

Defending Divine Simplicity

A Presentation and Defense of the Doctrine of Divine Simplicity

The doctrine of divine simplicity¹ has many detractors and defenders. This paper is adapted from the third chapter of my dissertation on divine simplicity and apologetics.² Chapters 1 and 2 presented an introduction to DDS, various critiques and defenses of it, and a survey of those who have noted its apologetic implications. *This chapter will present DDS in its fullness and will argue that DDS is consistent with Scripture and philosophically coherent.* Such a discussion is necessary to avoid any misunderstanding that the thesis of this project is merely a pragmatic one, as though DDS should be believed for purely practical reasons. Rather, this chapter will present the classic arguments for DDS to demonstrate that the doctrine itself is biblically faithful, historically orthodox, and logically coherent on its own terms and can serve a practical means without being merely a pragmatic doctrine.

Presuppositions in Developing a Doctrine of Divine Simplicity

Not all approaches to Scripture are equally valid. At times, what separates views concerning DDS is, in fact, one's approach to the study of theology. To that end, a brief word on the theological commitments and approach of this project is in order. First, this project takes as its starting assumption that the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are inspired by God and are alone the only infallible and inerrant authority for all matters of faith and practice. The basis for such a conclusion is the testimony of Scripture itself. The Scriptures claim to be the inspired Word of God in passages such as 1 Thessalonians 2:13, 2 Timothy 3:16-17, and 2 Peter 1:19-21. As a result, any articulation of a doctrine must be exegetically consistent with the totality of Scripture. While Scripture is not exhaustive in its theological scope, it is nonetheless the starting point and the final authority on all theology. No doctrine can be true that does not rest on the foundation of the Word of God.

Second, this project is committed to the confessional and historical development of theology and to doing theology with the history of the church. The truths of Scripture are eternal, but theology as a discipline is developmental as Christians throughout history have examined the text and applied it in the context of historical situations. Theology is done in concert with others who have come before and have

wrestled with the text in their historical contexts and have passed on their insights and wisdom.³ The historical confessions and creeds are guides to the study of Scripture and are warnings not to depart from "the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints" (Jude 1:3). To this end, this project will utilize the work of theologians of the past in formulating doctrine and will seek to walk within the rich tradition of Christian orthodoxy.

Finally, this project is committed to the use of philosophy as a ministerial tool of Scripture. While a doctrine must be driven exegetically, human conceptions and analytic tools are necessary in order to make sense of scriptural data.⁴ Without these tools, theology itself would not be possible, only restatement. The Church has recognized throughout history that theology consists of both the data of Scripture and its interpretation, as well as that which follows deductively from the implications of such data. On this basis, the Westminster Confession of Faith states:

The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men.⁵

To accept the logical implications of Scripture in developing theology is not to place logic above the Scriptures, but to employ logical laws of thought that flow from the mind of God Himself.⁶

A Summary of the Doctrine of Divine Simplicity

While there have been various models and emphases of simplicity throughout history,⁷ for the

³ Joel R. Beeke and Paul M. Smalley, *Reformed Systematic Theology: Revelation and God*, vol. 1 (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2019), 45-46.

⁴ Beeke and Smalley, *Reformed Systematic Theology*, 1:47.

⁵ John H. Leith, ed., *Creeds of the Churches: A Reader in Christian Doctrine from the Bible to the Present*, 3rd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1982), 195.

⁶ James Oliver Buswell, *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1962), 19-24.

⁷ Among others, Origen, Augustine, Anselm, Gregory of Nazianzus, Aquinas, and Duns Scotus have all argued for various models of simplicity. Each model has similarities and core ideas but different emphases and sometimes radically different understanding of key metaphysical questions. This project will be

¹ Hereafter, "DDS."

² Jeriah D. Shank, "A Simple Answer: Divine Simplicity and the Task of Christian Apologetics" (Dissertation, Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2024).

purposes of this dissertation, DDS will be defined as the doctrine that God is absolute unity. Deuteronomy 6:4 states, “Hear, Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one!” While this verse emphasizes the status of God as the only true God, His oneness is more than mere monotheism; it is oneness in the metaphysical sense.⁸ Joel R. Beeke and Paul M. Smalley summarize the doctrine well when they state, “God’s simplicity means that he has no parts, and his attributes and essence are all one in him.”⁹

Apophatically, DDS means that God lacks all physical and metaphysical composition. There are no distinctions in God between God and His essence, nature, or attributes. Augustine states clearly, “The nature of God is simple and immutable and undisturbed, nor is he himself one thing and what he is and has another thing.”¹⁰ Created things are composed of parts. For example, a tractor has various parts. To be a complete tractor requires a minimum number of parts and there is a succession and process by which these parts work. None of these parts are the entire tractor, but rather the tractor depends upon these parts. Further, new parts can be added to it to make it do new things, and without these new parts, it could not act in new ways.

However, while created things need multiple parts to exist and to do multiple things, God is simple. He does not rely on lesser parts to be what He is or to do what He does. He has no physical parts, metaphysical constructions, or succession of moments. In God, there is nothing but God, or, as James Dolezal states, “All that is in God is God.”¹¹ Jeffrey E. Brower expands upon this idea when he writes:

God is an absolutely simple being, completely devoid of any metaphysical complexity. On the standard understanding of this doctrine—as epitomized in the work of philosophers such as Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas—there are no distinctions to be drawn between God and his nature, goodness, power, or wisdom. On the contrary, God is identical with each of these things, along with anything else

operating in the Augustine/Anselm/Aquinas tradition. Chapter 4 of this dissertation will cover the history of the doctrine.

⁸ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:173.

⁹ Beeke and Smalley, *Reformed Systematic Theology*, 1:625.

¹⁰ Augustine, “On the Holy Trinity,” trans. Arthur West Haddan, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 3, 1 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2012), 1.5.

¹¹ Dolezal, *All That Is in God*, 41.

that can be predicated of him intrinsically.¹²

What does it mean to say that something or someone is “composed” of parts and what does it mean to say that God is not composed? That God is not physically composed is clear enough, but what does it mean to be metaphysically composed? Throughout history, the word “composition” has been used under a constituent ontology rather than a relational one.¹³ In constituent ontology, properties are thought to be parts of a thing that constitute what that thing is. In relational ontology, the properties of a thing are external abstract objects or concepts that a concrete, particular thing exemplifies. So, in constituent ontology, the redness of a car constitutes the essence of that car, while in relational ontology, a red car is red by exemplifying redness. This difference in ontology lies at the heart of much of the debate over DDS. This discrepancy is like operating on two different computer systems. Certain codes make no sense in one system, while in another system the codes work fine. Many DDS detractors criticize DDS while operating on a relational understanding of ontology and thus accuse DDS of being incoherent.¹⁴

To say, then, that God is not composed is to say that, in God, there is nothing but God’s essence. God does not add, participate in, or exemplify external properties. To be composed is to depend upon properties, concepts, or abstract objects to be what a thing is. Such composition would be disastrous. As Stephen Charnock points out, that which is composed is dependent upon its parts to be what it is.¹⁵ If God were composed of parts, He would be dependent upon these parts and, of necessity, caused to be by something else. By contrast, God is not defined by or dependent upon external properties. In God, there is no distinction between the nature, essence, or being of God and that which may be predicated of Him. As Dolezal writes, God is “not dependent on component parts that are ontologically more basic than the fullness of His being.”¹⁶

Given that DDS is a denial of composition, of what is God not composed? Throughout his

¹² Brower, “Simplicity and Aseity,” 105.

¹³ Doby, *Divine Simplicity: A Dogmatic Account*, 44-46.

¹⁴ For example, William Lane Craig, who argues for anti-realism, explicitly rejects a constituent ontology on the grounds that it leads to the so-called “bootstrapping problem” wherein God creates His own properties. See Craig, *God and Abstract Objects*, 485.

¹⁵ Stephen Charnock, *Discourses upon the Existence and Attributes of God*, 11th ed., vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993), 333.

¹⁶ Dolezal, *All That Is in God*, 42.

comments on simplicity in the *Summa Theologica*, Thomas Aquinas denies several variations of composition in God. Though these are apophatic denials, they lead to cataphatic affirmations. By presenting what God is not, Aquinas was able to describe what God is without denying the creator/creation distinction.

First, Aquinas argues, DDS denies any composition of actuality and potentiality in God.¹⁷ All things in creation have actuality (what they are) and potentiality (what they can become), just as, for example, an acorn is a tree seed and has the potential within itself to become an adult tree. However, to posit potential in God is a denial of God's eternal perfection and leaves God subject to change. If God has potential, He can become. If He can become, He is not eternally perfect.

Positively, this means God is pure act, or wholly actual. God has no passive potential in which He can be acted upon or actualized by creation to form His character, essence, or nature. Instead, He is wholly, fully, and eternally alive and actual. God does not start as one thing and gradually become something else, as taught in models of process theology. He is not composed of parts that need to be actualized by some external cause. He does not learn, grow, adapt, maneuver, or develop. This idea is rooted in God's aseity, which holds that God is His own life and does not receive it from any other cause or source. Rather, as Paul writes in Acts 17:24-25, God is Himself the giver of all life. Therefore, per simplicity, He *is* life. He is that by which He exists.

Second, DDS denies any composition of form and matter in God.¹⁸ In Platonic thought, which heavily influenced the early Church, forms are immaterial, eternal, universal, and abstract objects, and matter is the individuation of such forms. Forms like truth, goodness, beauty are eternal, while matter participates in such forms. This was Plato's solution to the problem of universals and particulars, or the One and the Many. In Aristotelian thought, which was influential in the thought of the Medievals like Aquinas, forms are not external, eternal objects but exist in the material thing itself as the essence of a thing.¹⁹ For both Plato and Aristotle, however, form is permanent while matter changes. Thus, in creation, things are a composition of matter and form, matter being the individualization of the form.

