede Rose (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1949) vol. 2, 351-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, “Absolute Simplicity,” in *Faith and Philosophy* 2 (1985): 362-366. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Ibid., 369. The same position is defended in Stump’s later *Aquinas* (London: Routledge, 2005), 109-115. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Ibid., “[Aquinas] does not conceive of contingency in terms of differences across possible worlds generally but, rather, in terms of branching time-lines emanating from a single possible initial world-state. And so we propose taking Thomas's 'essential', 'necessary', 'accidental', and 'contingent' to refer to modalities that can be determined by inspecting some subset of possible worlds consisting of the branching time-lines emanating from a single possible initial world-state-an initial-state set, we will call it. […] Within any initial-state set of possible worlds God's nature is fully and immutably determinate, and it is so as a consequence of the single, timeless act of will in which God wills goodness (himself) and whatever else (if anything) he wills for the sake of goodness in that initial-state set.” [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Dharmakīrti’s actual argument is in verse, which makes a reconstruction helpful. The key passage that begins his argument in the *Pramdnavdrttika* is: “How, if an entity is a cause, / (But is said) sometimes to be / A non-cause, can one assert in any way / That a cause is a non-cause? / One cannot so assert.” Translation from Roger Jackson “Dharmakīrti’s Refutation of Theism,” in *Philosophy East and West,* Vol. 36, No. 4 (Oct. 1986): 330. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Richard Hayes, “Principled Atheism in the Buddhist Scholastic Tradition,” i~~n~~ *Journal of Indian Philosophy* Vol. 16, No. 1 (Mar. 1988), 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Ibid., 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Aquinas rejects the use of terms that indicate distinctions or differences in the Godhead, except in a highly qualified sense when applied to Persons of the Trinity; ST I, q. 31, a. 3, esp. ad. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Thomas Aquinas, *De Ente et Essentia,* cap. 3 [Si autem ponatur aliqua res, quae sit esse tantum, ita ut ipsum esse sit subsistens, hoc esse non recipiet additionem differentiae, quia iam non esset esse tantum, sed esse et praeter hoc forma aliqua; et multo minus reciperet additionem materiae, quia iam esset esse non subsistens sed materiale. Unde relinquitur quod talis res, quae sit suum esse, non potest esse nisi una.] [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. W. Matthews Grant, “Aquinas, Divine Simplicity, and Divine Freedom,” ~~in~~ *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 77 (2004): 129-144. As Grant documents (139, fn. 43), Aquinas explicitly accepts this maxim and applies it to God’s creation; Cf. ST I—II, q. 110, a. 2: “Motion is the act of the mover in the moved.” Cf. ST I, q. 18, a. 3 ad. 1: “Because movement is an act of the thing in movement, the latter action, in so far as it is the act of the operator, is called its movement, by this similitude, that as movement is an act of the thing moved, so an act of this kind is the act of the agent.” C.f., Thomas Aquinas, *In XI Metaphysica*, lectio 9, nos. 2309-2313. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Grant, 138. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Grant, 137: “Aquinas’s teaching on God’s relationship to creatures is motivated by the same kind of reasoning that leads to the doctrine of divine simplicity in the first place—indeed, that it is a corollary of that doctrine.” [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Christopher Tomaszewski, “Collapsing the modal collapse argument: On an

    invalid argument against divine simplicity,” *Analysis,* Vol. 79, No. 2 (Apr. 2019): 278. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Aquinas invokes this distinction in his discussion of whether God’s acts are necessary, accusing the objector of just such a modal fallacy both in thinking that God wills what He does necessarily and in holding that God’s will imposes necessity on what is willed: ST I, q. 19, a. 3 & a. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Tomaszewski, 280. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. C.f., ST I, 1. 13, a. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. See, for example, Robert Francescotti, “Mere Cambridge Properties,” in *American Philosophical Quarterly,* Vol. 36, No. 4 (Oct. 1999): 295-308. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. ST I, q. 25, a. 1, ad. