BRILL

Divine Simplicity, God's Freedom, and the Supposed Problem of Modal Collapse

Daniel J. Pedersen | ORCID: 0000-0002-6121-4198
University of Aberdeen, Aberdeen, Scotland, UK
daniel.pedersen@abdn.ac.uk

Christopher Lilley | ORCID: 0000-0003-0945-487X
Marquette University, Milwaukee, WI, USA
chris.lilley@marquette.edu

Abstract

Proponents of the modal collapse argument claim that divine simplicity, traditionally conceived, contradicts other Christian commitments about divine freedom and grace by ultimately rendering all God's acts, including creation and redemption, absolutely necessary. If true, the argument goes, theologians must abandon either God's simplicity or God's freedom. The aim of this dilemma is to force the abandonment of simplicity. However, we argue that the modal collapse argument is insufficient to generate this dilemma apart from additional premises—and that these tacit premises are the true locus of dispute.

Keywords

God – simplicity – necessity – freedom – modal collapse

God, the Christian theological tradition holds, creates the world from nothing, creates it freely, and redeems it graciously. This seems to imply that the divine acts of creation and redemption cannot, therefore, be necessary. But there is an apparent problem, because many in that same tradition likewise hold that God is simple, eternal, and immutable. These divine attributes seem to imply that whatever God does God cannot decline to do or do otherwise; that whatever God does must be necessary. Moreover, if God does such things

of necessity, that in turn implies that not only God's action as cause but the thing God does as effect is itself necessary. The possible contradiction is obvious. On both counts, in regard to the freedom with which God creates and redeems, and with regard to God's creation of a dependent creation from nothing, it seems that one set of claims the theological tradition makes about God contradicts another set of claims. In recent philosophy of religion and theology, this is sometimes called the problem of modal collapse.[1] Having diagnosed this as a problem, we are told of its solution: we are to resolve the contradiction by abandoning the traditional theological commitments to simplicity, eternity, and immutability, leaving God composite, transitory, and sublunary, but our belief coherent.

In what follows, we argue that the problem of modal collapse is a false problem because it is not a sufficient argument ender. In the first place, thinkers as diverse as Boethius, medieval and Reformation-era scholastics, and Leibniz have appealed to a sort of necessity by which God acts—hypothetical, conditional, or suppositional necessity—that resists this collapse of creation and grace into absolute necessity that simplicity, eternity, and immutability are supposed to imply. In the second place, we argue that, even if the collapse into absolute necessity is granted, the conclusion that modal collapse is a *problem* is dependent more on controversial notions of freedom than on the issue of necessity in itself. Indeed, we argue that even if God creates and redeems of absolute necessity—that is, if the collapse of hypothetical necessity to absolute necessity succeeds—, there is no necessary contradiction of either creation from nothing, the dependence of creatures on God, the graciousness of grace, or divine freedom generally without the addition of specific and controversial assumptions about freedom and grace that serve as hidden premises. Without these premises made explicit, arguments *from* the problem of modal collapse merely beg the question; with these premises made explicit, it becomes clear that traditional thinkers face no *problem* of modal collapse at all, provided they decline this assumed notion of freedom and introduce adequate distinctions to resolve confusions of necessity and dependence.

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1   R. T. Mullins, "Simply Impossible: A Case against Divine Simplicity," *Journal of Reformed Theology* 7 (2013): 181–203. Although formulated differently, precursors of the argument that would appear to force a modal collapse on the basis of God being bound to necessarily create this particular world due to God's own nature can be found in Klaas J. Kraay, "Theism and Modal Collapse," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 48 (2011): 361–372.

1   Simplicity and the Problem of Modal Collapse

Simplicity, we are told, is a problem. But what exactly generates the problem, and why is it a thing to be avoided?

In the account of God elaborated by thinkers like Thomas Aquinas, God is *a se*, that is, strictly and utterly independent; and, because God is independent, God is simple. Because God is simple, whatever God is, God is essentially. But, also, because God is simple, God is necessary; and so God cannot become other than God is as regards either essence or existence. God has no accidents, no attributes that are not essential—and, therefore, that are not self-identical. And so, according to such accounts, whatever God is or does (the two are not really different), is as necessary as God's very existence.

In this account, God acts, and acts freely. Indeed, God does everything God does with supreme superfluity, creating from nothing, saving graciously, all in a way that neither compels nor completes God. In no way does God depend on creatures to be, or to be in a certain way. In no way is God determined or constrained by creatures. For, if God were, God would cease to be altogether simple and therefore would cease to be absolutely independent, which is to say, *a se*.

However, this account appears to have a flaw. By virtue of God's simplicity, God cannot be or do other than God is or does. God's act, which is God's being, is absolutely necessary. At the same time, the doctrines of God's free creation, creation from nothing, and the gratuitousness of God's saving grace all likewise follow from God's independence. But creation and salvation are divine acts. Therefore, there is an apparent contradiction: for what is supposed to be perfectly free is actually completely necessary.

Older thinkers recognized the potential puzzle and proposed to dissolve it with a distinction. They distinguished between two kinds of necessity: one, absolute necessity, and the other known variously as hypothetical, conditional, or suppositional necessity.[2] Absolute necessity is that necessity by which God exists and exists in a certain way. It is the kind of necessity that God's aseity, and so God's simplicity, involves. The latter, hypothetical necessity, is the necessity by which God creates and saves. It is the kind of necessity that an absolutely necessary being imposes on the things it knows or does *ad extra*. We will discuss both kinds of necessity at length in what follows. Thinkers from Boethius to Leibniz have been satisfied that this distinction in sorts of necessity is ade-

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2   For the most important early source of the introduction of hypothetical necessity, see Aristotle, *Physics* II.9.

quate to distinguish the way God necessarily exists from the necessity of the effects God freely produces.

