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**Simply Providential: A Thomistic Response to Schmid’s Providential Collapse Argument against Classical Theism**

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**Abstract**

Classical theism is often said to suffer from the problem of modal collapse: if God is necessary and simple then all of his effects (creatures) are also necessary. Many classical theists have turned to extrinsic predication in response: God’s simple and necessary act is compatible with any number of possible effects or no effects, and is only said to be an act *of creating* in virtue of the existence of the universe itself. Leftow and Schmid criticize this solution for leading to “providential collapse”: God would not have control over which creation obtains if all his intrinsic features are compatible with any possible universe. Thomistic classical theism avoids both modal collapse and providential collapse by utilizing the metaphysics of relations. With no differences within his simple essence/act, God can relate himself differently to his possible effects, willing some and not willing others. These relations determine whether or not the effects will exist. Thomistic classical theism’s version of divine simplicity is not incompatible with God having a multiplicity of relations, for the three divine persons are distinct relations within God. Divine simplicity is only incompatible with a multiplicity of absolute items within God. Furthermore, not all differences of relation are grounded in the different absolute characteristics of their *relata*. Rather, sometimes differences of relation themselves ground differences in the absolute characteristics of their *relata*. God’s divine act is thus said to be an act of willing this creation rather than that in virtue of his chosen, contingent relation to possible creatures, rather than in virtue of the creatures themselves.

**Keywords** Divine simplicity, classical theism, modal collapse, providential collapse, Thomas Aquinas, Joseph Schmid

**Introduction**

*Classical theism* is a traditional position according to which God exists necessarily, is the creator of all existing things other than himself, is perfectly simple, immutable, omniscient, omnipotent, perfectly good, and exercises providential control over the created universe. The doctrine of divine simplicity, in particular, has given rise to much controversy of late. According to this doctrine, God has absolutely no parts, either physical or metaphysical. Everything in God *is* God. He is his justice, for example, and his mercy, and thus his mercy is his justice. This doctrine gives rise to the problem of *modal collapse*: if God is identical to his own action, and he is necessary, then his action is necessary as well. But if his action is necessary, and he is omnipotent, then it seems that everything caused by his action is also necessary. Since he is the cause of all existing things other than himself, then it seems that all things are necessary, and there is no contingency or freedom anywhere in the universe. (Leftow 2015, p. 47–48.) This is problematic in itself and also not acceptable to most classical theists.

A number of authors have responded to this modal collapse argument by claiming that God’s act is only one of creating in virtue of an extrinsic predication (Tomaszewski, 2019, 2023, Grant, 2012, Pruss, 2008.) It is possible for God to create a universe or not, or to create this universe or that, even though God’s act is absolutely necessary. Whether God’s act is one of creating or not depends on something outside God, namely, the universe, and the universe exists contingently. God’s one, necessary, identical act is compatible with any number of different universes as its effects, or even with no universe at all. The statement “God created this universe” is true in virtue of the combined existence of God and this universe. Thus God’s act of creating is contingent, even though it is identical to God who is necessary.[[1]](#footnote-2)

Joseph Schmid has moved the conversation forward by confirming the soundness of Tomaszewski’s response to the modal collapse argument, while at the same time showing that such a response gives rise to a new, related problem: providential collapse. Schmid develops a criticism of Leftow’s (2015, p. 52) in the following manner:

[Providential collapse] simply follows from the radical indeterministic causal link between God and God’s effect needed to avoid modal collapse arguments. Every fact solely about God is perfectly compatible with any creation whatsoever coming into being; there is no distinctive intentional act to bring about this particular creation. At the very least, this intuitively calls into question how God could be in control of whether this particular creation comes into being. Had any other of the infinite creations come about, nothing about God would have differed. And in that case, there is nothing we can cite on God’s end to explain why this particular creation came into being. And in that case, it’s hard to see how God can providentially control whether this particular creation (as opposed to the infinitely many others, or no creation at all) comes about. (Schmid, 2022a, p. 20, see also 2022b)

If God’s act of creating this universe *is* the act of creating this universe not intrinsically, but in virtue of the existence of precisely this universe, then it seems that God is not causing this universe to obtain *rather than* any other or none at all. For God to have providence over the universe, his choice must determine which universe obtains, but the extrinsic predication response to the modal collapse argument seems to make the determination go in the other direction: which universe obtains determines what God has done and which choice he has made. Certainly the universe would still depend causally on God, but he would not be in control of that dependency.