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. ST I, q. 13, a. 7, ad. 1: “Some relative names are imposed to signify the relative habitudes themselves…But others are imposed to signify the things from which ensue certain habitudes…. Thus, there is the same two-fold difference in divine names. For some signify the habitude itself to the creature, as “Lord,” and these do not signify the divine substance directly, but indirectly, in so far as they presuppose the divine substance; as dominion presupposes power, which is the divine substance. Others signify the divine essence directly, and consequently the corresponding habitudes, as “Saviour,” “Creator,” and suchlike; and these signify the action of God, which is His essence. Yet both names are said of God temporarily so far as they imply a habitude either principally or consequently, but not as signifying the essence, either directly or indirectly.” [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. ST I, q. 25, a. 1, ad 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Elsewhere the identification is clear: e.g., *Summa Contra Gentiles* II, c. 8 (trans. James Anderson, Notre Dame University Press, 1975): “For things identical with one and the same thing are identical with one another. But God’s power is His substance, as was just proved. And His action is His substance…for the same argument applies to His other operations. Therefore, in God power is not distinct from action.” [Quae enim uni et eidem sunt eadem, sibi invicem sunt eadem. Divina autem potentia est eius substantia, ut ostensum est. Eius etiam actio est eius substantia, ut in primo libro ostensum est de intellectuali operatione: eadem enim ratio in aliis competit. Igitur in Deo non est aliud potentia et aliud actio.] [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Eleonore Stump, “Simplicity and Aquinas’ Quantum Metaphysics,” in *Die Metaphysik des Aristoteles im Mittelalter,* ed. Gerhard Krieger (De Grutyer, 2011), 198-199. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. C.f., ST I, q. 13, a. 1, ad. 2 & q. 13, a. 9, ad. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Stump, “Simplicity and Aquinas’ Quantum Mechanics,” 200-203. In these cases, both concrete and abstract terms have the same referent, God. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. More can be said here about how such a distinction is ideologically fundamental, but I am appealing to a distinction found in contemporary metaphysics. C.f., Theodore Sider, *Writing the Book of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), esp. 1-8; see also, Peter Finocchiaro “Ideology and its role in metaphysics,” *Synthese* (Jan. 2019): https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-018-02077-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. *Triads*, 93-96. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. *Triads*, 95. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. C.f., Alvin Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1980), 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. See most recently, Timothy Pawl, “In Defense of Divine Truthmaker Simplicity,” *Res Philosophica* 96, 1 (2019): 63-75. Their position is defended in a number of places: Jeffrey Brower, “Making Sense of Divine Simplicity,” *Faith and Philosophy* 25, 1 (2008): 3–30, http://dx.doi.org/10.5840/faithphil20082511; Brower, “Simplicity and Aseity,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Theology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. Pawl, “Traditional Christian Theism and Truthmaker Maximalism.” *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 4, 1 (2012): 197–218. http://dx.doi.org/10.24204/ejpr.v4i1.314; Pawl, *In Defense of Conciliar Christology: A Philosophical Essay* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016). See also Pawl, “A Thomistic Truthmaker Principle,” *Acta Philosophica* 25, 1 (2016): 45–64; Pawl, “Truthmaking and Christian Theology,” *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 89 (2016): 181–194. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Noël Saenz, “Against Divine Truthmaker Simplicity,” *Faith and Philosophy* 31, 4 (2014): 460–474, http://dx.doi.org/10.5840/faithphil2014121725. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Ibid., 469. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. See my “Being as Iconic Concept: Aquinas on ‘He Who Is’ as Name for God,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 19, 2 (Apr. 2017): 163-174. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. The explanation of this paragraph is mirrored in that given by Aquinas in *Summa Contra Gentiles*, II, caput 13-14. