

Jonathan Edwards on divine simplicity

OLIVER D. CRISP

St Mary's College, University of St Andrews, South Street, St Andrews, Fife KY16 9JU

Abstract: In this article I assess the coherence of Jonathan Edwards's doctrine of divine simplicity as an instance of an *actus purus* account of perfect-being theology. Edwards's view is an idiosyncratic version of this doctrine. This is due to a number of factors including his idealism and the Trinitarian context from which he developed his notion of simplicity. These complicating factors lead to a number of serious problems for his account, particularly with respect to the *opera extra sunt indivisa* principle. I conclude that Edwards sets out an interesting and subtle version of the doctrine, but one which appears mired in difficulties from which he is unable to extract himself.

The doctrine of divine simplicity has received serious criticism in recent philosophical literature.¹ However, little has been done to explicate the doctrine of Jonathan Edwards on this subject. The objective of this essay is to give a critical exposition of Edwards's treatment of divine simplicity as an innovative and idiosyncratic way of dealing with the problem, and as a contribution to the ongoing debate on this doctrine. In order to do so, a brief orientation in the contemporary literature on simplicity and properties will be in order, before assessing Edwards's doctrine.

The nomenclature of properties

Much of the debate over divine simplicity in the contemporary literature has specifically avoided the question of how God might be simple yet triune at one and the same time. Many of the treatments available prefer to deal with the doctrine of divine simplicity as it bears upon the God of the philosophers rather than the God of faith.² The reasons for this are obvious: the ground covered by the doctrine of simplicity has trouble enough with explicating the unity of the divine essence, without having to incorporate discussion of the persons of the divine Trinity as well. However, this is exactly what Jonathan Edwards seeks to do. In a

careful series of arguments, Edwards defends a novel Trinitarian simplicity argument. He develops his thinking on this matter in two places in particular, his *Dissertation on the End of Creation* [hereafter *EC*], and *Essay on the Trinity* [hereafter *ET*].³ He also makes considerable reference to these issues in his *Miscellanies*.⁴

To make clear where Edwards is original, and how what he says remains within the divine-simplicity tradition, we turn first to clarify some of the terminology. In an article on Aquinas' conception of simplicity,⁵ Eleonore Stump distinguishes four central theses that comprise this doctrine. The elucidation of these theses significantly reduces their apparent counterintuitivity and complexity. They are,

- P1 It is impossible that God have any spatial and/or temporal parts that can be distinguished from one another.
- P2 The distinction between a particular entity's essential and accidental intrinsic properties cannot apply to God, because it is impossible for God to have any intrinsic accidental properties.
- P3 It is impossible for there to be a real metaphysical distinction between one essential characteristic and another in God's being. ('Whatever can be correctly attributed to God must in reality be identical with the unity that is his essence.')
⁶- P4 God's essence is not different from His existence, that is, God is His own being; God is pure being.

In this last respect, God is *sui generis*, as Katherin Rogers explains:⁷ all other things have a distinction between their being and existence, except divine being.⁸

This can be applied to Edwards's views in the following way. Given Stump's four theses about divine simplicity, there is a distinction between,

- (1) God has only intrinsic essential properties;
- (2) God has no intrinsic accidental properties;

and,

- (3) God does have extrinsic accidental properties.

But this raises a series of queries about what this terminology actually means. By way of explanation, we shall take the properties referred to in the three propositions above in pairs, beginning with intrinsic and extrinsic properties before explaining essential and accidental properties.

Following Christopher Hughes,⁹ I take an *intrinsic property* to be a property a thing has in virtue of the way it is, for example, 'roundness', or 'extension'. David Lewis¹⁰ maintains that a property is intrinsic if, for any actual or possible perfect duplicates of each other (a perfect pair of, say, Tweedledum and Tweedledum*), either both have that property, or neither do. Otherwise, the property concerned is extrinsic. Furthermore, an individual can have intrinsic properties *essentially* or

inessentially. Hughes gives the example of a lump of clay. It has the property of shape essentially, but the particular shape it has at a particular time, say roundness, inessentially. According to (1), God can only have intrinsic essential properties. For theists like Edwards, this has been held alongside the view that there is no time at which God's intrinsic properties change.¹¹ So, as per (2), He cannot have intrinsic accidental properties. In Hughes's terms, this means that God cannot have intrinsic inessential properties. Defenders of the traditional view of divine simplicity have assumed that God is timeless, and that this is one of the central reasons why God's properties cannot be accidental or inessential. But even if He were everlasting, the intrinsic attributes of God need not change over time.¹²

By contrast, an *extrinsic property* is a property a thing has (at least in part) in virtue of the way things are, for example, proximity to Tony Blair, or namelessness. And as with intrinsic properties, distinctions can be drawn about the nature of extrinsic properties. There are, according to Hughes, two kinds of extrinsic properties: those that are *purely extrinsic* and those that are *impurely extrinsic*. A property is purely extrinsic if it divides some class of duplicates. For example, having a name. The name 'Tweedledum' divides the object Tweedledum from the class of things that are without a name. A property is impurely extrinsic if it divides some class of duplicates but includes, or excludes others: for example, 'being triangular or such that Wimbledon Common borders on Richmond Park'. This property is impurely extrinsic because it has both a purely intrinsic component (being triangular) and a purely extrinsic component (that Wimbledon Common borders on Richmond Park).

As we shall see, God, like all other existing things, has some extrinsic properties, which are accidental to Him. But He cannot have any properties that are both extrinsic and essential, which is why (3) has the qualifier 'accidental'.