In this paper I will present a Thomistic response to Schmid’s providential collapse argument. I argue that predications about God’s choice of universe need not be extrinsic in the sense that the providential collapse argument requires.[[2]](#footnote-3) I will argue that God’s choice of this universe consists in his one necessary act together with a contingent relation to this universe. But that does not mean that the predication “God chooses to create this universe” is true in virtue of the obtaining of this universe.[[3]](#footnote-4) Rather, it is true in virtue of God’s one necessary act and its contingent relation to possible creatures. God himself contingently determines his choice prior (causally prior, not temporally prior) to the obtaining of this universe precisely by contingently determining his relation to this universe. In this way he has providential control over which universe obtains. I will show, furthermore, that such contingent relations do not require any composition or difference within God and are thus compatible with the doctrine of divine simplicity and with God’s necessary existence.

My response will require some substantive and controversial metaphysical commitments. My goal is not to provide a knock-down argument for the truth of the Thomistic position, but rather to show that the doctrine of divine simplicity together with the doctrine that God is a necessary being do not logically contradict divine providence. In other words, all three of these tenets are compatible. Insofar as one has independent reason to believe in divine simplicity, divine necessity, and divine providence one ought not to be dissuaded by the providential collapse argument. (Such independent reasons might include religious faith or an argument that all contingent beings must caused by a necessary being, and that a necessary being must be without composition, but I will not explore such an argument here.) It is sufficient for my purposes if the substantive metaphysical commitments are not implausible.

I will proceed as follows. I will first put the debate into a broader context: Christian classical theists are Trinitarians. Thomistic Aristotelians have reconciled Trinitarianism with the doctrine of divine simplicity by utilizing the metaphysics of relations, and this same metaphysics will provide me with the resource I need to respond to the providential collapse argument. I will then consider as an objection the fact that Aquinas maintains that God has no *real* relations to creatures, only “relations of reason” (Schmid, 2022b, p. 1430, 2022c, p. 576, Grant, 2012, p. 267). I will show that on St. Thomas’ view God can have relations to creatures established by his reason, not ours, and that these relations are closer to being real than they are usually taken to be. I will then defend the possibility of a simple God having different possible relations to creatures with no possible differences in himself by comparing this case to that of libertarian freedom in the human will. Finally, I will consider more closely those of Schmid’s arguments that are most relevant to the Thomistic position I espouse.

**Trinitarian Simplicity?**

As I have said, those classical theists who are Christians believe that the one God is three persons. These classical theists have held that a distinction of divine persons is compatible with absolute simplicity on God’s part. How so? Without precluding alternative solutions, Aquinas will serve as my representative of Christian classical theism; he is certainly classical and certainly Christian, and he has explicitly addressed the issue. Aquinas understands the doctrine of divine simplicity in the following manner:

Every plurality of things said absolutely is excluded from God because of his highest unity and simplicity, not, however, a plurality of relations. For relations are predicated of something in reference to another and thus they do not imply composition in that of which they are said, as Boethius teaches. (*ST* I, q. 30, a. 1, ad 3. All translations of Aquinas are my own.)

There is real distinction in God, not indeed according to something absolute—which [can only be] his essence and in which there is the highest unity and simplicity—but according to something relative. (*ST* I, q. 28, a. 3, c.)

There is a basic distinction between relations and absolute, non-relative entities. Divine simplicity requires that everything absolute in God is identical to him. There is no plurality or composition of absolute entities in God, such as substance and accident, matter and form, or essence and existence. But there *is* a plurality of relations in God; the doctrine of divine simplicity, as classically understood, is not meant to deny such a multiplicity. Indeed, Aquinas says that

A multiplicity of relations between one thing and another is not against the notion of that thing’s simplicity. Rather, the simpler a thing is the more relations belong to it. For the more simple something is the less its power is limited, and so its causality extends to more things. (*Disputed Questions on the Power of God*, q. 7, a. 8, c.)

Now as Aquinas understands them the three distinct divine persons (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) are *subsistent relations* and are thus not incompatible with divine simplicity. There are no absolute differences between the persons of the Trinity. They are not parts of the divine substance. Rather, the divine essence includes within it relations of paternity, sonship, and (spirated) procession, and these relations just are the three divine persons: “These three relations: paternity, filiation, and procession, are called *personal properties* as if constituting the persons. For paternity is the person of the Father, filiation is the person of the Son, and procession is the person of the Holy Spirit proceeding.” (*ST* I, q. 30, a. 2, ad 1.) The relations are not determined by the absolute characteristics of distinct *relata*. Rather, the relations themselves constitute the distinctions between the persons.