Recent thinkers, however, have been less satisfied. Some now argue that the distinction collapses. Because, they argue, the distinction between absolute and hypothetical necessity reduces to absolute necessity, it cannot be used to solve the puzzle in the way older thinkers thought it could. The result, they charge, is that God's effects, like the world, are as necessary as divine being. The puzzle is now a serious problem, and the available solutions are accordingly more extreme. Most rely on the abandonment of premises that were important to thinkers from Augustine and Aquinas to Protestant scholastics. In many cases the *point* of the argument is precisely to force the abandonment of such premises—premises such as 'strong' notions of divine aseity and simplicity. This strategy is, once again, sometimes known as the argument from modal collapse. And one of its main contentions is that *because simplicity entails a modal collapse, we should revise or abandon the doctrine of simplicity*.[3]

Regarding the distinction between hypothetical and absolute necessity, we devote a section to the defense of this distinction as meaningful and therefore able to resist reduction. In the next section, we explain how this distinction is able to account for one sense of divine freedom in the midst of these various necessities. In the final section, we concede a modal collapse for the sake of argument and take a very different tack from other possible defenses: we argue that, even should a modal collapse be conceded (or advanced), it would

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3 Thomas V. Morris, "On God and Mann: A View of Divine Simplicity," *Religious Studies* 21 (1985): 299–318; R. T. Mullins, *The End of the Timeless God*, Oxford Studies in Analytic Theology (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 137–143; William F. Vallicella, "Divine Simplicity: A New Defense," *Faith and Philosophy* 9 (1992): 508–525. Others, such as Stump and Kretzmann, attempt to keep the language of divine simplicity but modify its meaning to avoid the problem of a modal collapse. In order to maintain divine freedom to create or not create, they argue for a position that weakens Aquinas's strong version of divine simplicity. For Stump and Kretzmann, God is not the same in all possible worlds, where there are worlds in which God wills *not* to create. This, they argue, preserves God's freedom to create or not create, while maintaining a more modest form of divine simplicity. While acknowledging that this seems to run contrary to Aquinas's notion of simplicity as barring contingency or accidental properties in God, they contend that this understanding of simplicity is confined to one or another set of worlds. See Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, "Absolute Simplicity," *Faith and Philosophy* 2 (1985): 353–382. Alternatively, others have argued that the notion of divine freedom ought to be modified and limited in order to accommodate divine simplicity. See Norman Kretzmann, "A General Problem of Creation: Why Would God Create Anything at All?," in *Being and Goodness: The Concept of the Good in Metaphysics and Philosophical Theology*, ed. Scott MacDonald (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 208–228; Timothy O'Connor, "Simplicity and Creation," *Faith and Philosophy* 16 (1999): 405–412.

not necessarily pose a problem, either to the doctrine of creation from nothing, to God's grace, or to God's freedom most broadly without the addition of controversial premises. In other words, assuming we grant the claim that hypothetical necessity collapses into absolute necessity, the subsequent argument *from* modal collapse is not a decisive argument against simplicity without the addition of controversial notions of divine freedom.

Last, a note on our procedure is in order. The modal collapse argument is an argument against the *internal* coherence of a tradition of thinking about God's independence, simplicity, and so on, as articulated by Aquinas, Protestant scholastics, and others. As such, resources internal to that tradition can be summoned to refute arguments against it without begging the question—but not the reverse. We advance only this modest defense of internal coherence in what follows.

2   Scholastic Absolute and Hypothetical Necessity

The traditional categories used to distinguish the necessity of God's existence from the necessity of creation and salvation are *absolute* and *hypothetical* necessity.[4] While familiar terms in modern accounts of modality, scholastics, both Protestant and Catholic, understood these terms in ways that sometimes differ in small but crucial ways from their more recent use. In this section, we explain the distinction as many scholastics understood it and argue that it is not only a meaningful distinction on its own stated grounds but is, indeed, irreducible on those grounds. If so, any attempt at a reduction of the distinction, without a direct challenge to those grounds, merely begs the question. Should one understand hypothetical and absolute necessity as scholastics did, one would have good reasons to dismiss the modal collapse argument.

The distinction between absolute and hypothetical necessity rests *solely* on the source, or ground, of a thing's necessity in relation to its essence or concept.[5] That is, as Aquinas put it, only "when the predicate forms part of the definition of the subject," or "when the subject forms part of the notion of the predicate,"[6] is a thing absolutely necessary. A hypothetical necessity, in contrast, is one in which the opposite is true, and the source or ground of a

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4   Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I.19.3, resp.

5   See Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* 1.81–83; Boethius, *Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. H. R. James (London: Eliot Stock, 1897), v. 6; Leibniz's Fifth Paper in *The Leibniz-Clarke Correspondence*, ed. H. G. Alexander (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1956), 56.

6   Aquinas, *ST* I.19.3, resp.

thing's necessity is extrinsic to its concept. The narrowness of this distinction is important to emphasize. This lies in contrast to, for example, Mullins's characterization of hypothetical necessity as necessary "given prior states of affairs," states of affairs that "did not have to obtain."[7] On Aquinas's understanding, however, the question does not necessarily have anything to do with temporal priority; and the additional criterion that the necessitating condition must *itself* be contingent is entirely absent. The significance of this difference will become clearer below.