Second, and following Edward Wierenga,¹³ we shall understand an *essential* property to mean a property which an object has in every possible world in which it exists, or just in case the object could not exist without having that property. Clearly, some properties are only *trivially essential*, since everything has them essentially. Among this group of properties are 'being red or not being red', or 'being extended in space or not being extended in space'. This subgroup of essential properties need not detain us. What we shall be concerned with are non-trivial essential properties. Such properties are not universal, but are essential to a particular thing, or individual. In particular, we shall be concerned with those essential properties that pick out an individual essence. An individual essence is itself a property, which a particular thing or individual has, but no other thing or individual may have.¹⁴ So, Tony Blair is essentially human; his cat is not. But nor can any other human be essentially Tony Blair (nor, for that matter, accidentally Tony Blair either). Only Tony Blair has those properties that pick out the individual essence, 'Tony Blair' as opposed to, for example, the individual essence, 'John Prescott'. That is, this is more than species-specific, it is object-specific. By

contrast, accidental properties are those that an individual has, but does not have essentially. An example might be ‘having blonde hair’. It is not essential to a person that their hair is one colour rather than another, otherwise each time Madonna dyes her hair, she loses one essential property (which means ceasing to be Madonna) and gains another, which is absurd.

What (1) seeks to safeguard is precisely that God can only have particular, intrinsic essential properties. I say properties, but given this understanding of individual essences, coupled with a doctrine of the unity of the divine nature, if God is in some weak sense simple, and has an individual essence, then God can only have (at most) one property: His essence. If we take a strong simplicity doctrine, then any talk of an individual essence must be laid to one side, since on the traditional construal of that doctrine, God has essentially no properties whatsoever.¹⁵ On the weak view of simplicity (1) should be altered to something like,

- (1′) God has (at most) only one intrinsic essential property, His intrinsic individual essence which is essential to God, and which no other thing can have.

On a strong view of simplicity, (1) would have to be significantly rewritten to read as,

- (1″) God has no intrinsic properties whatsoever, essential or accidental, because any attribution of properties presupposes composition in God.

We shall see that on one recent reading of this strong take on simplicity (that of Katherin Rogers), this can be made intelligible only if God is one single act.

It is precisely (1′), or something like it, that is at issue. So, for the purpose of the argument, we shall continue to speak of (1), although only as an approximation to the truth of the matter (if (1′), (1″) or something like them is the truth of the matter). Examples of (1) might include,

- (4) God is pure being,
(5) God is good,

and

- (6) God is love.

Typically, in the tradition of classical theism, God has been seen as essentially and maximally good and benevolent, and at least in the medieval tradition of perfect-being theology [hereafter, PBT], as pure being too.¹⁶

Examples of (3) might include,

- (7) God is mentioned in this sentence.
(8) God spoke to Moses,

and

(9) (?) God created the heavens and the earth.¹⁷

As has already been alluded to, no being whatsoever can be exempted from having extrinsic properties. But this does not compromise divine simplicity, since any such properties are ‘merely Cambridge’ rather than intrinsic, ‘real’, or ‘substantive’.¹⁸ That is, all extrinsic properties, being merely Cambridge properties, do not refer to, or imply, a genuine change in the essence of God (of who He is). The only change they do refer to is relational. We may explain such a merely Cambridge change as follows: if an extrinsic predicate is true of a particular object x at time t_1 , but not extrinsically true of x at a later time, t_2 , then x has undergone a merely Cambridge change,¹⁹ such as is expressed by the sentence,

(C) My brother has grown taller than me; I am now shorter than him.

Clearly, no real change has occurred in me that is *intrinsic*, whether *accidental* or *essential*, (I am still the same height I was before my brother began his growth spurt). However, the change in my brother’s size does have the effect of changing my relation to him. That is, it effects a purely *extrinsic* change in the relation between us that is merely *accidental* in nature. Whereas before his growth spurt I was taller than he was, now I am shorter. Similarly with (7) in relation to God. The fact that (7) has now been written down, and that (7) mentions God, makes no difference whatsoever to the essence of who God is. It merely involves the merely Cambridge change that God is now the subject of one more sentence than He was a moment before.

Nor does it appear that God could have any extrinsic *monadic* properties, if extrinsic properties, being mere Cambridge properties, are by their very nature, relational. This is because monadic properties are properties that belong to their possessor in virtue of what it is, not in virtue of any relation that thing might have to any other actual thing. Hence, it would appear that the only monadic properties the divine nature may have are intrinsic and (given (1) and (2) above), essential.²⁰ To illustrate this point, let us assume, for the sake of argument, that God has numerous extrinsic properties. Now, all extrinsic properties that God has involve relations (to other things outside Himself). But in addition – and this is an important addition – these relations do not involve any real change in God himself. And it is this addition that the qualifier ‘accidental’ reinforces, in (3).

So, if God speaks to Moses then that extrinsic property, being accidental (such communication making no difference to the essence of God) involves a relation between God and Moses (as per (8)). Consequently, it is not, and cannot be a property that is monadic, because God does not possess it merely in virtue of what He is, but in virtue of a relation He has to Moses at that particular time. Hence, the change that this relation entails, being a merely Cambridge change, does not involve any *real* change in God Himself.

The status and nature of properties in Edwards's thought

Edwards's peculiar approach to divine simplicity is partly due to his idealism,²¹ and partly due to his idiosyncratic way of individuating the divine persons of the Trinity by subsuming some of the divine perfections under individual persons of the Trinity, whilst leaving other perfections as part of the divine essence.²² This important innovation in his doctrine of the Trinity involves a distinction between what Edwards calls 'real' attributes and 'modes or relations of existence'. Real attributes are those that pick out an essential aspect of one of the persons of the Trinity. For example, the Son is identified with God's understanding, because he is the *logos*; the Spirit is identified with God's love as the *vinculum caritatis*; the Father with unoriginated being.²³ By contrast, 'relations of existence' are common to all the persons of the Trinity, and remain in the divine essence, such as immutability and power. Nevertheless, Edwards is concerned to reiterate the essential unity of God, despite this distinctive approach to individuating the persons.²⁴

This Edwardsian account of property attribution in his discussion of the Trinity raises important questions about the status and nature of properties in Edwards's philosophical theology, an issue crucial in understanding his view of simplicity. The problem is that the status of properties is ambiguous in Edwards's thinking. He writes as if properties can be predicated of God (both of the essence and persons of the Trinity), such as omniscience and power. But in other places he says that God is an act. And if He is essentially an act rather than a being who acts (and does other things beside), then it is difficult to see what purchase properties would have in the divine nature.²⁵

If Edwards does mean to say that God has properties or that properties can be predicated of God, this raises what we shall call the 'Plantinga problem' for divine simplicity: if God is not a certain group of properties, or a substratum which exemplifies a certain group of properties, but is Himself simple in essence, then God still appears to exemplify at least one property, His simplicity. This is extremely problematic.²⁶ However, if he maintains that God is an act, then Plantinga's problem does not arise because then the language of properties does not capture characteristics of the divine nature in a univocal way. (Indeed, if Edwards endorses a version of (1''), properties have no true purchase in the divine being.)