One cannot object that a multiplicity of real relations within God is contrary to the doctrine of divine simplicity, because Christian classical theism never meant the doctrine of divine simplicity to deny a multiplicity of relations in God in the first place; that is just not part of the doctrine. One can object, however, that it is incoherent to hold that there exists a real relation without a prior distinction between absolute ontological items. Are not relations determined by the absolute characteristics of distinct *relata*? Carbon dioxide has *more* oxygen atoms than carbon monoxide because carbon dioxide has two and carbon monoxide has one; Bob is *taller* than Tom because Bob is 5’11” and Tom is 5’9”.

But we have cases in the beings of our experience where relations are not entirely determined by their absolute *relata*, but rather at least partially determine the absolute characteristics of their *relata*. Take the example of spatial relationships. Prior to 20th century advances in science, it was plausible to maintain that the spatial relationship between two physical objects was determined by the absolute place of each one, as Isaac Newton held. But the theory of relativity overthrew that idea; there is no absolute place of any object. Rather, what obtains are space-time intervals that are invariant under transformations of reference frame. These spatio-temporal relationships seem fundamental, and in part determine the absolute characteristics of their *relata* by instantiating causal relationships (various forces) that bring about changes within the physical objects.

Here is another example. I will to eat a sandwich that doesn’t exist yet. It’s a new type of sandwich, never before made by anyone. I am in the relationship of freely-willing-it to this non-existent sandwich. Although the sandwich does not exist while my idea of it does, I nevertheless will *the sandwich* and not my idea of it. For I cannot eat my idea, and I will precisely to eat the object of my will-act. My relationship of willing to this sandwich causes my body to move about and make the sandwich, thus rendering the possible sandwich actual.[[4]](#footnote-5) The sandwich’s absolute existence is brought about and determined by my prior will-relationship to the sandwich;[[5]](#footnote-6) neither the sandwich’s actuality nor its possible characteristics determine my relationship to it. If the sandwich’s characteristics determined my will’s relationship to it, then my willing it would not be free. But by hypothesis it is freely willed.

It is thus possible for a relation to have characteristics of its own that do not depend on the absolute characteristics of its *relata*. And a relation can itself be the principle of a distinction, rather than depending on a prior absolute distinction. Thus there can be distinctions between the persons of the Trinity without there being any distinction of absolute parts or properties within the simple God.

**Providential Relations**

But if God can have multiple relations internally without sacrificing his simplicity, he can also have multiple relations *ad extra* without sacrificing his simplicity. In this way his providence over creatures can be maintained. He has the relation of knowing what they are to all *possible* creatures. Aquinas calls this “the knowledge of simple understanding.” On the other hand he has the relation of knowing any creature that is, was, or will be actual, precisely as actual at a specific time, and this relation is called the “knowledge of vision.” (*ST* I, q. 14, a. 9) But the latter knowledge-relation is naturally (not temporally) preceded by God’s relation of *willing* to give actual existence to that creature. (*ST* I, q. 14, a. 8). Conversely, he would know that a possible creature is not actual at any time in virtue of having the relation of *not willing* to create it.

These relations of God’s willing or not willing creatures are contingent and determine whether the creatures to which they relate become actual. In so doing they also determine whether God’s one, simple, and necessary act is an act of creating or not, and whether it is an act of creating this or of creating that. God’s relation of willing a creature is not determined by the joint existence of the creature and of God, but rather the existence of God plus his relation of willing the creature determine the actual existence of the creature.

But one may reasonably object that Aquinas’ understanding of Trinitarian relations cannot help with the providential collapse issue—at least not for Thomistic classical theists, and perhaps not for others either—because Aquinas holds that God has no *real* relations to creatures, only “relations of reason.” (Schmid, 2022b, p. 1430, 2022c, p. 576, Grant, 2012, p. 267.) The relations of the Trinity within God are real relations, but none of God’s external relations are real. Aquinas illustrates the concept of “relations of reason” with the examples of a thing’s being identical to itself insofar as it is thought of twice, and an external object’s relation of “being thought of by a person.” (Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 13, a. 7) These relations are not in the things themselves, but are established by how we think about them. If God’s relations to creatures are relations of reason, one may argue, then they must be posterior to creatures. In particular they must be posterior to the existence of rational creatures such as ourselves. They would not even exist at all if God created no universe or a universe without rational creatures. So it seems impossible for such relations to determine what kind of universe obtains, and providential collapse still looms.