Therefore, scholastics commonly understood a thing as absolutely necessary when its contrary involves a contradiction, *considered in itself*. For example, all geometrical truths are absolutely necessary. A triangle is a closed shape with three sides whose interior angles total 180 degrees (and so on). A purported triangle with more sides or another sum total of interior angles is not a triangle. No condition or hypothesis extrinsic to the very notion of a triangle makes this the case. It is the same with other things that are essentially true. Most importantly for present purposes, God's existence, and existence as such, is absolutely necessary. Contemporary accounts agree.

Not so with things that are hypothetically necessary. In contrast, for many scholastics, a thing is merely hypothetically necessary when its contrary involves no contradiction, *considered in itself*, but the contrary of which becomes contradictory with the addition of a hypothesis or condition that is not essential or intrinsic. As Boethius, following Aristotle, explains, "as that, if you know that someone is walking, he must necessarily be walking."[8] That is, supposing a man is walking, so long as he is walking, he must necessarily be walking. And, indeed, a non-walking walking man would be a contradiction, but it would not contradict the concept of a man considered in itself, that is, absent the condition. In this case the necessity generated is not somehow less necessary, but the source or ground of that necessity is derived from elsewhere. It is extrinsic to the essence of a human being. And we know this because humans very often begin to walk and cease to walk but in so doing do not begin or cease to be human. Creation is traditionally held to be hypothetically necessary in this same sense. It exists, but its nonexistence implies no contradiction *in itself*. However, its nonexistence becomes contradictory on the supposition that God brings it into existence. The same is true of salvation.

In light of this distinction, we can see why the absolute necessity of God's act entailed by God's simplicity does not make the hypothetical necessity of creation (or salvation, and so forth) absolutely necessary. For although God wills

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7   Mullins, *The End of the Timeless God*, 137.
8   Boethius, *Consolation*, v. 6.

to create, and God's will is identical with God's essence, and God's essence is absolutely necessary, creation is not, and indeed *could not*, be absolutely necessary unless it were self-existent since, despite its absolutely necessary conditions, the contrary of its existence involves no contradiction, considered in itself. Precisely because creation is necessary *in virtue of some extrinsic condition*, precisely because the essence of creation does not involve existence, can no strength or number of necessitating conditions make creation absolutely necessary. Indeed, it is the very test of a hypothetical necessity to ask whether it is necessary *because of* something else, some nonessential supposition. On scholastic grounds, if a thing's necessity is grounded in something other than its own essence, it can only ever be hypothetically necessary even if all its conditioning grounds are themselves absolutely necessary. Since the distinction between an absolute and hypothetical necessity is meaningful both with respect to relations of dependence and with respect to the intrinsic necessity of a thing, it cannot be reduced or ignored without explicit argumentation.

Consider how these resources could be marshalled in reply to an objection to the traditional account of simplicity like the one that follows from Craig and Moreland. They argue:

> Moreover, if God is identical with his essence, then God cannot know or do anything different from what he knows and does. He can have no contingent knowledge or action, for everything about him is essential to him. But in that case all modal distinctions collapse and everything becomes necessary. Since *God knows that p* is logically equivalent to *p is true*, the necessity of the former entails the necessity of the latter. Thus divine simplicity leads to an extreme fatalism, according to which everything that happens does so, not with temporal necessity, but with logical necessity.[9]

The first thing to notice is that the basic conclusion at which they arrive is one that the tradition has beat them to: yes, indeed, everything that happens does so with a logical, not merely temporal, necessity[10]—although the inference that this implies fatalism does not follow apart from additional premises.

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9   J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2003), 525.

10   Recall that hypothetical necessities are still necessary in that their contraries involve a contradiction—only not considered in themselves. Yet, on the condition of the hypothesis, the necessity generated is the same as an absolute necessity, since the contraries of both equally involve a contradiction.

But also notice that no argument is provided against the scholastic premise that logical necessities can, in general, be further distinguished, or against the specific distinction in kinds of necessity many scholastics offer.

This is where reductions of the distinction between absolute and hypothetical necessity in terms of possible worlds might do an injustice to scholastic accounts. Suppose something is necessary if it exists in every possible world, without respect to distinctions in the ground or source of that necessity. In that case, God's existence is clearly absolutely necessary and, supposing God is simple, God cannot be or do otherwise. Therefore, God cannot have created another world, supposing to create this world is God's eternal will.[11] If so, because God and God's will exist and exist as they do in every possible world, so does *this* world. And, if put in terms like these, that makes this world and God appear indistinguishably absolutely necessary. But notice that this argument proceeds by ignoring, not disputing, *the* distinction that many scholastics appealed to: the distinction between the intrinsic or extrinsic ground of necessity. Without an explicit argument that this distinction is illegitimate or immaterial, denying the soundness of scholastic accounts by appeal to possible worlds semantics that simply overlook the distinction merely begs the question.

Without an argued reduction of those distinctions, those in the scholastic tradition could reply as follows. All that God does God does necessarily. In willing God's own goodness, God wills things outside of Godself in creating the world.[12] If so, the act of communicating God's goodness by creating is indeed naturally necessary for God.[13] But this still does not make the world, the effect of that act, absolutely and not hypothetically necessary: for the absolute necessity by which God necessarily creates is a condition or hypothesis upon which the world's necessity depends—and an extrinsic ground is, once again, *the* criterion that distinguishes hypothetical necessities. No matter how necessarily all this follows from *God*, and no matter how logically necessary the world is because God necessarily creates it, unless the world is necessary because of something *essential to itself* it is still only and ever hypothetically necessary. Without further argumentation, on scholastic grounds there simply is no modal collapse.