Consider, for example, Edwards comments in *ET*, 118, 'The Holy Spirit is the deity subsisting in act, or the divine essence flowing out and breathed forth in God's infinite love to and delight in Himself.' This is developed in *Miscellany* 94:

It appears by the holy scriptures, that the Holy Spirit is the perfect act of God ... because from eternity there was no other act in God but thus acting with respect to himself, and delighting perfectly and infinitely in himself ... for the object of God's perfect act must necessarily be himself, because there is no other.²⁷

From these two citations it is clear that,

- (a) The Holy Spirit is an act.
- (b) This act is (at least part of (?)) the divine essence.
- (c) This act is God's infinite delight in Himself.
- (d) There is no other act in God.

The parenthetical clause in (b) serves to illustrate the ambiguous way in which Edwards frames what he says in these and other, similar, passages. If he endorses some strong version of divine simplicity, and if God is essentially an act, then He is wholly and simply an act, and cannot be merely partially an act. The divine nature cannot be divided into compartments, one of which is an act, and another of which is not (perhaps a part of God which is inactive, or potential, or dispositional). And it would be simplest to understand Edwards as endorsing this idea of God as essentially an act expressed in the person of the Holy Spirit in divine self-love, (if He is an act at all).

But if so, then how does this square with the language of properties? We have already had cause to note Katherin Rogers's comments on PBT, and her understanding of God in terms of being an act rather than as having or exemplifying properties.²⁸ Her point is that one way to avoid the difficulties that arise with properties in divine simplicity is to deny that properties have any metaphysical purchase in God, because God is pure act.

As Rogers goes on to point out, the difference between act and property is that acts are things a person does, whilst properties are things a person has. For instance, Trevor is writing out a form at the police station (an act). But Trevor has the ability to write because he has the property of being literate. Rogers claims that, 'any creaturely action is the manifestation of some property, or, as Aquinas would put it, the actualization of some potential. The point is that this is precisely the difference between God and creatures. God does not have any unactualized potentials'.²⁹ That is, if God is a perfect act, then there is nothing potential in God. There are no things that He *will* do, but *is not actually doing* at present. Nor can there be things He *has done*, or *might do*. If God is a perfect act, then all that He does is the perfect actualization of all that He is.

On this reading of PBT, if God is pure act, He cannot be said to possess properties (at least, not in any straightforward, cataphatic fashion). The reason being that properties capture the potentialities an object has. Actions a person does are, by contrast, the actualization of a particular potentiality. For instance, Trevor may have the potentiality to fill in the form at the police station because he possesses the property of being literate. But this property and its concomitant disposition would be worthless unless Trevor acted upon it. If Trevor claimed to be literate but refused to ever write anything, then his claim might reasonably be taken to be disingenuous; his unwillingness to ever provide evidence for his claim would tend to suggest that he is not literate after all. At the very least, he would have an unrealized disposition and a property he never actualized. But on this view, God

cannot have any such potentialities, actualized or unactualized. If He is pure act, then He has no potential to act upon, nor dispositions to realize, since He is completely, timelessly realized being. Hence properties do not have any purchase in this conception of God.

This presents issues for an account of counterfactuals. For sentences that speak of God's past, future, or possible acts cannot have any meaning beyond the fact that God, as pure, timeless act, is always doing the acts that He performs, though they may only occur in time at a particular index. More precisely, God is a single act that has numerous temporal effects at different indexes.

What is more, not only does this reading of the being of God go against the grain of the majority of contemporary thinking on the subject of properties (*pace* Plantinga *et al.*), it is highly counter-intuitive. For instance, how can God be a person, if He is an act? When Trevor fills in the form at the police station, he is engaged in the act of writing, but that does not mean that Trevor is himself an act. Yet Rogers and defenders of the PBT (or those within that tradition who would side with Rogers), seem to be engaged in saying something all too like this with respect to God. He not only acts perfectly, He is a perfect act.

Rogers's response to this line of attack is to call upon David Hume. Hume famously maintained that all we can experience of ourselves is our own experiencing.³⁰ Trevor sees the policeman who gives him the form to fill in, he perceives the boxes he has to tick on the form, he thinks about how to compose the lines he has to write, and he feels self-conscious as the policeman watches him. But that is all Trevor can experience of himself; his own experiences, or sense data. Rogers claims that whether one is willing to grant that such experiences are actions or not, they are at least 'much more like things we do than properties we have'.³¹ We all hypothesize that underlying my immediate experiences there is something unifying these into one individual, though we cannot get at that individual beyond our immediate experiences. Rogers thinks that, in order to make the traditional doctrine of simplicity somewhat more comprehensible, it is only necessary to show that in human experience there is some analogue for a person who is an act, '[s]ince what we perceive of ourselves is act, or at least active, the analogy is not hard to find'.³²

The application to Edwards at this point should be obvious: if God is essentially an act, and if the Holy Spirit is the act of love between Father and Son, which is the only perfect expression of love that God can manifest (since nothing else can be a fitting object for the perfect and infinite expression of his love), then in some sense, God seems to be essentially an act.