But this objection misunderstands the Thomistic classical theistic position. Aquinas holds that God has some relations of reason to creatures that are established by *his reason, not by ours*. (*ST* I, q. 15, a. 2, ad 3 & ad 4.) He explains that they are not real relations because a real relation implies that the *relata* belong to a common genus and that the thing that has the relation is in some way dependent on that to which it is related for its being or well-being. (*Disputed Question on the Power of God*, q. 7, a. 10.) A real relation is also an accident[[6]](#footnote-7) inhering in the substance that is so related. (*Disputed Question on the Power of God*, q. 7, a. 9, c. & ad 7.) None of this is the case with God in reference to creatures. If he necessarily willed creatures, so that he could not be God without creating them, then he would have real relations to creatures. But God only contingently wills creatures. (*ST* I, q. 28, a. 1, ad 3, ad 1.) And if his perfection depended on or were increased by his willing of creatures, then he would have—as accidents inhering in him—real relations to creatures. But he is no better or worse for willing or not willing creatures. So his relations to them are not real relations in the technical sense. But this does not make his relations to creatures fictional. His will truly establishes such relations, and in so doing, brings some creatures into existence rather than others. (Such relations are called “relations of reason” because they are constituted either by the intellect or by the will, which Aquinas frequently calls the “rational appetite.” [*ST* I, q. 13, a. 7, c. & ad 3.])

I say that God’s relations to creatures “are not real relations in the technical sense” because I hold that God is truly related to creatures, independently of how we think about him. When speaking to those outside the Thomistic/scholastic tradition, I could call such relations “real relations,” nor would I be departing from Thomas’ position in doing so. When speaking to a Thomist or scholastic, however, I would not call God’s relations to creatures “real relations” because that is opposed to the terminology that developed within that tradition. When the historical Aquinas speaks of a “real relation” he means that the relation is like a thing (*res*), and thus an accident inhering in a substance or at least a natural feature of a being. This is not the case with God’s relations to creatures. But nothing substantive depends on calling God’s relation to creatures “real relations” or not, as long as one understands what is meant.

Everything substantive does depend, however, on whether God’s relations to creatures are accidents inhering in him. If they are, then they introduce composition in God and are incompatible with divine simplicity. If they are not merely invented by our intellects when we think about God, does Aquinas have any justification for claiming that God’s contingent relations are not accidents inhering in him? In response Aquinas can say that what needs justification is the claim that *any* relations are real, inhering accidents in the first place. Absolute accidents like quantity and quality are *in* things, while relations are *between* things. It seems that they cannot inhere in either thing individually, and collectively the *relata* are not a substance in which anything can inhere. Would not then all relations be relations of reason invented by our minds? Aquinas says that certain thinkers, the “Porretans,” actually held something like this. (*Disputed Questions on the Power of God*, q. 7, a. 8 and *ST* I, q. 28, a. 2.) He himself, however, defends real relations as accidents inhering in creatures by claiming that relations really perfect things. By relating in the right way to other things, a creature really has a goodness that is distinct from its absolute, intrinsic goodness. Thus a creature—even a non-rational one—really acquires something distinct from its substance when it acquires a relation to another creature. Thus some relations are real accidents inhering in creatures. (*Disputed Questions on the Power of God*, q. 7, a. 9.)

God, however, is not perfected or good insofar as he relates to creatures and so there is no reason to think of the relations between God and creatures as real accidents inhering in him. The relations in question between God and creatures are brought about by his reason and will; they are contingent rather than a natural feature of his being. The relations between the persons of the Trinity, however, are not relations between distinct beings. Rather, they are internal to the divine being. Nor are they contingently willed into existence, but are rather a natural feature of the divine being. Hence they are not relations of reason but real relations. Yet they are nothing absolute affixed to the divine essence. Hence they too are not accidents, and not inconsistent with divine simplicity.

It is important to note that God’s relations to creatures, which are not accidents inhering in him, are also not themselves quasi-creatures standing between God and his creatures. They are simply the way his non-composite essence relates to creatures. His essence is of such surpassing perfection that it is not restricted to relating to creatures in one way rather than another. He can determine for himself how he is related to them. Thus “relations of reason” allow a simple, perfectly necessary God who is identical with his own act to exercise providential control over contingent creatures.

**Differences of Relation without Differences in God**

Yet how can a simple being have different relationships to a particular thing—say the relationships of willing or not willing Fido the dog to exist—when those different relationships are not caused by differences in Fido or in God (but rather cause a difference in Fido)? I can relate to a sandwich in multiple ways; I might relate to it as to an object of desire or as an object of indifference, for example. To do so, however, I have to be different: in the one case there is a will-act and in the other the absence of that will-act. Would not God have to be different to relate to Fido in different ways? Would he not have to have the act of willing Fido to relate to him in such a way that he is created, and lack that same act to relate to him as a purely possible, non-created dog? And would that not imply composition in God between his necessary essence and contingent will-act?