However, God does not have a physical body and is not composed of matter that can be put into

motion, change, decay, or be corrupted. Physical parts are subject to decomposition and limitations. God, however, does not have a physical body upon which He is dependent to exist or function. Rather, He is pure spirit and pure form.²⁰ Therefore, God has no physical limitations or dependency.

Third, DDS denies any composition of what Aquinas calls "quiddity" (essence or nature) and subject in God.²¹ Because God is not a composite of matter and form but is pure form, God cannot be differentiated from His essence. Rather, as Augustine writes, God "is what He has."²² In every creature, matter exemplifies an immaterial nature. So, a man, Mark, is a material exemplification of human nature. Mark is not identical with human nature because there is more to Mark than humanity, and not everything about Mark is true of all humanity. Humanity is that *by which* Mark is human, but Mark is not identical with humanity. God, however, is not matter and therefore cannot be the subject of an individualized nature. Rather, God just *is* His essence. Dolezal writes, "In other words, what is (the supposit) and that by which it is (the nature) are really distinct in all creatures but really identical in God."²³

Fourth, DDS denies any composition of essence and existence in God.²⁴ For created things, to exist and to exist as a certain thing are distinct. A red ball may exist in the mind but not in the real world. Something must bring that red ball into existence through creation. Everything in creation is contingent and owes its existence to something else. However, supposing everything to be contingent would lead to an infinite regress of causes. Therefore, there must be something that exists of its own nature. But God is not a created being. As creator of all, there is nothing outside of God to bring God's essence into existence or to actualize God's essence. God has no composition of act and potential and so nothing can cause God to be. Therefore, for God to be and to be God are one. In God, essence and existence are identical, making God a metaphysically necessary being. He is both the ground of all being and, as an

²⁰ In Augustine's theology, the mind of God takes the role of Plato's forms, standing in for the grounding of universal, eternal objects. For example, material triangles do not imitate the eternal form of triangle but reflect God's idea of a triangle. See Augustine, *Eighty-three Different Questions*, trans. David L. Mosher, Fathers of the Church Patristic Series (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2010), Q. 46.

²¹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.3.3.

²² Augustine, "The City of God," 11.10.

²³ Dolezal, *God without Parts*, 55.

²⁴ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.3.4.

¹⁷ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.2.3 and 1.3.7.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 1.3.1 and 2.

¹⁹ Aristotle, "Physics," in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, vol. 1 (Princeton University Press, 1984), 330.

absolutely simple being, He is existence and being itself.²⁵

Fifth, DDS denies any composition of genus and difference in God.²⁶ God is not a species of a genus in the way that a golden retriever is a species in the genus of dog. For in this case, a golden retriever is a dog, but not all dogs are golden retrievers. Here, genus is the form while species is the matter. But God is not a composition of form and matter. Further, since God is being itself, and being is not a genus, God cannot be in a genus. Therefore, God is not one example of deity as if deity is a genus of which God is one, even the only, example. There is no such thing as divinity. Rather, as Brian Leftow has pointed out, God Himself is the whole of divinity.²⁷ He is divinity itself.

Sixth, DDS denies any composition of substance and accident in God.²⁸ A substance is the essence of what a thing is, and accidental qualities are nonessential qualities a subject may take on. A car may be red but then painted blue and the car would be the same car. Red or blue color are accidental qualities. Aquinas, however, insists that God is not a substance or subject, at least not in the univocal sense of the word, because God is not composed of matter and form, act and potential, or genus and difference. God is, rather, a substance or subject in the analogical sense. God exists and exists as a personal God, but He does not exist as a material substance that can be known. As James Dolezal writes, “God is like a substance inasmuch as he is a complete being *per se* and does not exist by inherence in some other subject. But he is not a substance in the sense of being classified within a logical or natural genus . . . or standing under any accidents.”²⁹

As a substance in the analogical sense, and as a simple being, God is identical with His substance and so His attributes are not external properties but are the divine substance. There is no division between God Himself and His attributes and so He does not take on attributes or change attributes, for that would lead to God becoming something He was not and making Him dependent on new attributes to become something He was not. Francis Turretin states this when he argues that God’s attributes are not properly ascribed to God as if they were added to His essence, but rather they describe the perfections of the divine

nature.³⁰ God’s attributes are not Platonic forms in which God participates. Augustine states, “In God to be is the same as to be strong, or to be just, or to be wise, or whatever is said of the simple multiplicity, or multifold simplicity, whereby we signify his substance.”³¹ God is the substance of these forms. God is not just good, truthful, beautiful, loving, holy, or powerful, but is goodness itself, truth itself, beauty itself, love itself, holiness itself, power itself, and even being itself.

To be sure, relative to creation, God may take on relative names and titles that reflect His actions *ad extra*, such as Creator, Lord, and Redeemer, but these titles are not new attributes of God.³² While God may act in time one way and another way at a different time, this action does not indicate God being moved, becoming, or taking on new essential attributes. Rather, as Augustine and many others throughout history have taught, such new roles are God’s eternal nature and will relative to creation and relative to time.³³ As Duby writes, “God does not change in relation to the creature. Instead, the creature changes in relation to him without any change in the God who is already immanently determinate in his own plenitude and whose eternal decretive act wisely encloses all the travails of redemptive history.”³⁴

For example, the rebellious sinner experiences God’s eternal, holy nature as wrath in time and relative to the creature. This is not to say that God takes on the attribute of wrath or becomes wrathful, but that God’s eternal holy nature is experienced relatively and in time by creation as wrath. The repentant sinner experiences God’s love as mercy. This is not God taking on mercy, but God’s love being experienced in time and relative to the creature as mercy.³⁵ God’s substance does not take on accidental properties but is experienced in time by creation as relative properties.

²⁵ Stump, *The God of the Bible and the God of the Philosophers*, 86-87.

²⁶ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.3.5.

²⁷ Leftow, *God and Necessity*, 345.

²⁸ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.3.6.

²⁹ Dolezal, *God without Parts*, 61.

³⁰ Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 1:187.

³¹ Augustine, “On the Holy Trinity,” 6.4.

³² Duby, *Divine Simplicity: A Dogmatic Account*, 204-5.

³³ Likewise, Augustine explicitly denies that such change was an accidental change in God because God cannot change. Augustine, “On the Holy Trinity,” 5.16.17. Anselm also argues that such names do not signify changes in substance, but in relation. Anselm of Canterbury, “Monologion,” in *Anselm: Complete Philosophical and Theological Treatises*, ed. Joseph Saint-George, trans. Jasper Hopkins and Herbert Richardson (Jackson, MI: Ex Fontibus, 2016), 24. For more on this distinction, see K Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:216-26.

³⁴ Duby, *Divine Simplicity: A Dogmatic Account*, 145.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 205.

Implications of a Classical Doctrine of Divine Simplicity

In the end, simplicity is not an additional attribute of God but is a way of talking about God's relation to His attributes. DDS is a grammar for how to talk about God.³⁶ Simplicity describes language about God in a way that emphasizes the creature/creator distinction, that maintains God's absolute independence and sovereignty, and that understands God's actions in the world as always consistent and flowing from His nature. At least four key implications follow from DDS.

First, God's nature must be spoken of in analogical terms, rather than in univocal or equivocal ones. Simplicity means that God is unlike creation. Everything in creation is composite in some sense of universals and particulars, essence and existence, matter and form, and so on. Only God is absolutely simple. This means, as the DDS critics point out, that God is incomprehensible. One cannot speak of God in univocal terms with creation. For example, the word "love" in saying "God loves" and "John loves" cannot be applied in the exact same way. How could it if God is not in the same genus as humans? However, contrary to the critics, His incomprehensibility does not mean that one cannot say anything about Him, which would leave only equivocal language and agnosticism. Because God is not a genus of a kind and is utterly unique, God is incomprehensible in His essence but knowable in His effects. As John Calvin writes:

In seeking God, the most direct path and the fittest method is, not to attempt with presumptuous curiosity to pry into his essence, which is rather to be adored than minutely discussed, but to contemplate him in his works, by which he draws near, becomes familiar, and in a manner communicates himself to us . . . And as Augustine expresses it (in Psalm 144), since we are unable to comprehend Him, and are, as it were, overpowered by his greatness, our proper course is to contemplate his works, and so refresh ourselves with his goodness.³⁷

Thus, Aquinas argues, language about God is analogical.³⁸ Language about God is similar in God and in the creature, yet distinct in both quantity and

quality. God is what He is and does by virtue of God. The creature is what it is by virtue of participation.³⁹

Second, simplicity gives a foundation for many of God's absolute attributes. If God is simple, without any composition of act and potential, form and matter, or substance and accident, several vital realities follow.⁴⁰ If God is simple, then God is *a se*, that is, God has life in Himself and is dependent upon nothing to be what He is. Brower notes that safeguarding aseity has been the chief motivation for holding to DDS throughout history.⁴¹ If God is absolutely simple, then He is dependent upon only Himself to be what He is and is the physical and metaphysical grounding for all created reality. Anselm of Canterbury noted this when he argued that all things are what they are either through something else or through themselves.⁴² On this basis, he argued that God is the greatest conceivable being because God is that by which He is everything predicated of Him.