But it might be objected that this distinction, even should it help in one respect, does so at the expense of divine simplicity. Since one aim of many

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11   Aquinas, *ST* I.19.3.
12   Aquinas, *SCG* 1.37.5; 1.75.3–5.
13   By the 'act of creating' we mean the will to communicate God's goodness, not the will to communicate that goodness in a particular way, which is only suppositionally necessary.

modal collapse arguments is to force the abandonment of simplicity, they might succeed either way. Mullins puts the objection like this:

> It should be noted that the standard Thomistic reply to objections of this sort will not work. The standard Thomist reply is to say that God wills Himself as the ultimate end of absolute necessity, but only wills creation of conditional or suppositional necessity. The reason that this does not work is because it is inconsistent with divine simplicity. On simplicity, God's act of creating is identical to His act of willing Himself, so there cannot be two different modalities at play. Otherwise, the acts are not identical, and that is repugnant to divine simplicity.[14]

Thomists, Protestant scholastics, and others might take exception to more than one claim advanced here, but Mullins's key claim for present purposes is that the two modalities cannot both apply. On scholastic accounts, however, both modalities can be applied simultaneously without contradiction because they are *about* two different things. Absolute necessity pertains to God's will, whereas hypothetical necessity pertains to the intrinsic necessity of the things God's will brings about. One regards the cause, the other the effect. Nothing about this distinction poses any clear problem to simplicity provided the distinction is treated on scholastic terms.

What sorts of argumentation would be needed to generate a modal collapse, then? Advocates of modal collapse mostly appeal to the transitivity of absolute necessity to make their case: if x is absolutely necessary, and x entails or causes y of absolute necessity, then y is absolutely necessary.[15] But on a common scholastic account of the distinction between necessities, that conclusion is false. In fact, the second premise (x entails or causes y) is what *guarantees* that the necessity generated *cannot* be absolute. A true absolute necessity is, by definition, one that is rendered necessary by its essence or concept alone.

A more promising line of attack would be to contest the underlying assumption that underwrites the scholastic distinction: the assumption that *things can be considered in themselves*. It is this premise which authorizes the intrinsic-extrinsic distinction in necessities. Without it, such a distinction might not be permissible or intelligible. Without the assumption that things cannot be completely or truly or adequately considered in themselves, the absolute necessity

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14   Mullins, "Simply Impossible," 199n66.

15   It is not stated so explicitly, but this reasoning is clearly what underlies Mullins's inferences in Mullins, *The End of the Timeless God*, 138. And again, see Moreland and Craig, *Philosophical Foundations*, 525.

of *x* might well translate to *y*. We will examine this possibility further below when we entertain absolute necessity 'all the way down.' For now, however, it is sufficient to reiterate that, apart from arguments against the assumption that funds this scholastic distinction, claims that hypothetical necessity collapses into absolute necessity only beg the question.

3   Necessity, Freedom, and Grace

Even if the distinction between hypothetical and absolute necessity is clear and meaningful as a distinction, it might still be charged that this sense of hypothetical necessity nevertheless destroys God's freedom because—it is assumed—for God to act freely must imply that God's act, which, according to divine simplicity, is God's being, could have been otherwise. Likewise, divine grace must be such that God need not give it. As Hinlicky puts it, "What goes missing in the account [of God as simple] is the personal freedom of God."[16] Even if the objects and effects of divine freedom are such that they are only necessary on the condition that God wills them, God's will, on the traditional account, is absolutely necessary. God could not do otherwise, and therefore, it is claimed, God is not free.

This charge is, once again, mistaken, and the argumentation for it incomplete. It depends on a combination of conceptual confusion and question-begging. To see this more clearly, consider the argument as Mullins presents it. "Divine simplicity," he says, "not only entails that God must create some universe of some sort, it entails that God must create this universe."[17] But, Mullins adds, "Christian theists have long maintained that God does not have to perform all of the actions that He can possibly perform."[18] This is, Mullins charges, a contradiction that forces advocates of simplicity to choose between a simple God and a free one. For if simplicity entails that God must, for example, create, then simplicity, which (purportedly) entails a modal collapse, also implies that God is dependent upon the world.

In the first place, the account of divine freedom being assumed here is a species of libertarian freedom in which the principle of alternate possibilities not only holds but holds in a certain sense: namely, that "God was free to create or not to create,"[19] which is to say, where the alternate possibilities are pos-

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16   Paul Hinlicky, *Divine Simplicity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 22.
17   Mullins, *The End of the Timeless God*, 140.
18   Mullins, *The End of the Timeless God*, 140.
19   Mullins, *The End of the Timeless God*, 139.

sibilities *of the divine will*. While no doubt many Christians, some scholastics included, have held to a view of freedom like this, many also have not. The subject has long been one of active dispute within and between traditions, both Protestant and Catholic. There is no one 'classical' position. And there is a good case to be made that Aquinas, and, subsequently, many Reformed scholastics, thinkers like Leibniz, and others held to a different conception of freedom from that being attributed to traditional or 'classical' accounts *tout court*.[20] In fact, unless Aquinas understood God's freedom differently from the way libertarian incompatibilists do, it is difficult to explain notable historical controversies surrounding his account;[21] and the idea that freedom *must* be understood in this specific way is a strong—and unargued—assumption.