I do not think that this is the case, and a comparison to libertarian free-will in humans can show why. Most classical theists are libertarians about human will, and I think even Aquinas is, although this is disputed. (Jensen, 2017, Gallagher, 1994, 1991, Hoffmann, 2007.) For the purposes of my argument, I will presume that Aquinas is a libertarian. If anyone not only rejects libertarian accounts of human will, but considers them incoherent, he will also regard my defense of a simple God’s providence as unsuccessful. But I am satisfied to show that *if* libertarian accounts of human free will are coherent at all, God’s providence is compatible with divine simplicity.

It is crucial for a libertarian account that the human will in a particular state is able both to choose a particular thing and not choose it. In the case in which it freely chooses it, it is no different prior (temporally or naturally) to choosing it than it would have been prior to not choosing it if it had not chosen it. It is only different after choosing it. This is just a way of stating the principle of alternative possibilities. The will is capable of relating itself to something in alternative ways: with no difference in its essence the will can relate to that thing as to an object of choice or not. So too, the simple God can relate differently to a possible creature with no difference in his essence.

Now in our case there are mediating links between our identical will and its different possible relations to an external object, namely various will-acts or the absence of any will-act. So in making different choices the will becomes different, not in its essence, but in its non-essential acts. One reason so many philosophers object to divine simplicity is that it is natural to think, by comparison, that God too must have different will-act accidents inhering in him if he is to relate differently to possible creatures. But it turns out that human libertarian will itself proves that this structure of an essential faculty with inhering act-accidents is not absolutely necessary, but rather a contingent feature of the human will.

To see this, note first that one must avoid generating an infinite regress in the process of willing things. According to the libertarian view, the human will is capable of having different and even opposite will-acts in the same situation. Must it will its will-acts? Must it have another will-act between itself and the will-act by which it relates to the external object? And then another will-act between itself and that prior will-act? The buck has got to stop somewhere: alternative realities of some kind issue directly from the free-will, and the will has control over which of those alternatives obtains, otherwise it is not free.

In human beings the will-faculty (or rather the whole person) is the cause of its internal will-act prior to being the cause of the external object willed.[[7]](#footnote-8) The will-faculty is *related* to the will-act as its determining efficient cause. Otherwise our will-acts would not be free but produced in us by an external efficient cause, or, alternatively, our will-acts would be entirely uncaused and not in our control. (Note that the relation to the internal will-act is distinct from the relation to the external object.) We thus here have a case in which an entirely identical entity—my will-faculty or even my whole self, with all my thoughts and inclinations, naturally prior to willing some object X—can relate itself differently to possible will-acts with no differences in itself and without gaining any intermediary absolute accident between it and that which it causes.[[8]](#footnote-9) I can relate myself to will-act X as its cause or as not its cause, and be entirely identical in either case.[[9]](#footnote-10)

If the human will can do this, there is no reason that God cannot relate himself *directly* to possible *external creatures* without any intermediary accident. He need have no contingent acts of will. The one necessary act that he is identical with can contingently relate itself to the dog Fido as willing to create or as not willing to create, without any difference or contingency in God’s act. We, on the other hand, only relate ourselves without intermediary to different *internal will-acts*, yet we too do so without any difference in our will-faculty.

Why should human will require internal will-act accidents as intermediaries between it and external objects, whereas God’s will does not? Because the human will-faculty is a kind of potency and when we will things that potency is actualized in a certain way. We are not infinite act. We at times lack the actuality required to bring about an external effect, and must first actualize an internal potency before we can actualize an external one. We must gain a will-act before moving our limbs and affecting external things; we must prepare ourselves to produce an external effect. But God is infinite act and cannot lack the actuality required to bring about an external effect. Thus in God’s case there is no need for a will-act distinct from his essence to serve as a mediating link between him and his relations to things outside him. He need not prepare himself to produce an external effect. He has no potential, but is pure act.

A comparison might be helpful here. Due to my limitations as a physical being, I cannot cause a pizza to bake in the oven without moving my limbs. I must actualize a potency in myself—in my limbs—before I can actualize an external potency in the pizza. Due to his unlimited perfection, however, God can miraculously bake a pizza without moving any limbs. Again, I cannot have different relations to the pizza—cannot will it or nill it—without gaining or losing intellect-acts and will-acts. But God is so excelling in perfection that he can have different relations to the pizza without gaining, losing, or changing any act of his intellect or will. It is thus in his power and control to conserve the pizza or annihilate it, to miraculously bake it or to let nature go its normal course, and none of this is incompatible with his simplicity and necessity.