If God is simple, then God is also immutable. He does not change or become. As pure actuality, God has no potential and as such does not change. Augustine argues for simplicity on this very basis when he writes, "There is then one sole Good, which is simple, and therefore unchangeable; and that is God. By this Good all things were created; but they are not simple, and for that reason are changeable."⁴³ For Augustine, something that changes must be made of things that change. If God is simple, with no potential, He cannot change. But the reverse is also true. To affirm that God does not change, one must hold to His absolute simplicity. Only a simple God can be eternal and be eternally what He is.

Further, if God is simple, then God is impassible. Because God is simple, with no parts or potential and does not change, His emotional state is not subject to change. God does not have emotions in the univocal, human sense of the word and therefore cannot be emotionally damaged or manipulated by creation. This, of course, does not mean that God does not genuinely love His creation or show anger at sin, but that His love and anger are not based upon fleeting passions or inner movement. While humans act in response to emotions, God acts out of His perfect and simple nature. God's actions are not moved, or activated, by creation. Rather, God, as pure act, is fully alive and personal and is what He is at all times.

³⁹ Matthew Barrett, *The Reformation as Renewal*, 8-9.

⁴⁰ These realities stand in stark contrast to the theology proper of mutualism, theistic personalism, and process theology.

⁴¹ Brower, "Simplicity and Aseity," 107.

⁴² Anselm, "Monologion," 8-9.

⁴³ Augustine, "The City of God," 11.10.

³⁶ Sanlon, *Simply God*, 58.

³⁷ John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 1.5.9.

³⁸ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.13.3.

Matthew Barrett states this clearly when he writes, “If God is simple, then he must be not only immutable but impassible. A God whose nature is made up of parts is vulnerable to change, including emotional change. But a God whose nature is without parts is a God who is incapable of fluctuation in any way or form.”⁴⁴

Finally, if God is simple, then God is infinite. Because God is simple and has no parts, He is what He is without limitation. As Dolezal points out, if God is composed of parts, then those parts are not the whole of God.⁴⁵ God’s parts would then be limited by what they are not, and God would be composed of finite parts, making infinity impossible. However, Charnock argues that God cannot be infinite and made of parts. If He were, each part itself would have to be infinite to avoid the situation that Dolezal imagines and God would possess an infinite number of parts, which is itself incoherent.⁴⁶ Rather, God’s simplicity means that anything predicated of God is infinitely predicated of His single infinite nature.

The third implication of DDS is that if God’s attributes are identical to the one essence, then, in some sense, they must be identical to one another. If A (God’s Nature) is identical to B (Love), and A is identical to C (Power), then it follows that B and C are identical to one another, as well as the host of other attributes predicated of God. As Augustine writes, “God is truly called great, good, and wise . . . but His greatness and wisdom are identical . . . and His goodness is identical to His wisdom and greatness.”⁴⁷ Likewise, John Owen writes, “The attributes of God, which alone seem to be distinct things in the essence of God, are all of them essentially the same with one another, and every one the same with the essence of God itself.”⁴⁸

Such a thought may seem counterintuitive at first. After all, in everything in creation, love and power are not identical. One can be loving without power and powerful but unloving. The same goes for being omniscient, eternal, holy, and whatever else may be said of God. However, if God lacks parts and is identical with His simple essence, then God’s attributes cannot truly be separated from one another in God. Dolezal points out that “if God were a

complex of really distinct attributes or properties, then those various attributes would be more basic than the Godhead itself in explaining or accounting for what God is.”⁴⁹ In some sense, there is an identity of attributes in God. As stated earlier, these attributes are not Platonic properties in which God participates, but rather are the one simple, undivided essence of God.

Fourth, DDS not only has implications for God’s attributes, but also for the doctrine of the Trinity. Though modern critics use the Trinity as grounds to dismiss DDS, Augustine explicitly argues to the contrary. He states, “This Trinity is one God; the fact that it is a Trinity does not mean that it is not simple.”⁵⁰ Far from being a problem for the doctrine of the Trinity, DDS actually gives it substance and helps to clarify what Scripture affirms. There are not three beings, parts, or gods—there is one simple essence that is God shared among three persons.

Throughout history, DDS played a crucial role in explaining what it meant for God to be one God and three persons. D. Glenn Butner Jr. notes that DDS served at least four functions. First, DDS was used to reject hierarchy among the persons.⁵¹ If God is simple, one of the persons cannot be more God than the others. Instead, all three persons share the one, simple essence and its will, power, and nature. Theologians who wished to elevate the Father over the Son or Spirit by giving Him a higher kind of divinity were greatly mistaken because divinity, which is simple, cannot be differentiated.

Second, simplicity was also used to maintain a true monotheism and the singularity of the divine nature while avoiding the polytheism of the surrounding cultures.⁵² On a classical understanding of DDS, the Trinitarian persons of Father, Son, and Spirit are not three parts of God, three Gods, or three centers of consciousness: they are three relations that subsist in the one essence. Owen writes, “The divine persons are nothing but the divine essence, upon the account of an especial property, subsisting in an especial manner.”⁵³

Rather than positing three beings existing with a common nature, as three humans existing with human nature, God is one being subsisting as three persons who are distinguished according to personal properties and relations to each other. The

⁴⁴ Matthew Barrett, *None Greater: The Undomesticated Attributes of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2019), 115.

⁴⁵ Dolezal, *All That Is in God*, 48-49.

⁴⁶ Charnock, *Discourses upon the Existence and Attributes of God*, 1:186.

⁴⁷ Augustine, “On the Holy Trinity,” 6.7.

⁴⁸ John Owen, “The Mystery of the Gospel Vindicated,” in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William Goold, vol. 12 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2009), 72.

⁴⁹ Dolezal, *God without Parts*, 125.

⁵⁰ Augustine, “The City of God,” 11.10.

⁵¹ Butner, *Trinitarian Dogmatics*, 83.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ John Owen, “The Doctrine of the Holy Trinity Explained and Vindicated,” in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William Goold, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2009), 407.

Athanasian Creed is clear that the Father alone is unbegotten, the Son is eternally begotten of the Father, and the Spirit eternally proceeds from the Father and Son.⁵⁴ This one God then works inseparably in the world from the one divine essence, will, and power to do all things from the Father, through the Son, by the Spirit.”

Third, simplicity was used to explain the doctrine of eternal generation.⁵⁵ If the Son is Son by virtue of eternal generation, what does that mean and how does it guard against the teachings of, for example, an Arian? DDS enabled theologians to argue that, because God is without parts or passions, eternal generation is a passionless communication of the entire divine essence from Father to Son, such that they are identical in nature while distinct in mode of subsistence. After all, if the Son is the Son of the Father’s essence, which is divine and simple, then what the Father is the Son is without division or degree.

Finally, simplicity was used to show how it was that God was made known in Jesus.⁵⁶ Given DDS, that there are no parts in God, the God revealed in the person of Jesus could not be only part of God’s nature; rather, the entire divine essence must have been revealed in Jesus. Jesus had to be truly God in every sense of the word, not a version of God. DDS enables Christians to hold fast in the self-revelation of God by holding to the full participation of the Son in divinity.

A Defense of Divine Simplicity

Now that a summary of DDS has been offered, are there any reasons to believe it is true? This dissertation will argue for the truth of DDS on two grounds. First, DDS is biblically sound and supports the data of Scripture. Second, DDS is philosophically coherent and can overcome its major criticisms.

DDS is Biblically Sound

Many theologians and apologists argue that DDS is not a faithful interpretation of the scriptural data. For example, J.P. Moreland and William Lane Craig state, “This is a radical doctrine that enjoys no biblical support and even is at odds with the biblical conception of God in various ways.”⁵⁷ They argue that DDS is a doctrine imposed upon the text in an *a posteriori* manner and not drawn from the text organically. To be sure, the writers of Scripture do not present an explicit, full-fledged doctrine of

simplicity using the language or philosophical categories that is used by later theologians. Dolezal acknowledges that “there is no single biblical proof text for this doctrine.”⁵⁸

In fact, simplicity is not itself an exclusively Christian concept. Philosophers like Plato, Aristotle, Philo, and Plotinus all formulated concepts of divine simplicity, identifying God as the one absolute ground of all. The language for DDS is taken from Greek philosophical sources and there is no denying that Christians utilized this concept and language in their development of theology. The Fathers of the Church had several points of metaphysical commitments in common with the Greek philosophers, which enabled this appropriation of the language of simplicity, especially a commitment to realism. As Lloyd P. Gerson points out in his articulation of the fundamental tenets of Platonism, a commitment to anti-nominalism, that individuals are more than mere nominal particulars, united in name only, was essential to the Platonism of the ancient world.⁵⁹

Universal forms, for both the biblical authors and the Platonists, were real and actually connected concrete particulars. Thus, in a manner of speaking, the Fathers could critically appropriate the linguistic tools of the Greeks because they were using the same alphabet. They were operating with the same fundamental and metaphysical assumptions about reality, even if they disagreed over the sources of these universals.⁶⁰ In this context, speaking of act and potency, existence and essence, substance and accident, and genus and species made sense because things really did participate in greater realities.

However, while the concept and linguistic tools for discussing DDS were not unique to the early Church, this should not be a cause for concern. Jordan Barrett notes, “While divine simplicity was clearly a borrowed concept, this does not lead to the conclusion that it is contrary to scripture. If the mere borrowing of a concept made a doctrine suspect, then the creeds would be just as suspect due to their borrowed terms and concepts.”⁶¹ Though the language of substance, essence, simplicity, aseity, identity, inseparable operations, and even Trinity are not found in the pages of Scripture, these concepts were used throughout church history to give language to understanding the scriptural writers. These

⁵⁴ Leith, *Creeds of the Churches*, 705.