In the second place, the senses of 'must' used in this argument are insufficiently specific. Many scholastics happily concede that God necessarily wills (and so creates) in at least one sense but deny other senses of necessity and the pernicious consequences those senses are taken to imply. This directly relates to the work that modal collapse arguments are supposed to do. Because a modal collapse reduces all hypothetical necessity to absolute necessity, it is meant to authorize the reduction in senses of necessity to only one: that in which necessity implies dependence—because only in that case does the conclusion that God depends upon the world follow.

However, in regard to the charge that, on accounts like Aquinas's, God's freedom (and grace) cannot be preserved in light of God's simplicity because God is and acts by absolute necessity and, therefore, cannot do otherwise, there is more than one reply.[22]

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20   For an able defense of the idea that Aquinas's theory of divine freedom does not depend on a libertarian incompatibilist interpretation, see Coleen P. Zoller, "Determined but Free: Aquinas's Compatibilist Theory of Freedom," *Philosophy and Theology* 16 (2004): 26–31. For a clear example from Protestant scholasticism, see Petrus van Mastricht, *Theoretico-Practica Theologia* (1724), II.15.12. For a reading of Leibniz as holding that God chooses the best of all possible worlds *necessarily*, see Daniel Garber, *Leibniz: Body, Substance, Monad* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 236–237.

21   Bishop Tempier, *Condemnation of 1277*, § 20.

22   For a range of contemporary defenses of Aquinas's articulation of the compatibility of divine simplicity and freedom, see Steven J. Duby, *Divine Simplicity: A Dogmatic Account* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), 193–207; James E. Dolezal, *God without Parts: Divine Simplicity and the Metaphysics of God's Absoluteness* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2011), 188–212; Brian Leftow, "Aquinas, Divine Simplicity and Divine Freedom," in *Metaphysics and God: Essays in Honor of Eleonore Stump*, ed. Kevin Timpe (New York: Routledge, 2009), 21–38; Brian Davies, "Simplicity," in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Philosophical Theology*, ed. Charles Taliaferro and Chad Meister (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 42–44.

Recall that Aquinas, for instance, not only concedes, but insists, that God acts necessarily and, subsequently, that all God's effects acquire a second, conditional necessity on the supposition that God wills them.[23] But, according to Aquinas, God's freedom and absolute necessity are compatible. Therefore, Aquinas thinks God *freely* acts of absolute necessity. For instance, God cannot fail to will Godself as ultimate end, and this depends on no condition or hypothesis.[24] Additionally, God cannot, by natural moral necessity, will less than the best—including the best means to the divine essence as end.[25] Indeed, God does a number of things as entailed by the divine nature, and since the divine nature depends on nothing else either for its essence or for its existence, anything God does by nature is absolutely necessary. This shows that Aquinas does not understand the principle of alternate possibilities as a necessary condition for a divine act to be free.

In reply, it might rightly be objected that Aquinas denies that God wills creation of absolute necessity but does so only of hypothetical necessity. This not only seems to imply that the principle of alternate possibilities does, in some sense, apply to God—which appears to conflict with absolute necessity—, but also that 1) there are some things God begins to do, and 2) there are some divine potentialities that are not actualized. But this objection is mistaken. To understand why it is mistaken, we need to bring together some of Aquinas's key claims.

In the first place, according to Aquinas, *no* created thing adds any real being to God. Creation only accrues reality to creatures, which are derivative of God's reality.[26] Therefore, to abstain from creating some potential thing does not result in an unactualized potential *for God*, only for the creature that was not created. Of course, the ideality of creation is a controversial doctrine. But to dispute Aquinas's account on the grounds of a modal collapse without first giving an argument for the falsity of that premise begs the question. And, at the same time, giving a non-question-begging argument for its falsity can only possibly succeed if it is done without a viciously circular appeal to a modal collapse.

In the second place, to understand the coherence of Aquinas's account, we need to return to the distinction in kinds of necessity as regarding the intrinsic or extrinsic source of ground of a thing's necessity. Aquinas thinks the notion

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23   Aquinas, *ST* I.19.8, resp.
24   Aquinas, *SCG* 1.80.
25   Aquinas, *SCG* 1.81.6–7; 2.45.5.
26   Aquinas, *SCG* 2.15.3–5.

of *no* creatable thing entails its existence, considered in itself. Whether God does or does not create this or that is immaterial to a thing's status as merely hypothetically necessary even if God creates it by the absolute necessity of the divine will because the essence or notion of anything that is a candidate for *creation* does not involve existence.[27]

Accordingly, a sense of the possible remains, but it is not the sense that Aquinas's critics have in mind. It is not that the divine identity includes the power to do either *a* or *b* and yet somehow remains the same. Divine acts *ad extra* are, fundamentally, not something that *add* to the divine identity at all. That picture of addition already presupposes composition: that God *plus* God's acts yields the true metaphysical whole. Instead, God already *is* all reality, and God's acts *ad extra* do not aggregate to the divine essence but follow from it. Importantly, then, the sense of the 'possible' in creatables lies not in the idea that *God* might have (speaking in the sense of ordinary human counterfactuals) done otherwise, but in the sense that creatures, considered in themselves, might not have existed. Necessitarianism, for Aquinas and other scholastics, is false. Yet it is false not because God could have been otherwise, but because creatures could not have been.