**Analyzing Schmid’s Arguments**

Now that the Thomistic account has been clarified, I am in a position to respond more directly to Schmid’s arguments. He prepares the ground for his providential collapse argument by first arguing that classical theism suffers from “intentional collapse” because it must embrace the extrinsic predication thesis to avoid modal collapse. God is understood to be an intentional agent, who intends to do what he does. But this means that he contingently intends to create this universe rather than other universes that he could have intended. The extrinsic predication strategy must claim that God can only be said to intend this creation in virtue of this creation’s obtaining. Schmid then argues:

Intentional acts are by nature directed towards a specific target state. The driving force behind the intuition is that something about the *agent themself*—some “doing” of theirs, some activity on *their* end, not on the part of their *effects*—is by nature directed toward the specific effect in question. It is by dint of *this* that the agent can be meaningfully said to intentionally act—or so the intuitive thought goes. To say that the essential directedness toward a distinct target state simply consists in that target state *itself* coming about seems to quite literally change the subject—to change what is intuitively required to be the subject of the “essential directedness toward”—namely, the agent *themself*, or something about them—to some *other* subject—namely, the *effect itself* coming to be. Indeed, the coming-to-be of the effect itself is intuitively *posterior to* and *resultant from* the intentional directedness of the agent’s act and hence cannot be that *in virtue of which* the act is intentionally directed in the relevant manner. (2022a, p. 19)

Schmid is more or less right about this, but it does not generate a problem for the Thomistic position I have sketched above. For the predication “God intends to create this universe” is not extrinsic in the sense that it is true in virtue of the obtaining of this universe. God himself is directed towards the creation of *this* universe in virtue of a relation of reason, a relation established by *his* reason. The predication is not true simply in virtue of his necessary essence and the necessary act with which he is identical; it is not intrinsic in *that* sense. Rather, God determines how that perfectly necessary and simple act will *relate* to its possible effects. In that way his act becomes (in a non-temporal sense) directed to its specific result. The act need not be different in itself to relate itself differently to creatures, as I have shown above.

Schmid formally presents his providential collapse argument as follows:

13. If fixing all the facts about an agent and their act(s) is perfectly compatible with the obtaining of any possible effect of their act(s) among an arbitrarily large range of possible effects, then the agent is not in control over *which* effect of their act(s) obtains.

14. If DDS [i.e., the Doctrine of Divine Simplicity] is true, then fixing all the facts about God and his act is perfectly compatible with the obtaining of any possible divine effect among an arbitrarily large range of possible divine effects.

15. So, if DDS is true, God is *not* in control over which divine effect obtains. (13, 14)

16. But since God is provident, God *is* in control over which divine effect obtains.

17. So, DDS is false. (15, 16) (2022b, p. 1423)

My response is that one must clarify what one means in premises 13 & 14 by “fixing all the facts about an agent and their act(s).” Does this include the act’s relations to its (possible) effects? If so, do we include relations that are posterior to the absolute characteristics of their *relata*? If so, then premise 13 utilizes an impossible antecedent since a specific effect is presupposed by the relation and hence by the facts about the agent and his acts. In addition, premise 14 is false. Or does the phrase only include relations that are causally prior to some characteristic of one of the *relata* (such as God’s relationship of willing towards a creature)? If so, then premise 13 is true. But in that case, premise 14 is false: the doctrine of divine simplicity does not imply that God’s act together with its relations to creatures are compatible with the obtaining of any possible effect. He is omnipotent, so that to which he relates in the relationship of choosing will in fact obtain. Alternatively—and this seems the most likely interpretation of Schmid’s intent—if the phrase “fixing all the facts about an agent and their act(s)” does not include any relations between that agent/act and its effect, then premise 13 is false. The divine agent can have control over which effect obtains in virtue not of his act but of its relations to its possible effects. On no interpretation, then, is Schmid’s argument valid.

In another passage, Schmid (2022b, p. 1425–31) clarifies that he is objecting not to the fact that the extrinsic predication defense of classical theism requires indeterminism in regards to God’s effects, but about the precise placement of the indeterminism. By libertarian lights, indeterminism upstream of an agent’s choices is not opposed to free intentional action or to the exercise of providential control, but indeterminism downstream of the agent’s choices is: if an agent’s choice is compatible with any number of relevantly different effects, then the agent is not free to bring a specific effect about. But “under classical theism (but *not* under non-classical theism and (typically) not in human free action), the indeterminism is located precisely in the control-diminishing locus: *downstream* of God’s act (and, indeed, donwstream of *everything* about God as he is in himself).” (Schmid, 2022b, p. 1427)

I think this objection is valid if predications such as “God chooses this universe” or “God wills this universe” are true in virtue of the obtaining of this universe, as many proponents of divine simplicity have implied. But in the Thomistic account I have presented above, the objection fails. There is no control-diminishing indeterminism downstream of God’s choice/will: once God decides that his one divine act relates in the willing-relationship to a certain possible creature then that creature must exist.