⁵⁵ Butner, *Tritarian Dogmatics*, 84.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Moreland and Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*, 524.

⁵⁸ Dolezal, *All That Is in God*, 44.

⁵⁹ Lloyd P. Gerson, *From Plato to Platonism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013), 11.

⁶⁰ See discussion in Barrett, *The Reformation as Renewal*, 205-83.

⁶¹ Jordan Barrett, *Divine Simplicity*, 37.

concepts were never intended to be a higher authority or to be a replacement for Scripture, but rather to serve it by capturing the meaning of the biblical texts.⁶²

In this sense, DDS is biblical in the exact same way that other doctrines are biblical. The hermeneutics that allow exegetes to arrive at other key doctrines are not different than the hermeneutics that allow them to arrive at DDS. Rather than being a philosophical idea forced upon the text, DDS is a way of capturing all that the text says. DDS is a grammar for understanding divine revelation. When approaching a doctrine, the first stage is to gather the data of Scripture. One begins by asking “What has God said?” Revelation provides the content of doctrine. However, in order to understand that content, one must use familiar language in order to make sense of that data. That is what theology is. If one is only able to use language that is taken from the biblical data, theology is impossible. All one can do is recycle the same words.

Often, rejection of a classical DDS reveals more than a mere biblical fidelity or commitment to the Reformed doctrine of *sola scriptura* on the part of critics; it often reveals a mindset of biblicism. This attitude toward Scripture, whether explicitly or implicitly, looks with suspicion upon attempts to use metaphysical descriptions of biblical statements because such descriptions are said to be drawn from extrabiblical sources.⁶³ This mindset, however, is a denial of the image of God in creatures, as if only words used by biblical writers can be used to convey concepts that apply to God, and they are often applied very selectively.

As a prime example, consider the glorious doctrine of the Trinity. The scriptural data given in revelation is that there is one God who alone is perfect, glorious, holy, and worthy of worship. However, the New Testament identifies three individuals as God. The Father, the Son, and the Spirit are all called “God.” There are similarities among them, such as abilities and characteristics, and distinctions among them in their sending, in their conversing, in their titles, and so on. What is the exegete to do with this data? Should theologians simply say there is one God and three Gods? Clearly, this is incoherent and contradictory. But, if one is resigned to only say what Scripture says in explicitly scriptural language, nothing meaningful can ever be said.

This is where the doctrine of the Trinity becomes a necessary grammar. If there is one God, as Scripture says, and three are called God but are also distinguished, then one must seek to humbly, carefully, and prayerfully give language to communicate this doctrine and to avoid error. As the doctrine developed, language of Trinity, persons, essence, relations, substance, and nature came to the aid of the early Church as it sought to communicate what Scripture was teaching.⁶⁴ The doctrine of the Trinity is not explicitly taught in Scripture using the word “Trinity” or articulated succinctly (claims to 1 John 5:7 in the Received Text notwithstanding), but it is a necessary consequence of what Scripture reveals that God is one, and yet three are called God.

This reality is precisely what the Westminster Confession of Faith is communicating when it states that the Christian faith consists of what is “expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men.”⁶⁵ The doctrine of the Trinity provides a *prima facie* example of using familiar language to elucidate scriptural data. The language of Trinity is not forced upon the text. Rather, it is an attempt to describe the data of the text in an understandable way. To borrow theological language, DDS is *homousious* with this example. As Jordan Barrett states, though the language of DDS is taken from Greek philosophy:

Divine simplicity is a uniquely Christian doctrine rooted in scripture that developed in order to combat opposition and in response to false readings of scripture. To locate the origins of divine simplicity in Greek philosophy, natural theology, perfect being theology, or “classical theism” is the result of misunderstandings. Rather, it is a revealed doctrine that is best understood when governed by scripture and when it follows from the theological discernment of trinitarian distinctions.⁶⁶

DDS, then, is a way of making sense of the scriptural data. DDS is consistent with the scriptural data and is a logical consequence of its propositions about God. Rather than being imposed upon the text, DDS is a way of formulating what the text is

⁶² Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:296-98.

⁶³ For a brief explanation of biblicism, see Matthew Barrett, *The Reformation as Renewal*, 21.

⁶⁴ See Stephen R. Holmes, *The Quest for the Trinity: The Doctrine of God in Scripture, History, and Modernity* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2012).

⁶⁵ Leith, *Creeeds of the Churches*, 195.

⁶⁶ Jordan Barrett, *Divine Simplicity*, 33.

communicating. Specifically, DDS encompasses at least three scriptural realities.

1. Entailed by Attributes Ascribed to God

First, DDS is entailed by many of the attributes ascribed to God. As Peter Sanlon states emphatically, “Without simplicity it is impossible to affirm fully or coherently all the Bible teaches about God.”⁶⁷ Scripture presents many attributes of God, and these attributes lead to the conclusions of DDS. In his book on DDS, Stephen J. Duby brings out this point with clarity when he presents the doctrines of singularity, aseity, immutability, and infinity, as well as God’s work in creation *ex nihilo* and argues from each that such doctrines necessarily point to divine simplicity. In each case, DDS is not imposed upon these doctrines, but flows from them.

Scripture teaches that God is singular. In Isaiah 45:5-6, God states, “I am the LORD, and there is no one else; there is no God except Me . . . so that people may know from the rising to the setting of the sun that there is no one besides Me. I am the LORD, and there is no one else.” If there are no other gods, Duby argues, then God is not a composition of genus and species, as if He were an individuation of the genus “divinity.”⁶⁸ Further, there cannot be two simple beings, for to differentiate them would mean difference, and difference would mean parts that can differ.

Scripture also states that God is *a se*, having life in Himself. In John 5:26, Jesus taught, “For just as the Father has life in Himself, so He gave to the Son also to have life in Himself.” God is not contingent and/or dependent upon anything to exist. Rather, He is the cause of all things, as Paul pronounces in Acts 17:24-25 when he states, “The God who made the world and everything that is in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made by hands; nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things.” Duby points out that this implies that God cannot be composed in any way. If He were to be composite, He would be dependent upon a composer and upon that of which He is composed. He must be pure act, “without causal susceptibility.”⁶⁹ Rather, as God states in Exodus 3:14, “I AM WHO I AM!”⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Sanlon, *Simply God*, 20.

⁶⁸ Duby, *Divine Simplicity: A Dogmatic Account*, 100-108.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 118-31.

⁷⁰ Much ink has been spilt to argue that the writer of Exodus did not have a metaphysical point to make in this text and that God was not communicating anything about His aseity, in spite of such an understanding through history. Rather, He was merely communicating that He would be with Moses and the people of

The biblical writers also consistently teach that God is unchanging in His nature. He is immutable. Hebrews 13:8 states, “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today, and forever.” In Malachi 3:6, the Lord states, “For I, the LORD, do not change; therefore you, the sons of Jacob, have not come to an end.” In spite of Israel’s inconsistency, God would not be inconsistent with His promises because He does not change in His character. Rather, as in Numbers 23:19, God is not like men and does not change or repent.⁷¹ This immutability, Duby argues, demonstrates that God Himself does not change or become in His being, but that creation changes in relation to God.⁷² God is fully Himself in need of no change *ad intra* to act.

Scripture further teaches that God is infinite and unlimited in His nature, power, and attributes. In Psalm 147:5, God’s understanding is said to be infinite, just as His faithfulness is said to be everlasting in Psalm 136:4. In Luke 1:37, the power of God is said to be infinite when the angel declares to Mary that “nothing will be impossible with God.” Second Chronicles 2:6 says that “the highest heavens cannot contain Him.” God is infinite in power, majesty, and greatness. Duby argues that, if God is infinite, He is fully all that He is and unlimited or inhibited by material or lesser parts. Further, nothing can be added to Him to make Him what He is because, in His being, He is already infinite.⁷³

The last doctrine that Duby connects to simplicity is the biblical teaching that God created all things *ex nihilo*. Genesis 1:1 begins with the assumption that God is the ultimate creator of all, bringing the heavens and the earth into existence out of nothing, and this is the consistent testimony of the rest of Scripture. In John 1:3, the Word is said to have created all things when John writes, “All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him not even one thing came into being that has come into being.” Matter and God are not cotemporaneous or coequal; rather, God is absolutely sovereign over

Israel. However, as Jonathan Platter argues, this assumes a dichotomy between metaphysics and non-metaphysics that is unjustified. Metaphysics may not have been the main point, but it does not mean it was not a point. See Jonathan M. Platter, “Divine Simplicity and Scripture: A Theological Reading of Exodus 3:14,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 73, no. 4 (2020).

⁷¹ Verses like Gen 6:6-9 and 1 Sam 15:11 are often cited as counter examples of God’s change and possibility in that He sorrowed over previous actions and changed. However, in light of such clear statements about God not changing, such language of sorrow and repentance should be understood analogically as a way of communicating God’s actions without communicating univocal change in God. See Dolezal, *All That Is in God*, 20.

⁷² Duby, *Divine Simplicity: A Dogmatic Account*, 143-50.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 155-60.

all creation. On this basis, Duby argues that God must be pure act and noncontingent.⁷⁴ Since something cannot bring itself into existence (the so-called bootstrapping problem), God's essence and existence must be identical. If God created all things *ex nihilo*, there is nothing temporal, external, or material to cause God to be, to act, or to relate.⁷⁵ If God created all things not Himself, then God cannot be composed of Himself and anything but Himself.