In explanation of this claim, Aquinas is representative when he, again, adverts to the distinction between the consideration of things intrinsically and extrinsically: intrinsically, created things could have not existed since no creature's essence involves existence; extrinsically, they could not have failed to exist on the supposition that God freely wills them. As Aquinas explains: "Since then all other things have necessary existence inasmuch as they exist in God; but no absolute necessity so as to be necessary in themselves, in so far as they exist in themselves; it follows that God knows of necessity whatever He wills, but does not will of necessity whatever He wills."[28] And Aquinas not only concedes, but insists, that God does not begin to be or do anything and, therefore, does not begin to will. God *eternally* wills to create and save this world.[29] Moreover, even though God knows potentially existent things that God will not bring into existence (that is, unactualized creaturely possibilities), God knows them *as merely potential*, that is, as creatable things that God *shall* not create.[30]

A common charge, however, remains: that the necessity that the eternity of the divine will imposes on things willed is tantamount to compulsion. It is not.

27   Aquinas, *ST* I.25.5, resp.
28   Aquinas, *ST* I.19.3, rep. obj. 6.
29   Aquinas, *SCG* 1.83.3.
30   Aquinas, *De Potentia* I.5.

Thinkers like Aquinas explain this by offering a distinction between the necessity of compulsion and the necessity of immutability.[31]

The necessity of compulsion is the sole sort of necessity that imperils divine freedom. It is this sense that Thomas has in mind when he sometimes describes something as "necessary" without qualification. If one is compelled, one is not perfectly free. But one is compelled if one is forced to act against their will. And God's will is God's essence, and God's essence is wholly and entirely simple and *a se*. If God is simple and *a se*, nothing *could* compel God to act; and God's act is wholly and entirely in accord with God's will.

The necessity of immutability, on the other hand, is that necessity by which a thing that cannot be otherwise acts of its own accord. It is the necessity of immutability, not the necessity of compulsion, by which God eternally wills. Conclusions to 'necessity' without further specification are not sufficient to decide the matter. This view of freedom is, of course, open to dispute. But because many accounts of divine freedom make this distinction, and offer good reasons for it, the distinction between the necessity of compulsion and the necessity of immutability shows that the modal collapse argument is not a sufficient argument-ender.

Say, however, that convincing reasons were, in fact, offered for why God was free if and only if God could do otherwise. Would thinkers like Aquinas then be vulnerable to the charge that their account of God's absolute necessity renders God unfree? Once again, the answer is no.

Recall that a hypothetical necessity is that which is not necessary, considered in itself. Such a thing is not absolutely necessary, because if it were otherwise, or did not exist at all, it would imply no intrinsic contradiction. Because such a thing is not necessary in itself, it is *in itself* (not in light of God's will) only possible. For someone like Aquinas, this applies equally to all things that God knows, such that anything that is not a violation of a geometrical truth or a natural necessity—such as square circles, eternal created things, and so forth—is *also* possible considered in itself. Which is to say, the things that God created were equally possible as the things God did not create. Because, on this account, if God had done otherwise, it would involve no contradiction, the principle of alternate possibilities is preserved in a nontrivial sense. Though God eternally does not will otherwise, things, in themselves, could be otherwise.

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31   Aquinas, *SCG* 1.19.3.

4   Absolute Necessity All the Way Down

Our above replies to the charge of modal collapse rely upon a common distinction drawn by medieval and Reformation-era scholastic thinkers between absolute and hypothetical necessities, namely, the consideration of the source or ground (either intrinsic or extrinsic) of a thing's necessity. Because hypothetical necessities differ from absolute necessities irreducibly on the supposition that they *can* be considered in themselves, they cannot be rendered absolutely necessary without explicit challenge to that supposition. In order to collapse scholastic hypothetical necessity into absolute necessity, one must deny that things *can* be considered in themselves. In this section we consider how one might defend against the modal collapse argument supposing it were successfully argued that the scholastic distinction between absolute and hypothetically necessary things fails because things cannot be considered in themselves.

This approach differs from other common defenses of divine simplicity. Tomaszewski is representative when he concedes of the modal collapse argument that "[i]f this argument is successful, it is indeed fatal to DDS [the doctrine of divine simplicity]. As Leftow puts it, 'Modal Spinozism thus looms: absolutely everything is absolutely necessary.' Such a doctrine is patently false, and so if DDS entails it, DDS is likewise patently false."[32] Tomaszewski does not think the modal collapse argument succeeds, but he agrees with advocates of the modal collapse argument that, if it did succeed, the absolute necessity of all things would be sufficient reason to decline the doctrine of simplicity. In contrast, we claim that even if each and every thing is absolutely necessary, the modal collapse argument is not a sufficient argument-ender.

Suppose for the sake of argument that we had good reason to think that things cannot be considered in themselves. For example, say it was convincingly shown that to separate things from their conditions is a mutilation of their complete concepts, or that consideration of things in themselves is a vicious abstraction from the whole that informs them. If so, an adequate consideration of things would *include* a consideration of their conditions or hypotheses. And if these conditions are necessitating conditions, the consideration of things would involve their necessity. The contrary of such a thing, then, *would* imply a contradiction. And since we cannot have recourse to the consideration of

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32   Christopher Tomaszewski, "Collapsing the Modal Collapse Argument: On an Invalid Argument Against Divine Simplicity," *Analysis* 79 (2019): 278.

things in themselves apart from their conditions, we cannot have recourse to the *sine qua non* of hypothetical necessity as many scholastics understood it. In that case, if God is simple, everything becomes absolutely necessary because the contrary of everything that obtains involves a contradiction in the same sense.