But Schmid further argues that many people have through that truly free—and, one should add, providential—action, as opposed to merely random action, involves acting on one of many possible *reasons* for action. And according to Schmid the doctrine of divine simplicity is incompatible with God’s having *many* possible reasons:

In keeping with this response, non-classical theisms can hold that there exists a multiplicity of reasons upon which God’s different intentional acts across worlds are dependent, such that different reasons factor differentially into the explanation of God’s choices across worlds. But the existence of such a multiplicity of reasons would plausibly entail that there are positive ontological items intrinsic to but numerically distinct from God, meaning that classical theists cannot avail themselves of this maneuver. Moreover, the proposal in question entails that God’s acts are dependent things—they are dependent on prior reasons. But God, under classical theism, is identical to God’s acts, and hence if God’s acts depend on something prior, God himself depends on something prior (thus violating divine aseity). (2022a, p. 20)

Schmid’s objection here seems to want it both ways: are God’s reasons intrinsic to him and distinct from each other, in violation of divine simplicity, or are they extrinsic and prior to him, in violation of divine aseity? The classical theist, of course, holds that God’s fundamental reason for creating anything is himself: his own goodness motivates his action. But, as Aquinas explains, God’s goodness is neither increased nor diminished no matter what he creates or does not create. Yet everything that he might create would participate in his goodness. Thus he has a reason to create anything good: it would extend the range of beings who actually participate in his goodness. But none of these reasons are compelling since his goodness is not lacking in any way if he does not create. (*ST* I, q. 19, a. 3.) God thus does have many different possible reasons to create different universes, but no overriding reason to act on this reason rather than that reason. Aquinas himself says that God has many different “divine ideas,” such as ideas of horses and humans. These ideas provide God with many reasons to create different things. But this is not opposed to his simplicity because these reasons are not absolute items *in* his intellect, but things known *by* his intellect. They are all grounded in the one divine essence/act: in the very act by which God knows himself he knows all the possible ways in which his goodness could be participated, and thus all of the possible reasons for him to create different things. The reason for each of these reasons is himself. The multiplicity is only on the side of the relations between himself and possible creatures. (*ST* I, q. 15, a. 2.)[[10]](#footnote-11)

As for God’s choices being dependent on something distinct from and prior to him if they depend on a reason, this does not follow. God himself constitutes the reason for his choice. His nature/goodness is the ultimate reason, and his nature includes within itself many possible ways of being participated and thus many different sub-reasons for creating, none of which, however, compel God’s choice. God can, of course, have creaturely effects as subordinate reasons for his actions. For example, God could will a miracle for the sake of increasing someone’s faith, which in turn is for the sake of bringing him to heaven and extending the degree to which creatures participate in God’s goodness. But this does not make God’s choice dependent on a creature. God chooses that the one creature (the miracle) depend for its goodness on the other creature (the witness’ faith), but God’s choice does not depend on either creature. God knows that these creatures and their relationship of dependency on one another would participate in his goodness, yet without increasing his goodness or the sum total of goodness overall (since there already is infinite goodness merely in virtue of God’s existing.) Thus God’s having many possible reasons for creating does not violate his aseity.

**Conclusion**

The doctrine of divine simplicity threatens a modal collapse, and attempts to respond to this threat have opened classical theism to the objection of providential collapse instead. By paying attention to the fact that Christian classical theists are Trinitarians, I have shown that classical theism can utilize a multiplicity of God’s *relations* to respond to this threat. Rather than always being determined by a pre-existing distinction between *relata*, relations can themselves establish a distinction or determine the character of a *relatum*. Thus God’s relation to a possible creature as contingently willing it can itself determine the existence of that creature. Although God’s relations to creatures are not “real” relations in a technical Thomistic sense, they are relations of God’s reason, not ours, and they are not fictional but produce real, extramental effects.