Finally, though Duby does not specifically add immateriality to his list of attributes from which simplicity flows, such a truth is readily seen in Scripture. In John 4:24, Jesus states clearly, "God is spirit." Paul, in Acts 17:24-25, emphasizes that God "does not dwell in [human] temples." In 1 Timothy 1:17, God is called the "King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God." God is an immaterial spirit. He has no inherent matter and is not bound by material limitations that are subject to succession, decay, change, or space and time. Thus, God is not composed in any way of matter and form.

2. Entailed by the Nature of Scripture's Attributive Predication

The second scriptural reality of DDS is that it is entailed by the nature of Scripture's attributive predication. Throughout the language of Scripture, more is said of God than that He simply does things. Rather, Scripture consistently teaches that the things God does flow out of His nature. God *does* things because He *is* things. Herman Bavinck writes:

The fact of the matter is that Scripture, to denote the fullness of the life of God, uses not only adjectives but also substantives: it tells us not only that God is truthful, righteous, living, illuminating, loving, and wise, but also that he is the truth, righteousness, life, light, love, and wisdom. . . . Hence, on account of its absolute perfection, every attribute of God is identical with his essence.⁷⁶

Scripture does more than ascribe loving, holy, just, wise, and powerful actions to God. Rather, it states that He is love (1 John 4:16), is holy (Isa 6:3), is light (1 John 1:5), is wisdom (1 Cor 1:30), is great

⁷⁴ Duby, *Divine Simplicity: A Dogmatic Account*, 167-75.

⁷⁵ In this part of his discussion, Duby addresses the challenge of Platonic forms as abstract objects in the works of Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff and as non-real concepts in Moreland and Craig. He argues that Plantinga's notion destroys aseity by making universals independent objects and that Craig and Moreland's model still makes God dependent upon really distinct properties to be what He is. See Duby, *Divine Simplicity: A Dogmatic Account*, 172-73.

⁷⁶ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:173.

(Ps 145:3), is good (Ps 34:8), and in Him is life (John 1:4-5). The biblical writers describe these attributes as being identical with God Himself. It is not merely that God does these things, but that He is these things, and that to be these things for humans is to be like God (Lev 11:44-45).

Many critics, such as John Feinberg, argue that assuming that these substantives are doing more than emphatically stating that God has the attribute in consideration is assuming too much. However, Jordan Barrett makes an excellent observation of such passages and names. He notes that God is not praised simply for what He has done, but for what He is when he states:

If God is praised for being holy, but his holiness is something other than God himself, or he is holy according to a standard other than himself, then something other than God is being praised. The result would be a serious charge of idolatry. . . . Rather, in scripture the praise of God's name, his holiness, or his mighty deeds are all ways of praising who and what Yahweh *is*.⁷⁷

To praise God for being things that are distinct from His essence would be to elevate these things and praise God for His participation in them. While critics argue that DDS leaves one unable to talk about God as He is, in fact, it is them who disconnect God's essence from His attributes. The scriptural data describes God's attributes as identical to God's very being.

3. Entailed by the Trinitarian Language of Scripture

The third scriptural reality of DDS is that it is entailed by the Trinitarian language of Scripture. As noted previously, Scripture indicates that there is only one God (monotheism), but that three persons—the Father, Son, and Spirit—are called God while being differentiated. While the biblical writers do not resolve this tension explicitly, they do make numerous statements that keep the language "in bounds." They claim a oneness among the three while also claiming a threeness within the one (Matt 28:19; John 10:30; Eph 4:4-6; 1 Pet 1:2). They also claim each person fully shares the divine nature. For example, in Colossians 2:9, Paul writes of the Son, "In Him all the fullness of Deity dwells." The Son is not a part of God but is all of God, while being distinct from the Father and the Spirit. Further, throughout the New Testament, the names, titles, and works performed by one person are often associated

⁷⁷ Jordan Barrett, *Divine Simplicity*, 149-50.

with the others as well. The Father, the Son, and the Spirit are each called God (2 Cor 1:3-4; John 20:28 with Acts 20:28; Rom 8:14), Lord (Ps 68:20 with Rom 10:9), Yahweh (Ps 102:21-27 with Heb 1:8-12), and Savior (Ps 17:6-7 with Titus 3:6), and are said to give life (John 5:26), to elect and sanctify (John 6:65 with 1 Cor 1:1-2 and 1 Pet 1:1-2), to create (Mal 2:10; John 1:1-3; Gen 1:2), to work miracles (John 10:32 with Gal 3:5), and to receive worship (John 5:23; Phil 2:9-11).

However, while these names and works are ascribed to all three persons, the manner in which each person works is distinguished. For example, in Ephesians 1, salvation is the work of one God, and yet the Father is said to be the one who chooses (Eph 1:4-6), the Son redeems (Eph 1:7), and the Spirit seals (Eph 1:13). Each person works to accomplish the miracle of salvation and yet they work in distinct ways and one does not act without the other. Throughout Scripture, Father, Son, and Spirit work together inseparably, and yet in distinct ways.

DDS captures the scriptural language about the relations of these three persons. Scripture is consistent in its affirmation that there is one God who exists as Father, Son, and Spirit. Scripture claims, with DDS, that these three are not parts of God, distinct gods, or merely different phases of one God. Rather, they are identical to the one God and yet distinct from each other. All three persons act in the world as one, in what is called by theologians “inseparable operations,”⁷⁸ because they are all identified as the one God, and each works as the one essence, power, and will, avoiding the Arianism against which the early church fought so hard.

However, while these names and works are ascribed to all three persons, the manner in which each person works is distinguished, avoiding such heresies as Sabellianism. There is an order to the workings of the three persons that reflects their eternal relations of origin. Adonis Vidu writes, “The persons share the same power, the same will, because they share the same essence. At the same time, the order must be observed.”⁷⁹ As articulated by Bavinck, all things “proceed from the Father, are accomplished by the Son, and are completed in the Holy Spirit.”⁸⁰ For example, in Ephesians 1, salvation is the work of one God, and yet the Father is said to be the one who chooses (Eph 1:4-6), the Son redeems (Eph 1:7), and the Spirit seals (Eph 1:13). In

salvation, the one God works inseparably and yet this work is distinguished.

Throughout Scripture, Father, Son, and Spirit work inseparably as one essence, nature, and will, and yet, through what is often called “appropriations,” in distinct manners that reveal and reflect their eternal relations of origin.⁸¹ It is not that the Father chooses to the exclusion of the Son, or that the Spirit seals to the exclusion of the Father. Rather, as the Father is unbegotten, He is said to be the source of divine activity. Because the Son is eternally begotten, He is said to be that through which the Father acts as His Word, Wisdom, and Power. Because the Spirit proceeds from the Father and Son, the Spirit is said to bring about the works of God.⁸² As Dolezal argues, “Without divine simplicity, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit potentially could be understood either as three parts of God . . . or as three distinct beings or gods who collectively make up a social unit we call God.”⁸³

If DDS is true, then, the doctrine of inseparable operations follows. If inseparable operations is true, DDS follows. This is why many who deny DDS in its classical forms also deny a classical understanding of inseparable operations. Without simplicity, there can be no inseparable operations. If God is not simple, then the three persons are of divided minds, wills, and actions. They do not act as one ontologically, but merely communally, with each playing a part of an action. However, if God is simple, then the *ad extra* works of God are not the works of any individual person, but are always the work of the one, triune God.

In sum, DDS is biblical because it flows from key biblical doctrines, because it gives language for the substantive predications of God through Scripture, and because it captures all that the Scripture teaches about the one God who is three.

DDS is Philosophically Coherent

This section will engage with three criticisms of DDS to demonstrate the doctrine’s philosophical coherence: the identical attributes objection, the modal collapse objection of divine freedom, and the Trinitarian objection. Each of these objections is considered and various historical approaches to them

⁷⁸ Butner, *Trinitarian Dogmatics*, 175-97.

⁷⁹ Adonis Vidu, *The Same God Who Works All Things: Inseparable Operations in Trinitarian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2021), 143.

⁸⁰ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:319.

⁸¹ This is in sharp contrast to those like Bruce Ware who argue that the Father can work without the Son or Spirit, but simply chooses to use them. Bruce Ware, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: Relationships, Roles, and Relevance* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005), 55.

⁸² Scott R. Swain, *The Trinity: An Introduction, Short Studies in Systematic Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 109.

⁸³ Dolezal, *All That Is in God*, 105.

are given in response, primarily from Augustine, Turretin, and Aquinas, respectively.

1. A Defense of the Identity Thesis of Divine Attributes

If God is simple and is identical to His attributes, then, in some sense, these attributes must be identical to one another. However, critics argue that such a conclusion seems absurd. If God is identical to His properties or attributes, does this not make God a property or attribute? Further, God's attributes mean different things and can exist without the others and so cannot be identical. Power is not love, love is not omniscience, eternity is not holiness, and so on. This objection against the identity account is one of the most commonly cited problems of DDS. How should the relationship between God and His attributes be understood?

To begin with, it is vital to recognize that DDS does not mean that there can be no distinctions between attributes. As Bavinck states, "Though every attribute is identical with the divine being, the attributes are nevertheless distinct."⁸⁴ Likewise, Augustine proclaimed God's "simple multiplicity, or multiple simplicity."⁸⁵ Even Aquinas argued that the divine attributes, or "names" as he called them, are not synonymous with one another.⁸⁶ The question, then, is not "are the divine attributes distinct," but rather, "in what sense are the divine attributes identical or distinct?"