In this case, not only God's act as cause, but God's effects, become absolutely necessary entailments of God, and so the divine essence itself necessarily includes its effects in the same sense. This appears to imply several things: one, that God is not free, because there is no hint of indifference or choice on this account (that is, the principle of alternate possibilities cannot, in any way, obtain); two, that because God creates with absolute necessity, God is made dependent upon the world; and three, that because God *must* do everything God does, the idea of grace is incompatible with this account of God's necessity.

Nevertheless, even on these extreme grounds, we argue, the collapse of all necessity to absolute necessity is an insufficient argument-ender against simplicity. Even if we were to grant that all things follow from God's absolute necessity with such close connection that they become, themselves, absolutely necessary—that is, even if we were to deny the absolute-hypothetical necessity distinction—, it does not follow that God is not free, that God is dependent on creation, or even that grace is not given graciously, apart from additional premises.

With respect to the question of God's freedom, one might take the positive position advanced by Spinoza: that a thing is free if and only if it is wholly and entirely undetermined to be, or act, by anything not itself.[33] God is the one and only such thing.[34] And just because God, in fact, exists and acts by the divine nature alone, God is, alone, *perfectly* free. But God's essence and existence are absolutely necessary. Therefore, the one and only perfectly free thing is that which exists and acts by its nature alone. Absolute necessity is, on this view, not an obstacle to divine freedom, but a necessary condition of it.

Now, Spinoza may be wrong, and one might disagree with him about how freedom is best understood. But what his position makes plain is that nothing about God doing everything that God does of absolute necessity, with no genuine possibility that is not actualized, necessarily, and apart from additional premises (in this case, controversial assumptions about freedom), entails a denial of divine freedom. For his part, Spinoza was convinced that the opposite

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33   Spinoza, *Ethics*, 1D7.
34   *Ethics*, 1P17 Cor 2.

was true: that for God to act *apart from* absolute necessity was the true threat to divine freedom.

Consider Spinoza's reasons. God is "what is in itself and is conceived through itself."[35] There is necessarily one and only one such God who exists and acts by the necessity of God's nature alone.[36] If a thing does not determine itself to act, it is determined by another.[37] However, if God is determined to act by another, then God is no longer that which exists and is conceived through itself alone, and is thereby rendered dependent on something else, which is absurd (and in any event, would amount to atheism). This "something else" is anything that could *determine* God, anything not strictly identical with God's essence—that is to say, anything that is not the divine nature itself. And so, if God acts because of a will that is simply one and the same with the divine nature, God acts of absolute necessity. But if God's will is not strictly identical with the divine nature, then God's nature is determined to act by something not itself, and in that case God is not truly *a se*, and therefore is not truly free. Perhaps counterintuitively, the expectation that indeterminacy guarantees divine freedom is most deeply mistaken. According to Spinoza, God is free if and only if God acts of the necessity of the divine nature alone.

Again, Spinoza's account is contestable. But it is not more contestable in principle than the assumption that freedom requires the principle of alternate possibilities, which is used as a tacit major premise in arguments against simplicity from a modal collapse. Philosophers have given good reasons to doubt whether the principle of alternative possibilities is a necessary or sufficient condition of *any* agent's freedom, let alone God's.[38] The strong assumptions Spinoza makes about freedom serve to highlight how much work assumptions about freedom, and not the question of necessity as such, do for all involved.

Whether the absolute necessity of the world implies the dependence of God on the world rides on parallel assumptions to that of divine freedom. In the first place, if a thing is free, that itself implies its independence. Indeed, Spinoza's argument for God acting by natural necessity alone is predicated on God's absolute aseity, which is to say, God's perfect freedom.[39] It would be very

35   *Ethics*, 1D3, D6. *A Spinoza Reader: The Ethics and Other Works*, ed. and trans. Edwin Curley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 85.
36   *Ethics*, 1P14 Cor 1, P20.
37   *Ethics*, 1D7, A3.
38   See Harry Frankfurt, "Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility," in Joel Feinberg and Russ Schafer-Landau, eds., *Reason and Responsibility: Readings in Some Basic Problems of Philosophy*, 16th ed. (Boston: Cengage Learning, 2017), 528–533.
39   *Ethics*, 1P17.

strange if Spinoza's conclusion undermined his most basic assumption. Charity screams caution.

However, there is, perhaps, a plausible case to be made that the absolute necessity of the world implies God's dependence on the world. For, on this view, the very notion of God that does not include the world implies a contradiction. And that might seem to imply that God *needs* the world.

But this is a trap Spinoza was wise enough to anticipate and avoid. He does so by distinguishing between the *kind* of necessity (absolute vs. hypothetical necessity) from the *reason* for a thing's being necessary.[40] As he explains, "A thing is called necessary *either* by reason of its essence *or* by reason of its cause. For a thing's existence follows necessarily either from its essence and definition or from a given efficient cause."[41] Nothing about these different reasons makes any of the things resulting from them less than absolutely necessary in the sense that their contraries involve a contradiction. But there are absolutely necessary things that are absolutely necessary *by reason of* other things, and one and only one thing that is necessary by reason of its own essence. Even if all things are absolutely necessary, something being necessary by reason of its cause (rather than its essence) describes a relation of dependence. And relations of dependence are asymmetrical. Therefore, even if the world and God were absolutely necessary, nothing about the world's absolute necessity need imply that God depends on the world.