But, to return to a previous question, if He is an act, then what of properties? It would appear that if this line of enquiry holds, Edwards's use of the language of properties is disingenuous, or at least, only approximately, or analogously true of God (*viz.* (1') or (1'')). If properties pick out potentialities and dispositions an object has, and if God is an act, then, strictly speaking, properties have no application to

Him, since He has no potentialities. This would mean that Edwards endorses (1'') or something like it.

What this means for the divine attributes can be explained with reference to one of the traditional theistic attributes. For example, God cannot be omnipotent (however that is construed), because it is not the case that God has the ability, power, property or whatever to actualize or act or bring about one particular state of affairs (or whatever) over another, possible state. For if God were really said to have such a property, this seems to imply a potentiality in God to be omnipotent, which defenders of God as pure act cannot countenance. Perhaps the best approximation that can be made here with respect to those who side with Rogers is to say that God *is power*, an approximation that Edwards seems close to endorsing at one point.³³ But this should not be taken as a quality of God that is separable from God as act. It is only a way of describing that act. Thus, Edwards's account of God as pure actuality appears to militate against the ontological reality of properties in the divine nature. Although he still uses the language of properties – perhaps, as elsewhere in his work, so as to speak with the vulgar, whilst thinking with the learned³⁴ – his defence of divine pure actuality leads him to espouse something like (1'').

A second problem with properties in Edwards's thought is whether he thinks of them in terms of bundles, or as pertaining to a bare particular or substratum. What little Edwards does say on this subject has to be pieced together from various references scattered throughout his *corpus*. Hence, in the short *Miscellany* 267 he makes reference to this issue in the context of talking about proving the existence of God. He thinks that the existence of new thoughts is a proof of God's existence, because as with all other things, each new thought requires a cause. Previous thoughts cannot be the cause of a present thought, because previous thoughts have ceased to exist; they can have no causal power in the present. But,

If we say 'tis the substance of the soul (if we mean that there is some substance besides that thought, that brings that thought forth), if it be God, I acknowledge; but if there be meant something else that has no properties, it seems to me absurd. If the removal of all properties, such as extendedness, solidity, thought, etc. leaves nothing, it seems to me that no substance is anything but them; for if there be anything besides, there might remain something when these are removed.³⁵

This is a rather slippery passage. However, a close reading of the whole seems to lead to the conclusion that Edwards is endorsing a bundle view of properties. That is, there are no substrata ('substances') that have properties or attributes, which underlie such properties, and which exemplify them but are themselves undetectable. Rather, there are properties and that is all. And where bundle theorists have struggled to explain what it is that provides the 'glue' that holds all these properties together in one recognizable whole object (an apple say, or an angel), Edwards is happy to admit that all these things are held together merely by the mind of God. If it is asked what holds together the different properties that are predicated of

God, the answer is surely: God is essentially simple, He has no parts or properties which require any 'glue', whatever such a relation is called (variously co-actuality, collocation, consubstantiation, and so on).

In this, Edwards stands with Hume and Berkeley over and against Locke, who presumed there was a substratum, although he had no idea what that might be.³⁶ Edwards has no need of the Lockean hypothesis because of his commitment to idealism: God holds the properties of all things together in His mind. There is nothing that keeps an apple round, green, sweet, and delicious apart from God's immediate action on the apple in willing it to be. And the apple is no more than the bundle of properties that make it up. It exists as it does, as a particular bundle of property-tokens that exemplify 'appleness' because God continues to will these properties in that conjunction.

Edwards's early notes on idealism support this view of properties. In several places in his early work, he confirmed that the common notion that solidity provided some kind of bare substratum to which properties refer, is false. The only thing, which acts as a kind of substratum as far as the young Edwards is concerned, is God himself. He is the 'glue' that holds bundles of properties, including solidity (which is itself a chimera) together, since He is the only real substance. This has to be the case for Edwards because, given his idealism, the only real substances are ideal, or spiritual, and, 'speaking most strictly, there is no proper substance but God himself ... how truly, then, is he said to be *ens entium*'.³⁷

This need not mean that God Himself is just a bundle of properties. But, for Edwards, as for other idealists of a similar stripe, it does mean that God is a mind, or perhaps better, a mind which is an act. A comparison with Berkeley makes this clearer. Berkeley held to a bundle theory with regard to matters of sense perception of physical objects, but maintained that there were substrata with respect to minds that held all such sense data together. Thus in *Principles of Human Knowledge*, paragraphs 1 and 2 respectively, he says,

It is evident to anyone who takes a survey of the objects of human knowledge, that they are either ideas actually imprinted on the senses, or else such as are perceived by attending to the passions and operations of the mind, or lastly ideas formed by the help of memory and imagination.

And,

... besides all that endless variety of ideas ... there is likewise something which knows or perceives them and exercises divers operations, as willing, imagining, remembering about them. This perceiving, active being is what I call mind, spirit, soul or my self. By which words I do not denote any one of my ideas, but a thing entirely distinct from them.³⁸

Edwards did believe that God stood in for substrata, as the only real substance. But unlike Berkeley, it is not clear that Edwards believed that the divine mind (or any other mind, for that matter) was a substratum, or bare particular. All that can be

said with confidence of Edwards's view is that God is differentiated from other bundles of properties that make up mundane objects by virtue of the fact that He alone is an underived, eternal mind, which is simple.³⁹

How simple is Edwards's God?

The central question that is generated by the foregoing discussion is to what extent does Edwards retain a notion of divine simplicity in his doctrine of God? In order to answer this question we need to return to the nomenclature of properties with which this essay began. To what extent does Edwards's treatment of divinity match the traditional parameters set out earlier for a doctrine of simplicity?