Essentially, four interpretations of God's relation to His attributes have been offered. Among those who deny DDS, a *real* distinction model has been offered in which God and His attributes are really distinct and the attributes are really distinct from one another. Alvin Plantinga proposes a Platonic distinction between God and His properties. God is not identical with His attributes or properties. If He were, this would make God a property. But properties do not do things, persons do.⁸⁷ Properties are eternal and abstract objects functioning like Plato's forms, which exist independently of God.⁸⁸ God is a person who participates in and exemplifies in these platonic properties at a maximally great level.⁸⁹ Thus, God *has* a nature, divinity, but is not Himself a nature and *has* properties and attributes becoming of divinity, but is not identical with them.

Like Plantinga, William Lane Craig also denies aspects of DDS but argues against a Platonist understanding and draws a limited anti-realist distinction between God and His properties.⁹⁰ Craig is concerned that such forms of Platonism lead to a denial of divine aseity in making eternal, uncreated, abstract objects independent of God.⁹¹ Instead, Craig rejects the ontological constituency model and argues that simplicity is not necessary because uncreated abstract properties are not real things, and thus God cannot be composed of them.⁹² In his view, properties are conceptual tools and do not exist in the proper sense.⁹³ The only things that exist in the classic sense are concrete particulars: God, trees, people, cats, and so on. God's properties, then, are not constituent parts of Him, nor are they exemplifiables,⁹⁴ but are predicated of God in a univocal sense with creation.

While Plantinga and Craig deny key aspects of DDS, others who affirm the doctrine have attempted various interpretations of its understanding of the divine attributes. Some, such as John Duns Scotus in the twelfth century, affirm God's simplicity,⁹⁵ but argue for a *formal* distinction between the essence and attributes of God and between the attributes themselves.⁹⁶ For Scotus, the divine attributes are *really* identical to God, but *formally* distinct from each other and from the divine essence.⁹⁷ Unlike real distinctions, in which x and y are not identical and can exist without the other, formal distinction holds that x and y are identical in the sense that x and y are inseparable. However, this is not to say that if x is inseparable from y and x is inseparable from z that y and z are identical if y and z are different in *ratio*.

In Scotus' understanding, the attributes of God are essential to God and united by His infinite essence, but are distinguished, not as things, but as formalities.⁹⁸ God's will and intellect, power and love, justice and goodness, are identical to God in that it is God who is willing and thinking, showing

⁹⁰ Craig, *God and Abstract Objects*, 488.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 201.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 200-201.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 199.

⁹⁵ John Duns Scotus, "Lectura," in *Opera Omnia*, vol. 17 (Vatican City, 1966), I.8.1.1, p. 2.

⁹⁶ Richard Cross, "Duns Scotus on God's Essence and Attributes: Metaphysics, Semantics, and the Greek Patristic Tradition," *Recherches de Théologie et Philosophie Médiévales* 83, 2 (2016): 353-54.

⁹⁷ Scotus, "Lectura," I.8.1.4.

⁹⁸ Richard Cross, *Duns Scotus on God*, Ashgate Studies in the History of Philosophical Theology (New York: Routledge, 2005), 109.

⁸⁴ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:124-26.

⁸⁵ Augustine, "On the Holy Trinity," 6.4.6.

⁸⁶ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.13.4.

⁸⁷ Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?*, 47.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 108.

power and love, justice and goodness. But they are formally distinct in that will and intellect are distinct realities. Because God's essence is infinite, all His infinite attributes are *really* inseparable in Him. However, they are *formally* distinct in that will is not intellect, love is not power, and justice is not goodness. God's infinity unites the formally distinct attributes.⁹⁹

But wherein lies the difference between Scotus and, say, Aquinas? In Aquinas' understanding, the difference between attributes is conceptual on the part of the creature. The one simple essence of God creates many effects, and the creature can therefore reason analogically back to the source of these effects by naming God accordingly. The difference, for Aquinas, is not in God but in creation and is conceptual as creatures name God. Scotus, however, locates the difference in the things themselves. The attributes of God are univocal concepts with those in creation,¹⁰⁰ though they exist infinitely in God because they are united to the infinite divine essence.¹⁰¹ In creation they are distinct and must then be distinct in God.

In the end, while Scotus claims to adhere to DDS, his model represents a significant departure from the classical understanding.¹⁰² The divine attributes are not the divine essence but are formally distinct, united by God's infinity. This is not composition, he argues, but complexity. In this model, Scotus argues, God appears to have complexity without composition. God has one infinite essence but complex attributes.¹⁰³

In Jordan Barrett's work on DDS, he posits an *idiomatic* distinction between the attributes. He rejects those models that create a distinction between God and His attributes but also agrees with the critics of DDS that the divine attributes are not synonymous with one another and are not mere conceptions in the human mind.¹⁰⁴ In his model, each attribute is truly predicated of the divine essence, but each attribute is idiomatically distinct from one another in name in a

way analogous to the way the persons of the Trinity are identical to the divine essence while being distinct from one another.¹⁰⁵ Thus, the divine attributes are distinct perfections of the divine nature.¹⁰⁶

However, Jordan Barrett is not clear as to what it means to be idiomatically distinct. He uses the title but gives no succinct definition. While he equates the divine attributes with the divine nature, and is clear that these attributes are not identical with one another, he does not state what gives these attributes their individual identities. Clearly, they are not eternal, Platonic objects or merely conceptual tools, but what they are ontologically that allows them to be distinct in God, he does not state.

The problem, however, for views that separate God from His attributes, or the attributes from one another, is that the definition and ontological nature of these attributes become defined by something other than God. Properties such as love, wisdom, and power, whether abstract objects or concepts, are first defined and then applied to God and creature univocally. God is then ontologically dependent upon things other than God to be what He is. How does one define these attributes if they are not identical to God? In these views, God is not the definition, but the greatest example of them. As Craig argues, God is the "least arbitrary" standard for these attributes because He demonstrates them the best.¹⁰⁷ They may be essential to the nature of God, but they are not identical with God, nor are they defined by God.

Given the shortcomings of these previous models, the fourth model is vital. In this model, God's attributes are *really* identical to God but *conceptually* distinct on the part of the creature. The diversity of the divine attributes is just creation experiencing the fullness of the absolutely simple God in various ways. Thus, these are not accidental properties, but relative ones.¹⁰⁸ What creatures perceive as distinct properties are the effects of the simple essence of God upon creation. In this way, God is pure act; He is nothing but Himself acting.¹⁰⁹

Aquinas argues, "But our intellect, since it knows God from creatures, in order to understand God, forms conceptions proportional to the perfections flowing from God to creatures, which perfections pre-exist in God unitedly and simply,

⁹⁹ Scotus, "Lectura," 1.8.1.4.

¹⁰⁰ Matthew Barrett, *The Reformation as Renewal*, 234-39.

¹⁰¹ Richard Cross, "Duns Scotus on God's Essence and Attributes: Metaphysics, Semantics, and the Greek Patristic Tradition," *Recherches de Théologie et Philosophie Médiévale* 83, no. 2 (2016): 356. Also see Stephen D. Dumont, "Scotus's Doctrine of Univocity and the Medieval Tradition of Metaphysics," in *Was ist Philosophie im Mittelalter*, ed. Jan A. Aertsen and Andreas Speer (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1997), 210.

¹⁰² Jeff Steele and Thomas Williams, "Complexity without Composition: Duns Scotus on Divine Simplicity," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 93, no. 4 (2019): 20.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁰⁴ Jordan Barrett, *Divine Simplicity*, 182.

¹⁰⁵ Jordan Barrett, *Divine Simplicity*, 1.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 180.

¹⁰⁷ Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, 182.

¹⁰⁸ Augustine, "On the Holy Trinity," 5.16.17.

¹⁰⁹ Rogers, *Perfect Being Theology*, 29.

whereas in creatures they are received, divided and multiplied.”¹¹⁰ Likewise, Turretin puts it this way: “Attributes are not ascribed to God properly as something superadded to his essence, making it perfect and really distinct from himself; but improperly and transumptively in as much as they indicated perfections essential to the divine nature conceived by us as properties.”¹¹¹

The distinction between God’s attributes is not in God but in God’s effects. In creation and in time, creatures experience this essence relatively as distinct attributes and properties. Power, knowledge, justice, and love are not the same effect, though they do intertwine. When God works for the well-being of creation, that is God’s goodness on display. When God gives of Himself to lost sinners, that is God’s love on display. When God pronounces His law, that is God’s holiness on display. When God holds men accountable for sin, that is God’s justice on display. When God creates, does miracles, and as He upholds all things, that is God’s power on display. In each case, the divine attributes are the effects in creation of God’s simple essence. Though these attributes are conceptually distinct, they are identical in God because they are nothing but the divine essence in action towards creation. As Dolezal writes:

The virtual or eminent distinction between the divine attributes is a realist position insofar as it finds the ground for each of these attributes in the divine essence itself and not merely in the theologian’s own concepts (contra nominalism); but it is a conceptualist distinction to the extent that it grounds the *diversity* of attribute predications upon the diversity of creaturely likeness to the divine essence.¹¹²

The attributes of God are then real and have ontological grounding: God! This is, in fact, the way the DDS functioned historically in many cases. God is not a composition of matter and form but is pure form. God, for Augustine, stood in the place of Platonic forms.¹¹³ In this way, God is not a property. As Leftow points out, forms are not properties.¹¹⁴ Rather, to say God stands in for Plato’s forms is to

say that God acts as a “set of standards.”¹¹⁵ Augustine writes, “We may not say God has measure . . . as if it were imposed upon him from elsewhere. But if we call him the supreme measure, we perhaps say something significant.”¹¹⁶

God, therefore, is not a property but is the standard for properties! God is goodness, power, truth, holiness, love, justice, and any other attribute one might predicate as the standard of that attribute. Properties are ways in which creation participates in the likeness of God. So, while goodness, wisdom, or justice may be properties in which man participates, God does not participate, but rather ontologically grounds and defines. When a person exemplifies such properties, he is acting like God.