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Gilles Emery explains Thomas’ account of “reduplication” or *redoublement,* when it concerns the Trinitarian relations,in *Trinity in Aquinas* (Naples, FL: Sapientia Press, 2003), 172-185. While the Trinitarian relations are “real” relations, unlike these other relational divine names, the ordinary cases of relational terms (referring to God’s energies) and the way that they relate to non-relational names that refer to God’s essence are, in my view, an analogy for understanding Aquinas’ account of the Trinitarian relations. One sees my point, for example, about dependence in divine names applied to the Trinity in, e.g., ST I, q. 40, a. 4, resp.: “we must absolutely say that the relations in our mode of understanding follow upon the notional acts, so that we can say, without qualifying the phrase, that ‘because He begets, He is the Father.’” [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Joseph Lenow has proposed a view of divine simplicity that comes strikingly close to my own proposal: Joseph Lenow, “Shoring Up Divine Simplicity Against Modal Collapse: A Powers Account,” in *Religious Studies* (2019), doi:10.1017/S0034412518000859. It is also noteworthy that my proposal would involve a particular way to understand the classical scholastic claim that divine actions *ad extra* are ‘virtually transitive’. Compare what Garrigou-Lagrange says about these relations: “The doctrine of St. Thomas and his disciples is very clear on this point. They teach in common that even God's action ad extra is formally immanent and virtually transitive, and that there is no real relation on God's part toward us; there is only a relation of dependence of the creature on God, and this is not reciprocated. Thus the creative action is formally immanent and eternal, although it produces, at the time willed in advance by God, an effect in time. Whereas the formally transitive action, such as the heating of water by the coal fire, is an accident that proceeds from the agent and terminates in the patient, the divine action ad extra cannot be an accident; it is really identical with God's very essence. It is therefore formally immanent, and, though not having the imperfections of the formally transitive action, it resembles this latter in so far as it produces either a spiritual or corporeal effect that is really distinct from it. It is in this sense that it is said to be virtually transitive, for it contains eminently within itself all the perfection of a formally transitive action, without any of the imperfections that essentially belong to this latter,” in Garrigou-Lagrange, op. cit., 252-253. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. See Mark Spencer, op. cit., for a variant, more detailed interpretation of the semantics involved in the Palamite distinction. His interpretation of Palamite semantics appears largely compatible with the analysis of the metaphysics of the distinction I offer here. That said, while I cannot explore this here, the Thomistic proposal is not the same as the Scotist ‘formal distinction’ that Spencer endorses. In sum, the Thomist appeals to less ideological machinery. The Scotist formal distinction requires a difference between forms, formalities, and intelligibilities that goes beyond the commitments that I have taken on here, and differs in obvious ways from the way in which Aquinas had proposed a distinction in how different terms refer to God. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Even so, there are further questions I do not treat here as to what *exactly* is doctrinally-binding on Orthodox Christians as a result of the hesychast councils of Constantinople. Usually, in theological tradition, the Church does not endorse as binding the entire system of any particular theologian and even when they endorse a claim or formulation from (for example) Scotus, the Church does not require subscribing to that theologian’s particular explanation of it. Consequently, it is possible that my proposal does not match all elements of Palamas’ own exposition, but could nevertheless justify enough of a distinction that it allows one to subscribe entirely to the declarations of the councils or the *Synodikon of Orthodoxy*. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. I note in particular that it seems to me, if I am correct, that many interpreters of the Palamite distinction, such as Mark of Ephesus, Vladimir Lossky, and John Meyendorff, have failed to capture important nuances of the doctrine. By contrast, even though Demetracopoulos believes Palamas himself was committed to a “real distinction,” (which I have already suggested is not obvious) he shows that many early followers of Palamas, i.e. “Neo-Palamites,” were in favor of a way of understanding Palamas’ claims in a way that is similar to what I have presented, avoiding positing any real distinctions or formal distinctions in God. See John A. Demetracopoulos, “Palamas Transformed,” op. cit., 263-372. Recently, however, David Bradshaw has defended a position much like mine here – pushing back against Demetracopoulos’ and others’ quick identification of Palamas’ distinction as a “real” one: David Bradshaw, “Essence and Energies: What Kind of Distinction?” in *Analogia* Vol. 6, (2019): 5-35. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. For further defense of the general reading I have given of Gregory Palamas, making Palamas sympathetic to the classical approach to divine simplicity, see the extended treatment by Marcus Plested, “St. Gregory Palamas on the Divine Simplicity,” op. cit. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Many thanks to those whose comments led to improvements of this paper, including Ryan Miller and Fr. Christiaan Kappes. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)