Endorsing P1, P2, P4 and (1) to (3)

Edwards endorses P1 and P2. He may also have endorsed a form of P4. He does so in the case of P1 in a fairly traditional manner: God has no spatial parts, He has one essence, and He is timelessly eternal, such that He cannot have any temporal parts either.⁴⁰

With respect to P2, Edwards argues that God has no intrinsic accidental properties, and that the only 'real' distinctions in God are those that pertain to the persons of the Trinity.⁴¹ On P4, Edwards says that it is impossible that being should not be, and identifies God with being in general. Moreover, God comprehends all being in Himself in what sounds like a panentheistic fashion, and exists *a se*. If the reading of Edwards in light of Rogers's essay is correct, then he would also support the substantive point of P4, that the divine being is not different from his existence, and that God is pure being, that is, pure act.⁴²

From this and from what has been said about Edwards's views on properties, it should be clear that Edwards endorses (1) to (3) after a fashion. God has intrinsic essential properties as per (1) only in *an approximate sense*. It is in this circumscribed sense that we are to understand Edwards when he says that 'real' attributes are the only 'real' distinctions in God. Those properties that are merely 'modes and relations' are also intrinsic and essential, but they do not pick out 'real' attributes in God, where such real attributes are synonymous with the persons of the Trinity, not the essence of the Godhead.

This means that, as per (2) and P2, God has no intrinsic accidental properties. Taken together, these claims mean that for Edwards, God has the properties He does in virtue of the way He is (as per Hughes's distinctions), and there are no possible worlds in which God could exist without these properties obtaining.

Moreover, the properties this refers to are not merely trivially essential like 'being red or not being red'. The properties concerning God's nature are properties that pick out an individual divine essence. As already pointed out, Wierenga explains that such individual essences are themselves properties which a particular individual alone exemplifies. However, if the tentative reading of Edwards's

doctrine in the light of Rogers on PBT and the divine nature being pure act is correct, God could not be said to have an individual essence in the sense Wierenga requires, since God could have no properties whatsoever to be strongly simple. Talk of an individual essence, like talk of divine attributes and properties, would be an approximation to the truth only. Strictly speaking, as pure act, God has no properties, as per (1'). It is this proposition, and not (1), that Edwards actually believes reflects the ontological truth of the matter. Such a reading of Edwards requires that the divine mind is not a bundle of properties, but is a substratum of some kind. However, it is not entirely clear that this was Edwards's view. All that can be said is that Edwards believed God to be a mind and an act. Whether minds can stand in the place of substrata, and whether the deity can be both an mind and an act at one and the same time, are vexed questions that are outside the bounds of the present discussion.⁴³ As far as Edwards (and perhaps, on the latter point at least, the PBT) was concerned, they could.

Furthermore, given Edwards's understanding of P₁, (2) obtains. That is, where God is a timeless immutable being, there can be no possibility of God having intrinsic accidental properties, since such properties would necessitate change in God that was not merely Cambridge. On the question of merely Cambridge changes as per (3), Edwards says nothing. However, it is fair to extrapolate from what he does say that Edwards would not have deviated from this principle, and that nothing he does say regarding 'real' and 'relational' properties in any way precludes him from affirming the traditional view with regard to (3). Nor does the distinction he draws between 'real' and 'relational' properties mean that God has impurely extrinsic properties as per Hughes. The intrinsic properties that are predicated of God cannot have an extrinsic component as well as an intrinsic one: they are purely intrinsic. Relations of existence are still properties that pertain to the divine essence; they do not have extrinsic components, although at first glance and given the language Edwards uses, one might be forgiven for thinking that they did.⁴⁴

Problems with P3

P₃ articulates perhaps the most problematic metaphysical claims of the simplicity tradition. These are that there are no distinctions between one essential characteristic and another in God's being; that there is a relation of identity (or something very similar) at work between different essential attributes in the divine nature; and that God is an absolute unity understood in strong simplicity terms. P₃ expresses the problem that essential properties being distinct from God entails.

Many of the problems associated with divine simplicity in the recent literature have to do with how P₃ is tackled. This in turn depends upon different views on the nature of properties and their metaphysical neighbours. It should be clear from what has been said thus far, that the approach of most contemporary analytic philosophers does not accord with how Edwards tackles this issue. What he has to

say sounds much more like the reading of the tradition made recently by Katherin Rogers.

Take a model of strong simplicity, for example. On one such picture, God may have many different properties attributed to Him, but all of them fail to actually latch onto the nature of God. Instead, they are merely faltering attempts to express different facets of the one simple essence. Peter Geach explains with respect to Aquinas' doctrine,

‘The square of –’ and ‘the double of –’ signify two quite different functions, but for the argument 2 these two functions both take the number 4 as their value. Similarly, ‘the wisdom of –’ and ‘the power of –’ signify different forms, but the individualizations of these forms in God’s case are not distinct from one another; nor is either distinct from God, just as the number 1 is in no way distinct from its own square.⁴⁵

A similar point could be made in more Fregeian language, regarding the distinction between sense and reference. Frege, as is well known, used the example of the morning star and the evening star. Both have different senses (and to the ancients, were different objects altogether), but actually both have the same reference: the planet Venus, at different times of the day. The same is true of God. Attributes like omnipotence or omnibenevolence have the same reference, because both signify one thing: God Himself. But they have different senses; one is not synonymous with the other.⁴⁶

Rogers is more concerned to establish that God is an act, but her conception of the deity can be read alongside those of Geach and Davies. As we have seen, she maintains that if God is seen as pure act, then properties cannot, strictly speaking, do anything more than capture some aspect of the one, simple, divine essence. To use an analogy: if I were to speak of someone who has brown wavy hair, a rictus-like grin and is prime minister of Great Britain in 2001, I would be understood to be speaking about Tony Blair. None of the properties used to describe the prime minister exhaust who he is; each pick out some characteristic of the whole person. Similarly with God’s attributes. The crucial (and controversial) difference is that God does not have a set of properties that refer to Him (given (1’)). All His properties, as per P3 are synonymous with His essence.