At this point, the work of Brower is illuminating. Brower posits that God is the truthmaker for the predications of Him.¹¹⁷ In other words, in the statement “God is x,” God Himself, and not x, makes it true that God is x. So, the statement “God is love” is true by virtue of God and not love. God is that by which all predications are true because such predications are simply God acting *ad extra* as God. As Augustine argues:

But since God is not great with that greatness which is not Himself, so that God, in being great, is, as it were, partaker of that greatness; otherwise that will be a greatness greater than God; therefore, He is great with that greatness by which He Himself is that same greatness. . . . He is great by Himself being great, because He Himself is His own greatness. Let the same be said also of the goodness and of the eternity, and of the omnipotence of God, and, in short, of all the predicaments which can be predicated of God.¹¹⁸

By recognizing God’s attributes as nothing but the divine essence and defining them by God’s actions, these attributes receive a proper grounding in God. In this way, predication of God and creatures are analogous, but not univocal. These attributes inhere in God as essence and as their source for creation and in creatures as diverse properties through participation¹¹⁹ By reading God as the

¹¹⁰ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.1.13.5.

¹¹¹ Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 1:187.

¹¹² Dolezal, *God without Parts*, 135.

¹¹³ See, for example, Plato, *Timaeus*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (New York: Clydesdale Press, 2018), 1254-55; and Aristotle, “Metaphysics,” in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, vol. 2, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton University Press, 1984), 1561.

¹¹⁴ Leftow, “Divine Simplicity,” 366.

¹¹⁵ Leftow, “Divine Simplicity,” 367.

¹¹⁶ Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, trans. John Hammond Taylor (New York: Newman Press, 1982), 3, 7-8.

¹¹⁷ Brower, “Simplicity and Aseity,” 112.

¹¹⁸ Augustine, “On the Holy Trinity,” 5.10.11.

¹¹⁹ Dolezal, *God without Parts*, 150-51.

truthmaker for His attributes, that God is that by which He is what He is and that He is the standard for all that is predicated of Him, God's attributes may be understood to be identical to Him and diverse in creation.

2. A Defense of Divine Freedom against Modal Collapse

Not only do critics of DDS take issue with the identity account of God's attributes, but they also argue that DDS leaves God without genuine freedom. R. T. Mullins states:

What this means is that God's actions are identical to God's existence, and thus it is not possible for God to have done otherwise. To say that God could have done otherwise is to say that God could have existed otherwise because God's act is identical to God's existence. . . . Thus, these divine actions are performed of absolute necessity, which entails a modal collapse.¹²⁰

Theologians throughout history, as shown in earlier in this chapter, have maintained that God is pure act, without passive potential to be acted upon. Because He is *a se*, having life in Himself, and because He is simple, being identical with His intellect and will, God does not depend upon His creation, creation does not define Him, and His actions are eternal in His mind, though they play out in time. However, if God is pure act and His attributes are nothing but the divine essence acting in creation, then, it is argued, it seems He cannot do other than He does without being other than He is.

As cited by Mullins, philosophers call this idea a modal collapse. This idea comes from the philosophy of modal logic that uses the language of possible worlds. In a modal collapse, there are no contingent truths, only necessary ones. A being cannot act in a way other than what it has done. If God must create, then creation would seem necessary to fulfill God's purpose. Further, if God cannot be other than He is and therefore must create and must create this world, it seems impossible for living things in creation to have free will.

Defenders of DDS have offered several responses. Some, such as Katherin Rogers, argue that one must simply "bite the bullet"¹²¹ and accept that for creatures to have freedom of choice, their choices really do contribute to God's nature. If a person can choose either A or B in the world God created, then

God's world, and thus His nature, are dependent upon the choices that person makes. This is the only way to truly keep God from being the author of sin, in Roger's opinion. She writes, "God acts to some extent in response to free creaturely choices and we have not avoided the difficulty that creatures are somehow partially responsible for God's nature if God is identical with His act."¹²² However, she does not feel this is a problem because God chooses to allow Himself to be changed in this way.¹²³ God is limiting Himself voluntarily, so His becoming is not a weakness. But regardless of whether God's becoming is voluntary or not, the result is still the same and amounts to a denial of God's immutability and makes God's nature dependent upon human creatures.

Others, such as Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, using the language of possible worlds, argue that God has trans-world freedom. Since God has eternally willed to create, this willing is necessary.¹²⁴ However, in another possible world, God could have chosen not to create.¹²⁵ But if God is identical to His act of creating, does this not mean that God would be a different version of Himself in a different possible world? They state, "God is not the same in all possible worlds."¹²⁶ God, in this view, is immutable in the actual world, but is trans-world mutable.

Stump and Kretzmann acknowledge that they are "weakening" the strong account of divine simplicity,¹²⁷ but only in a theoretical sense. God could have been different if He had done different, but He did not, so it does not matter. For them, DDS only demands that God is immutable in that He does not change in the actual world. God is incomplete and lacking nothing in all possible worlds, but He could have been theoretically different in a different possible world in which creatures freely choose to do x instead of z. However, as others have pointed out, if God can be different in a different possible world, this would require parts in order for some aspects of God to be different in a different possible world without all of God being different.¹²⁸

Jay Richards argues that DDS needs to be modified to allow for God's taking on accidental

¹²⁰ Mullins, "Classical Theism," 95.

¹²¹ Rogers, "The Traditional Doctrine of Divine Simplicity," 182.

¹²² Rogers, "The Traditional Doctrine of Divine Simplicity," 185.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 186.

¹²⁴ Stump and Kretzmann, "Absolute Simplicity," 367.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 368.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 369.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

¹²⁸ Dolezal, *God without Parts*, 199.

properties and for potential.¹²⁹ Because God becomes things in creation and because God could have done otherwise, God must have attributes that are not essential or necessary to Him and He must have potential.¹³⁰ “Surely,” he writes, “God is at least as free as we are when we exercise freedom.”¹³¹ He argues that God chooses to take on attributes like creator and redeemer and has potential in Him because He possesses freedom.¹³²

Further, Richards maintains that if God is pure act with no potential, then He must do all that He can do, including creating all possibilities, which He has not, and therefore He is not pure act.¹³³ In Richards’ view, while it is necessary to maintain that God is not composite,¹³⁴ God must have some sense in which there is distinction between essential attributes and properties (which he defines as “facts or truths about an entity”¹³⁵) and accidental ones. Therefore, in this view, some of the claims of DDS should be modified, while others that allow for divine freedom should be maintained.

Each of these views seeks to maintain divine freedom by altering DDS. For God to have freedom, they argue, He must be able to change in some way. Others, seeking to maintain DDS in its strongest form, argue that divine freedom needs to be understood differently. While God’s inner life is ultimately a mystery, arguments can be made to show that divine simplicity and divine freedom are not inherently contradictory.¹³⁶

Throughout history, proponents of DDS have firmly held to the truth of God’s freedom. Aquinas, for example, states clearly, “God acts, in the realm of created things, not by necessity of His nature, but by the free choice of His will.”¹³⁷ God, according to Aquinas, does not do all that He is able to do¹³⁸ and does not act by mere necessity, but by intellect and will.¹³⁹ Theologians have referred to this idea as active potency. God is able to act and possesses the sufficient power to do other than He did. Passive

potency, in which God is acted upon or becomes new things by His actions, is clearly a denial of His aseity, simplicity, and actuality. However, active potency, in which God does not do all that He could do, but only that which He intends, does not equal potentiality in God. Rather, it indicates logical possibility and the unlimited potential of His power.¹⁴⁰

Yet, while affirming that God did not have to create, but chose to, Aquinas also writes, “As the divine existence is necessary of itself, so is the divine will and the divine knowledge.”¹⁴¹ Is Aquinas contradicting himself? No, his point is that God’s willing this creation is in some senses necessary and in some senses free. Given that God’s will is identical to His essence, God’s will to create cannot change and what He creates will reflect His nature. However, God was free to create or not to create at all, in principle. Further, He was free to create what He desired and there are no particular things in creation that He must have willed to create.

Like Aquinas, Turretin agrees that there are necessary and free aspects to the will of God and offers a succinct exposition.¹⁴² He asks, “Does God will some things necessarily and others freely?”¹⁴³ While this question poses great problems for contemporary critics, Turretin is able to respond resolutely “We affirm.” He is able to do this, like Aquinas, by appealing to the absolute necessity of aspects of God’s will and of the freedom of other aspects. He begins by arguing that God has both a primary object of His will and secondary objects. The primary object of God’s will is none other than Himself. As the infinite good, God, who is good, must necessarily will Himself. To will lesser things would be against His good nature.

However, the secondary objects of His will, things in creation, are willed freely. This is because necessity can be applied in two senses. First, absolute necessity means that something could not be otherwise. God wills Himself with absolute necessity because He cannot will other than Himself. Hypothetical necessity means that a thing is not logically demanded but could have been otherwise unless it follows necessarily from a previous supposition.

Further, when asking whether the will of God is free, Turretin argues that the idea of freedom comes

¹²⁹ Richards, *The Untamed God*, 202.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 234.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 239.

¹³² *Ibid.*

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 234.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 217, 231.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 232.

¹³⁶ Dolezal, *God without Parts*, 210-12.