Spinoza shares this much with Aquinas: because both think that anything God can make (which for Spinoza, though not for Aquinas, is everything God *does* make), is already included in the very notion of God (even if, for Aquinas, as real for God but only as a possibility for creatures), nothing that God creates adds any real being to God. For Spinoza, God's essence simply includes its attributes and modes. Nothing is aggregated to God when particular things come into being.[42] The divine ideas of the essences of things are eternal.[43] Similarly, for Aquinas, God already is all real being. Creation, then, adds nothing to God, only something to creatures. The relation of God to creation is, famously (or infamously), merely a relation of reason. And this means that, whether on Spinoza's absolute necessity or Aquinas's hypothetical necessity, necessity does not imply dependence because there is no new reality compounded to the divine essence that could perfect God's existence and no reality

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40   *Ethics*, 1P24.
41   *Ethics*, 1P33S1, *A Spinoza Reader*, 106. Emphasis added.
42   *Ethics*, 1P15.
43   *Ethics*, 5P23.

besides the divine essence which could determine it. Once again, this account is open to debate. What a relation of reason is and whether such a relation is defensible are live questions—though Aquinas offers a number of ordinary examples in defense of this kind of relation.[44] Even if this does not resolve the matter, however, the ideality of creation is a plausible position, and appeal to it again demonstrates that even if simplicity entailed the absolute necessity of all things (that is, a modal collapse), a modal collapse would not be a sufficient argument-ender.

This leads us, finally, to the question of grace. Because the 'problem' posed to God's grace follows that posed to God's freedom, the reply parallels it. If nothing about God acting of absolute necessity contradicts divine freedom, then nothing about God's free grace being a thing God gives of absolute necessity does either. Yet, unlike above, on the condition of *all* things following of absolute necessity, it seems the recipients of grace likewise cannot not *receive* it. And this seems to imply that there is something on the part of the recipient of grace that renders God's giving of it dependent or compelled. That might, perhaps, contradict the gratuitousness of grace.

Once more, however, this is a confusion of a distinction, or else begging the question. For the distinction between the *kind* of necessity and the *reason* for a thing's being necessary is applied equally to the existence of things, and to their existence in a certain way as expressing a relation of dependence. Like creation, the recipient of God's grace, though they necessarily receive it, might nevertheless depend on an external cause, something outside themselves, for salvation. In that case, they cannot fail to be objects of divine grace, and God cannot fail to give grace, yet neither absolute necessity applied to God as giver or us as recipients reverses or dissolves the relation of dependence, nor does any sense of absolute necessity imply, as a consequence, that grace is something that we are due or that we have in our power. Indeed, in the service of explicitly Christian accounts of redemption, Spinoza's reasoning has been used to strengthen the claim that God is *essentially* love.[45] A simple appeal to necessity requires ignoring Spinoza's distinction; and a claim that this distinction fails *because* it makes grace, like creation, absolutely necessary likewise begs the question. Any

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44   Aquinas, *DP* VII.10.

45   For a developed account of this see Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart, eds. (Berkeley: Apocryphile Press, [1830] 2011). For an account of how Schleiermacher explains the compatibility of absolute necessity with God's willing for the sake of an end, see Daniel J. Pedersen, *The Eternal Covenant: Schleiermacher on God and Natural Science* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), 127–150.

argument that this kind of necessity entails dependence would require denying Spinoza's distinction between the kind of necessity and the reason for a thing's being necessary. And this alone shows that arguments against simplicity from the necessity simplicity implies (or is supposed to imply) is an insufficient argument-ender.

5   Conclusion

The argument from modal collapse is supposed to show that, on internal grounds, traditional accounts of God as simple (and therefore eternal and immutable, and so forth) are incoherent by contradicting other central Christian commitments to divine freedom. But, as we have shown, the resources available to such traditional accounts resist this reduction with a carefully and clearly applied distinction between absolute and hypothetical necessity. Because this distinction is meaningful, and because it is on internal grounds irreducible in principle, modal collapse arguments are never sufficiently decisive. Instead, work must be done to reduce the distinction offered by the tradition, and only if that reduction succeeded could a modal collapse even begin to threaten traditional accounts.

Moreover, even should the distinction between absolute and hypothetical necessity fail, that, too, would prove insufficient to generate the incoherence critics of simplicity hope to prove. Even if God did everything God did of absolute necessity and God's absolute necessity was completely transitive, such that the possible existence of anything beside the actual world in all its particulars would imply a contradiction, this, too, would prove insufficient to generate a *problem* apart from additional premises and apart from arguments against the distinction between matters of modality and relations of dependence.

At every step we showed how deeply the so-called problem of modal collapse depends on controversial, yet tacit, premises, either to generate the collapse itself, or to generate the pernicious consequences that such a collapse is supposed to imply. This shows that the question of necessity is, in itself, of minor interest. It is, instead, these tacit premises that are most pertinent and that truly divide traditional accounts of God from their recent critics. In fact, when these tacit premises are made explicit, it is clear that the argument against divine simplicity is not an argument *from* modal collapse at all, but an appeal to hidden, unexamined, and unargued premises, premises that traditional accounts of God as simple, eternal, and immutable would reject, premises that show that divine simplicity is not, and never was, a matter of *internal* incoherence.

This line of criticism is legitimate, but it is not immanent. It is a serious, but altogether novel, account of God and divine action, connected to the theological tradition to which it professes to relate by less than it might intend. There is, in short, no problem of modal collapse, but a problem of first principles.