Edwards seems to hold a similar view to this with respect to the Trinity. The persons of the Father, Son, and Spirit have particular ‘properties’ attributed to them, but in reality God is one act in essence, and three persons in a perfect relation exemplifying excellency. Although the (‘real’) perfections of the deity are subsumed under the persons of the immanent Trinity, this does not mean that the different persons are merely loosely associated in some kind of federal union, whilst retaining domain over their distinctive perfections. The conjunction of Edwards’s later work on the Trinity with his early idealism, and in particular, his insistence on divine excellency, mean that the Father’s knowing of Himself is the Son and the Father and Son’s love for each other is the Holy Spirit. This sounds

rather like the Fregeian notion that the ‘real’ attributes and distinctions in God (viz. the three persons of the Godhead) have the same referent, but different senses.⁴⁷

He also seems to say that mundane objects are bundles of ‘properties’ held together in the mind of God. I have suggested that Edwards might hold as a corollary to this a position that God’s essence, unlike mundane objects, is (very loosely) a ‘substratum’. It is a substratum *only* in the sense of an object – here read mind – that is undetectable, but undergirds property attribution. This divine mind is an act that does not exemplify properties as such (*qua* Rogers), but in an approximate fashion exhibits characteristics that are expressed in terms of property bundles like mundane objects. Of course, even this is strictly speaking, false, since God has no characteristics; He is a single act with a simple essence that has numerous indexical effects, and is (vulgarly) described by different properties that have different senses, but one reference.

We are now in a position to sum up our findings: God is pure act, strictly speaking without properties, but to whom we attribute properties (in a proximate way). These ‘properties’ attempt to capture some aspect of either (a) ‘real’ attributes/distinctions in God, with respect to the immanent Trinity, or (b) ‘relations of existence’ in God’s essence. Moreover, these ‘properties’ have different senses (particularly the ‘real’ properties), but refer to the same perfect being: God. Thus P₃ as it stands cannot be affirmed on Edwards’s metaphysics. But a weak version of P₃ can be affirmed, which we might characterize as P₃’ in the following way:

P₃’ It is impossible for there to be a fundamental metaphysical distinction between one essential characteristic and another in God’s being, since, as pure act, God has no such fundamental distinctions. Nevertheless, since proximate language about God is unavoidable in order to speak meaningfully about the divine nature, we may, to speak cataphatically⁴⁸ (with the vulgar), say that although the different essential characteristics *refer* to the same divine being, they have different (linguistic) *senses* such that different essential characteristics are synonymous with the same divine being, but do not entail one another.

This reading of Edwards presumes that (1’’) is a more basic constituent of his theistic metaphysics than P₃, such that the amendment to P₃ in P₃’ should be read in the light of Edwards’s view expressed in (1’’) and not vice versa. Unfortunately, the resulting amendment is rather awkward.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, it is clear that Edwards does maintain a peculiar brand of divine simplicity, but not a straightforwardly traditional version of the

doctrine. The peculiarities associated with it are in large measure due to his idealism, and the resulting metaphysics of property attribution, as well as how he goes about individuating the divine persons, and reorganizing the divine perfections against the tradition.

Whether his ontology is sufficiently fine-grained enough to enable him to distinguish the persons of the Godhead, whilst retaining their essential simplicity, is a question that goes to the heart of the tradition of divine simplicity in general, and Edwards's doctrine in particular. (It also goes to the heart of the debate in the contemporary literature about conceptions of the divine nature, viz. actuality and property attribution.)

In fact, Edwards's metaphysical commitments, pursued in the belief that they shore up his doctrine of the Trinity, present him with several serious problems when it comes to his doctrine of divine simplicity. The first is this: the consequences of his partitioning of the divine attributes into 'real' and 'relational' means that the *opera extra sunt indivisa* principle embodied in P₃, which is a crucial constituent of any doctrine of divine simplicity, is jeopardized. Even the reformulation of this principle in line with Edwards's metaphysics in P₃' cannot avoid the impression that certain divine attributes appear to be the peculiar preserve of one or other divine person, rather than shared together in the divine life.⁴⁹

What is more, in individuating the Son and Spirit in terms of the *logos* and *agape*, and in relocating certain moral characteristics of the divine essence to these divine persons (wisdom and understanding to the Son; love and holiness to the Spirit), Edwards appears to give different divine persons different moral characters.

Finally, Edwards's account of God as pure act has considerable conceptual difficulties still to overcome. Rogers contemporary account of perfect-being theology may come to his aid in some respects, but more needs to be said by way of explaining how God can be an act without properties (strictly speaking). Unfortunately for contemporary philosophical theologians, Edwards does not provide such an explanation.⁵⁰

Notes

1. Examples include Alvin Plantinga's attack in *Does God Have a Nature?* (Milwaukee WI: Marquette University Press, 1980), Thomas V. Morris 'On God and Mann: a view of divine simplicity' reprinted in *Anselmian Explorations* (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987), and Christopher Hughes *On a Complex Theory of a Simple God* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1989).
2. This has been particularly the case in the journal articles on the subject. Thus, William E. Mann, in his initial response to Plantinga's critique of the doctrine, says that he is not, 'concerned to ask how the doctrine interacts with Trinitarian speculation. I will have my hands full as it is'. See his 'Divine simplicity', in *Religious Studies*, 18 (1982), 451. However, Christopher Hughes attempts just such a programme with regard to Aquinas' doctrines of simplicity and Trinity in *On a Complex Theory of a Simple God* as both a problem for theism *simpliciter*, and for Trinitarian faith in particular.