Furthermore, God does not need to be any different to have different relations to the same possible creature. Just as a human’s one will, with no difference in its essence, can relate in different ways to an object such as a possible pizza, so too God’s one essence, with no difference in the act with which his essence is identical, can relate in different ways to possible creatures. Due to its not fully actual nature, the human will gains or loses a will-act when it relates differently to its object, but God, due to his infinite perfection and pure actuality, does not need different will-acts to relate differently to possible creatures. Rather, he is perfectly simple and absolutely necessary, and can cause different creatures without any difference in himself. His different relations do correspond to differences in the possible creature (e.g., having actual existence or not having it), but the relations cause the difference in the possible creature, rather than being caused by it.[[11]](#footnote-12)

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1. I will avoid the use of the terminology of “possible worlds” when speaking about possibility and necessity. I think such language is potentially misleading and does not accurately reflect the structure of reality. For a criticism of such language see Oderberg (2007, p. 1–6.) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. If one uses David Lewis’ criterion for determining what is intrinsic vs. extrinsic, as Schmid and others in the conversation have done (Schmid, 2022a, p. 4, 2022b, p. 1414, Pawl and Grant, 2023, p. 144, Grant, 2012, p. 254), then God’s choice of this particular universe is indeed extrinsic. For Lewis states (1986, p. 61) that “we distinguish intrinsic properties, which things have in virtue of the way they themselves are, from extrinsic properties, which they have in virtue of their *relations* or lack of relations to other things.” (Emphasis added.) I hold that predications such as “God wills this universe to exist” are true in virtue of God’s relations to creatures. But these relations are not extrinsic to God in the sense that their character is determined by creatures outside God. Rather, God determines his relations to possible creatures, and thereby determines the creatures themselves. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. On the Thomistic view that I defend there is a difference here between the predications “God creates this universe” and “God chooses (or wills) to create this universe.” The former names an external action of God’s (a “transeunt” action in Thomistic terminology) while the latter names an internal action of his (an “immanent” action.) (Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* (hereafter *ST*) I, q. 14, prol.) The former is indeed a case of extrinsic predication in the sense proposed by Tomaszewski, Pruss, Grant, and others: it is true in virtue of both God and the universe. Such predications, even though their subject is an immutable God, can become true at a certain time. (Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 13, a. 7.) The latter predication is not extrinsic in that sense: it is true in virtue of God and his relation to creatures; it is not true in virtue of the creatures themselves. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Perhaps one should say that the desire as an *act* of will, rather than a *relation*,causes me to make the sandwich. However, the act of desire is an *intentional* act in the sense that its very existence involves being directed towards/related to the not yet existent sandwich. (Cp. Schmid, 2022b, p. 1430.) An intentional act such as knowing or willing something is intrinsically related to external objects; I do not characteristically know my knowledge but know things by means of my knowledge. My knowledge is the knowledge *of* X and my will-act is the willing *of* Y. It seems that such a relationship is at least partly constitutive of the desire-act and of its causing of the sandwich. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Precisely: by my relationship of willing-the-sandwich, a relation that exists when the sandwich does not. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. By “accident” Thomists and Aristotelians in general mean any attribute that a concrete thing (a “substance”) really has but that is not its essence or part of it. Some accidents are *essential* in that they *flow from* but are not part of a thing’s essence. These kinds of accidents are called “properties” in Thomistic vocabulary. Other accidents are accidental in that they are neither part of nor flow from a thing’s essence. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. This does not mean that the will-faculty wills the will-act first and then wills the external object, except perhaps in unusual circumstances. This would multiply will-acts *ad infinitum*. Rather, the will-faculty wills the external object just by causing (“eliciting”) one will-act. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Is the will-faculty’s relation to its internal will-act a real accident inhering in the will, and thus incompatible with simplicity? Only if this relation constitutes a goodness of the will distinct from the will’s essence and the will’s act. (See above, the section titled “Providential Relations.”) This is certainly not the case with God’s relation of will towards external creatures. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Or rather, I-minus-will-act-X can so relate myself without difference. Will-act-X is obviously different in the two cases and is a difference in me. But will-act X cannot be included in the cause of will-act X, because nothing causes itself. So the cause of will-act X is I-minus-will-act-X. And I-minus-will-act-X is entirely identical whether I relate myself to will-act X as its cause or as not its cause. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Schmid argues in this context that “surely *God himself* (under DDS) does not point towards and is not of himself directed towards or referred to something *ad extra*.” In a footnote to this statement he explains that “Aquinas, for instance, explicitly denies that the divine substance can be essentially referred to other things—cf. *Summa Contra Gentiles* II, ch. 12 and *De Potentia* Q7, A8.” (2022b, p. 1430.) These are texts in which Aquinas denies that God has real relations to creatures, claiming only that he has relations of reason to them. But as I have shown above, Schmid misunderstands Aquinas: some of these relations are relations *of God’s reason*. They are not relations that are only generated by our minds. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. I thank Michael Bolin and an anonymous reviewer for their helpful comments. This paper is much improved because of them. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)