3. All references to the Yale edition of the Works of Jonathan Edwards (1957–) hereinafter follow the standard notation of *YE* followed by volume number, colon, and pagination. See *YE*8, 401–536 for *EC*, and *Treatise on Grace*, Paul Helm (ed.) (Cambridge: James Clark & Co., 1971), 99–131 for *ET*.
4. At present the *Miscellanies* are not all in the public domain. Yale University Press has published two volumes of the *Miscellanies* from a–832 in *YE*13 and *YE*18. We will refer to both these volumes in what follows.
5. Eleonore Stump ‘Dante’s hell, Aquinas’s moral theory, and the love of God’, *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 16 (1986), 181–198. Stump has a more recent and succinct treatment of some of the basic issues that she takes up in this article in ‘Simplicity’, in Philip L. Quinn and Charles Taliaferro (eds) *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 250–256.
6. Stump ‘Dante’s hell, Aquinas’s moral theory, and the love of God’, 185.
7. Katherin Rogers *Perfect Being Theology* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 27 ff.
8. This is an extremely problematic concept, but one defended unanimously in the tradition. One of the central difficulties that Hughes finds with the doctrine of divine simplicity is this distinction between God’s essence and His *esse* (existence) as found in Aquinas. See Hughes *On a Complex Theory of a Simple God*, 4–5. For present purposes, we shall leave this difficulty to one side, though it is a central problem in the doctrine under consideration. Instead, we shall concentrate on the concept of properties at issue, and relate that to Edwards’s doctrine of divine simplicity.
9. *Ibid.*, 107 ff.
10. David Lewis ‘Extrinsic properties’, *Philosophical Studies*, 44 (1983), 197–200, cited in Hughes *On a Complex Theory of a Simple God*, 107.
11. The fact that God’s intrinsic properties are essential need not entail that there is no time at which God’s intrinsic properties change. For God might everlastingly possess intrinsic property P in the actual world and yet never possess P in some other logically possible world, in which case His possession of P would be unchanging even though it was not essential. I am grateful to Professor William Wainwright for pointing this out to me.
12. This does depend on what is made of scriptural passages like Mark 15.34, where the cry of dereliction is sometimes taken to involve a passibility in God, which implies an intrinsic property that predicates change in the individual to which it refers.
13. See Edward Wierenga *The Nature of God* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), 11.
14. Leaving to one side the question of the identity of indiscernibles, and whether there are objects which buck this principle, as Swinburne claims there have to be, if there are objects that exemplify thisness. See Richard Swinburne *The Christian God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), ch. 2. Much here depends upon whether one is willing to accept that there are bare particulars, which exemplify properties, or whether individuals are merely made up of bundles of properties. Swinburne’s view depends on a version of the former, taking a notion of substance as a bare particular.
Modern critics of divine simplicity have charged it with reducing God to a property, whereas, it is claimed, for God to be a person, He must be a bare particular of sorts. For a discussion of these ideas, see Michael Loux *Metaphysics: A Contemporary Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1998), ch. 3.
15. There is a further possibility. An individual essence could pick out the divine nature in an approximate way. That is, it could be used to speak of the divine nature in a way approaching how things really are without actually capturing the reality of how things are. An example: for the purposes of most conversations it is appropriate to speak of Newtonian laws of gravity, or motion. In fact, Newtonian laws are only an approximation to the way things are, given what the theory of general relativity claims is the case.
16. Rogers argues this point in ‘The traditional doctrine of divine simplicity’, in *Religious Studies*, 32 (1996), 165–186. A similar argument is made by Stephen Holmes in ‘“Something much too plain to say”: towards a defence of the doctrine of divine simplicity’, in *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie*, 43 (2001), 137–154.
17. This is not a proposition that Edwards would have been able to affirm, since he believed that it is necessary that God created a world, and that it is necessary that God created this world. So, according to Edwards, (8) is deeply problematic because God’s creating this world appears to be an intrinsic, essential property. See William Wainwright, ‘Jonathan Edwards, William Rowe, and the necessity of creation’, in Jeff Jordan and Daniel Howard-Snyder (eds) *Faith, Freedom and Rationality* (Lanham MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1996), 126 ff. Edwards was apparently happy to concede that God can only act

- as He does, since He must act in accordance with His nature. Thus God's freedom is compatibilist. See *ibid.*, 127.
18. A point made by Stump in 'Simplicity', 250.
 19. See Tim Crane 'Cambridge change', in Ted Honderich (ed.) *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 115.
 20. Swinburne points this out in *The Christian God*, 154.
 21. This has to do with Edwards's principle that 'one alone cannot be excellent'. His ontology presumes that excellence is exemplified in a being's relations with other beings. The more symmetry, harmony, and beauty that results, the more excellent that being is. See YE6 for his early philosophical writings on this issue, particularly Wallace Anderson's editorial introduction, and the text of 'The mind'. See also Roland Delattre's study, *Beauty and Sensibility in the Thought of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1968).
 22. See *ET*, 118–119. There is not the space to develop Edwards's individuation of the Trinity here. For a treatment of these issues see my 'Jonathan Edwards on the Trinity and individuation', forthcoming.
 23. See *ET*, 118–119.
 24. See, for example, *Miscellany* 308 in YE13, 392. This sounds traditional in one respect. However, by carving up the traditional attributes of the Godhead into those pertaining to specific persons of the Trinity ('real' attributes), whilst retaining others as attributes of the essence of God ('modes' and 'relations') pertaining to all three persons of the Godhead, Edwards is making a considerable departure from the tradition. See my 'Jonathan Edwards on the Trinity and individuation' for further discussion of this.
 25. But if acts have properties, like graceful dancing and malicious talk, then, if God is pure act, does He not have (at least) one property, that of being 'pure' act or 'perfect' act, or whatever? If so, then the Plantinga problem is reinstated for the pure act version of simplicity. However, it is not clear that being 'pure' act is a true property in the same sense as 'graceful' dancing is. For 'property of' can be used simply as an equivalent to 'is true of' or 'is a truth about' and thus have no separate ontological or metaphysical significance, as when philosophers say that material objects are substances with properties, or are merely bundles of properties. Thus, the 'property' of being a pure act simply reduplicates God's pure actness: it repeats the point that this is a truth about God, telling us nothing about that fundamental feature of the divine being. By contrast, 'graceful' does tell us something about someone's dancing when that action is said to be (truly) graceful.
 26. One of the central criticisms raised by Plantinga regarding divine simplicity in *Does God Have a Nature?*
 27. YE13, 261.
 28. See Rogers 'The traditional doctrine of divine simplicity', sections 3 and 4 in what follows.
 29. *Ibid.*, 172.
 30. See Hume *A Treatise of Human Nature* I:IV:VI. There Hume claims that, 'For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch myself at any time without a perception, and never can observe any thing but the perception'; Selby-Bigge edn, 252.
 31. Rogers 'The traditional doctrine of divine simplicity', 173.
 32. *Ibid.*
 33. In *Miscellany* 94, he says, 'as to the power of God, power always consists in something – the power of the mind consists in its wisdom, the power of the body in plenty of animal spirits and toughness of limbs, etc. – and as it is distinct from those other things, 'tis only a relation of adequateness and sufficiency of the essence to everything. But if we distinguish it from relation, 'tis nothing else but the essence of God.'; YE13, 262. This seems to fit with what was noted earlier, regarding Edwards's belief in the necessity of creation, picked up by Wainwright in 'Jonathan Edwards, William Rowe, and the necessity of creation'. However, whether Edwards realized this or not, this is not an orthodox position. For even if there is no time at which God is not actualizing a potentiality which He actualizes at other time(s), thereby having no unrealized potentialities, it is nevertheless true that God could have created other worlds than the world He has in fact created. In this sense (*pace* Edwards), He has unrealized potentialities.
 34. Compare his careful ordinary language analysis at the beginning of YE1.

35. *YE*13, 373.
36. See John Locke *Essays*, II: XXIII: 6, 298 (Nidditch edn); Berkeley *Principles of Human Knowledge* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988), §1, 53; Hume, *Treatise* I: I: VI.
37. 'Of atoms', in *YE*6, 215. See also in the same volume, 'Things to be considered and written fully about', Long Series, No. 44, 238; and 'The Mind', No. 61 on 'Substance', 376 ff.
38. See Berkeley *Principles of Human Knowledge*, 53.
39. There are considerable problems with bundle theory that have led most recent philosophers to abandon it as unworkable. The most serious issue has to do with coherence of the identity of indiscernibles, which Edwards endorses in at least one form, in his individuation of the Son (See *ET*, 118–119). Although this is a unique case, and does not mean that Edwards endorsed the same principle indiscriminately, it does raise the problem that exists for bundle theorists. Edwards would not have been aware of these issues, and an extended treatment of them would take us outside the boundaries of the present discussion. Loux has a succinct rendition of the problems in *Metaphysics*, ch. 3.
40. See further to this, *Miscellanies* 679 and 308 on unity of divine essence; 96 on the Trinitarian qualification of the divine essence; and 238 on lack of parts or succession in the divine nature. For timeless eternity see *YE*1, 276.
41. *ET*, 118. In several places in his corpus, Edwards insists that the only 'real' distinctions in God are the three persons of the Godhead.
42. On the impossibility of there being no-being see *Miscellany* 650; *Miscellany* 697 states that God comprehends all being in himself and that he exists *a se*. For the detail on his claims regarding the necessity of being, see 'Of being' in *YE*6.
43. I take it that substrata are typically taken to have ideas, rather than to consist in an idea or ideas, since that would open a back door to a bundle theory. I also take it that ideas are mental acts, since they typically take time to formulate (sometimes very little time to be sure) and involve electrochemical changes in the brain. And duration and change are usually taken to be constituents of acts. The problems this raises for a timeless, immutable being should be obvious, and has been pointed out by Holmes, in "'Something much too plain to say": towards a defence of the doctrine of divine simplicity', 140. Whether Edwards was aware of the distinction between intentional states and their objects is an open question. Perhaps, along with other eighteenth-century empiricists, it did not occur to him to make such a distinction.
44. However, I do not presume to relate this distinction to the Incarnation, which is a more problematic issue in this regard, as Hughes points out in *On a Complex Theory of a Simple God*. It is on this question that impurely intrinsic properties seem irresistible.
45. Peter Geach, in Elizabeth Anscombe and Peter Geach *Three Philosophers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), 122.
46. This point derives from Brian Davies *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 69, and is taken from Gottlob Frege, 'On sense and meaning' in Brian McGuinness (ed.) *Collected Papers on Mathematics, Logic and Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 157 ff. This is perhaps a qualification of the traditional doctrine, if a constituent of it is that different attributes are one and the same. However, Davies thinks that a good case can be made for thinking that the traditional doctrine involves something like this kind of Fregeian distinction.
47. This is not strong enough for the doctrine as it is often construed. A traditional reading of simplicity often maintains that the different divine perfections must entail one another. However, tempting though it is to attribute this to Edwards, there is nothing in his writings that suggests this, and the distinctions he so carefully draws between 'real' and 'relational' attributes appears strong evidence for the view being advocated here.
48. That is, to say something positive, if not substantive about God, as opposed to apophatic, or negative.
49. It might be claimed that by drawing upon the notion of perichoresis, Edwards can retain an understanding of a (P₃) or (P₃') principle that overcomes this issue. That Edwards did endorse a doctrine of perichoresis is evident from *ET*, 120. But although he invokes perichoresis, he does not explain how this is compatible with his distinction between 'real' and 'relational' attributes. Nor does he attempt to explicate the relations that exist in the immanent Trinity, which make such a doctrine viable in light of his analysis of 'real' Trinitarian relations. For, presumably if a concrete particular P has an intrinsic essential attribute *x* and another concrete particular Q has another intrinsic essential attribute *y*, then it is difficult to see how P and Q can remain distinct individuals whilst sharing a

perichoretic relation such that what can be predicated of P (namely x) can also be predicated of Q and vice versa. If, as Peter van Inwagen has recently speculated, the persons of the Trinity may have certain intrinsic non-relational attributes not shared by the other divine persons (as Edwards's distinction between 'real' and 'relational' attributes surely attempts to provide in some fashion), then it is difficult to see how this can be made compatible with (a) perichoresis, and (b) divine simplicity, as understood in (P₃) and (P₃'). See Peter van Inwagen, 'And yet they are not three Gods but one God', in *idem God Knowledge and Mystery* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), 258–259.

50. My thanks to the two readers of this paper for their comments, and to Professors Peter Byrne and Paul Helm for their criticisms of an earlier draft of this paper.