¹³⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, trans. Anton C. Pegis, vol. 1 (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), 2.23.1.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.23.3.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.23.5.

¹⁴⁰ Dolezal, *God without Parts*, 39-41. Also see Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 271-72.

¹⁴¹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.19.3.

¹⁴² Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 1:218-20.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 1:218.

in two forms. There is the freedom of spontaneity and the freedom of indifference.¹⁴⁴ Spontaneity is the freedom to do what one wills without external compulsion. The freedom of indifference is the ability to do or not do without change or harm to oneself. Turretin affirms that God does indeed possess both kinds of freedom in that His will is not subject to an external force and that He could have chosen differently.

Finally, Turretin draws a distinction between kinds of things that may be willed.¹⁴⁵ The first is the principal thing willed. This kind of thing is necessarily willed as the ultimate end (what Aristotle called the final cause). The second is the secondary thing willed. Secondary things are willed freely as means. For example, one may will to go to the store, but how to get there, while necessary, is secondary. God wills Himself as the principle of His will necessarily and other things freely as means.

Following Aquinas and Turretin, several points can now be made. Some aspects of God's will are necessary. First, it is necessary *that* God will. If God is a personal agent, He must will something and, as the first cause, without God willing it is impossible that anything exist. Second, God's will is also necessary in the sense that, since God is His act of willing and God is eternal, what God wills He has willed eternally and as such is not subject to change or corruption. While critics argue that God must be free to change or to do otherwise, Dolezal points out that such a predicament, in God, is not a virtue but a vice.¹⁴⁶

In creatures, change in plans are the result of new motivations or new information, but God is perfect and all-knowing. He has no need to change. God does not move from potency to action to create. Rather, creation is the temporal effect of His eternal will.¹⁴⁷ Third, the character of God's will is necessary. Because God is simple, God's will, like God's essence, is good, just, holy, loving, and beautiful. God necessarily wills according to nature. Fourth, the direct object of God's will is necessary. Because God is identical with goodness, truth, and beauty, He must will Himself as the ultimate ends of all creation.¹⁴⁸ Finally, since God is omnipotent, what God wills will necessarily come to pass.

However, the particular things God has willed are not necessary but are logically possible to have been otherwise. God's willing a person to be six feet tall rather than five feet tall or born in Africa rather than America are all logically possible in that they do not pose an inherent contradiction, like a square circle. Thus, these things are *hypothetically* or *logically* possible. Such hypothetical change, contra Richards or Stump, does not represent composition, potential, or contingency in God. To say God could have done x instead of y is not to say there is potential in God.¹⁴⁹ Rather, it is to recognize the logical potential in creation to be x or y and to recognize that God does not stand in real relation to x or y to be what He is.

As pure act, God's attributes are nothing but the divine essence acting in space and time. Therefore, God is identical to His act of willing but not identical to the secondary objects willed. To posit identity between God and the creation He wills is to posit pantheism. Creation can hypothetically be different than it was without God being different and God is hypothetically free to create either world x or world y.

The issue of divine freedom is difficult to parse. However, this does not mean that some things cannot be said with confidence. Must God create? Yes, in the sense that He has eternally willed to create. Could He have logically willed not to create? Yes, because He is not dependent upon creation but is totally *a se*. Could He have created a different creation? Yes, creation could logically have been different than it is. Does this mean God would be different? No, because God is not formed by creation. The same simple God could have logically willed differently. Therefore, the challenge of divine freedom is not a defeater for DDS.

3. A Defense of a DDS Account of Trinitarianism

A final common objection to consider is that if God is simple He cannot be Trinity.¹⁵⁰ Richards states bluntly, "The most basic trinitarian claims are impossible to square with simplicity."¹⁵¹ He goes on

¹⁴⁹ Duby, "Divine Simplicity, Divine Freedom, and the Contingency of Creation," 139.

¹⁵⁰ Related to the issue is that of the incarnation. Critics argue that an absolutely simple God, who is pure act with no potential and cannot take on accidents, cannot take on humanity without introducing change in God. However, as Duby argues, consistently with the Chalcedonian Creed, the divine nature as such undergoes no change or addition. Rather, in the person of Jesus, the divine nature is united to the human nature. Duby, *Jesus and the God of Classical Theism*, 161. See also Leith, *Creeds of the Churches*, 35-36.

¹⁵¹ Richards, *The Untamed God*, 229.

¹⁴⁴ Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 1:219.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 1:219.

¹⁴⁶ Dolezal, *God without Parts*, 202.

¹⁴⁷ Duby, "Divine Simplicity, Divine Freedom, and the Contingency of Creation," 128.

¹⁴⁸ Charnock, *Discourses upon the Existence and Attributes of God*, 1:141.

to state, “The problem here is not with trinitarianism *per se* but with trinitarianism shackled with strong simplicity . . . surely the latter should give way.”¹⁵² Likewise, Moreland and Craig argue that the doctrine of the Trinity is a strong reason to reject DDS when they state, “Intuitively, it seems obvious that a being that is absolutely without composition and transcends all distinctions cannot have real relations subsisting within it, much less be three distinct persons.”¹⁵³ How can an absolutely simple being have *ad intra* distinctions?

While there have always been debates over the doctrine of the Trinity, the modern era has seen a renaissance of contemporary approaches. The tendency to collapse the processions and missions of the Trinity has been strong with Rahner’s Rule, named after the dictum of Karl Rahner: “The ‘economic’ Trinity is the ‘immanent’ Trinity and the ‘immanent’ Trinity is the ‘economic’ Trinity.”¹⁵⁴ Theologians have historically drawn a distinction between the immanent Trinity, which is God as He is in Himself, and the economic Trinity, which is God as He works in the world. To collapse these two conceptions of God is to define God by His activities such that God would not be God without them. In this model, “God is as God does.”¹⁵⁵ God is His actions in history and His actions are social. Therefore, God must be social in Himself.

The modern period has thus been characterized by various forms of social Trinitarianism. While these movements can vary greatly, the common denominator is that the oneness of the Trinity is not seen in oneness of being but in mutuality and oneness of relationship. For example, Jürgen Moltmann argues that “the concept of God’s unity cannot in the trinitarian sense be fitted into the homogeneity of the one divine substance, or into the identity of the absolute subject either; and least of all into one of the three Persons of the Trinity. It must be perceived in the perichoresis of the divine Persons.”¹⁵⁶ He states that these three are “three persons, one community”¹⁵⁷ and that their unity lies “in their fellowship, not in the identity of a single subject.”¹⁵⁸ This model fits well with Moltmann’s understanding

of the relationship between God and creation as mutually indwelling and completing each other.

Richard Swinburne, adapting this model, argues for three beings that are God.¹⁵⁹ The three persons are three individuals¹⁶⁰ who are one in the sense that they share the divine nature (like three humans share humanity) and are mutually dependent upon one another.¹⁶¹ Moreland and Craig also argue for a social trinitarian model. However, in their model, the three persons are parts of God.¹⁶² Each person is fully divine but is not the whole God. God, in this view, is a soul with three distinct centers of consciousness.¹⁶³ Only in this way, they argue, can the concept of personhood take on any real coherence.¹⁶⁴

In each of these models, the Trinity is three minds, three wills, and three personalities which are one in the sense of purpose, community, and nature, but they are not one in being, substance, and essence. Only these models, it is argued, can give true meaning to the distinction among the persons and give the world a model of loving community. By contrast, DDS insists that there is only one being that is God and the persons are three relations that are identical with the one divine essence. Turretin writes:

The orthodox faith is this: in the one and most simple essence of God there are three distinct persons so distinguished from each other by incommunicable properties or modes of subsisting that one cannot be the other—although by an inexpressible circum-in-session (*emperichoresin*) they always remain and exist in each other mutually. Thus the singular numerical essence is communicated to the three persons not as a species to individuals or as a second substance to the first (because it is singular and undivided), nor as a whole to its parts (since it is infinite and impartible); but as a singular nature to its own act of being (*suppositis*) in which it takes on various modes of subsisting.¹⁶⁵

Turretin presents several essential elements of the classical Trinitarian doctrine. There is only one

¹⁵² Richards, *The Untamed God*, 230.

¹⁵³ Moreland and Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*, 586.

¹⁵⁴ Karl Rahner, *The Trinity* (New York: Crossroad, 1970), 22.

¹⁵⁵ Matthew Barrett, *Simply Trinity*, 77.

¹⁵⁶ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 150.

¹⁵⁷ Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel and Jürgen Moltmann, *Humanity in God* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1983), 96.

¹⁵⁸ Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 95-96.

¹⁵⁹ Swinburne, *The Christian God*, 184.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 173-75.

¹⁶¹ Swinburne, *The Christian God*, 184.

¹⁶² Moreland and Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*, 591.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 594.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 587.

¹⁶⁵ Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 1:265.

numerical and simple essence that is God. Christians are monotheists in the metaphysical sense. Yet, this one God exists as three distinguishable persons. What distinguishes these persons are not individual essences, natures, intellects, or wills, but their personal properties (i.e., modes of subsisting).

In Turretin's view, the persons do not compose the divine essence but "characterize" it as particular modes of subsistence.¹⁶⁶ They do not exist alongside the divine nature, as if the divine nature is a thing that can be considered independently of the persons as a fourth thing. Rather, they are the divine essence subsisting in particular ways; the Father is unbegotten and begets, the Son is begotten, and the Spirit proceeds. These persons are not three individuals in the species of divinity as three individual humans in the species of humanity, nor are they three parts of God, but are identical to the singular nature of the one being of God. God is "simplicity in respect to essence, but Trinity in respect to persons."¹⁶⁷

Simplicity, then, does not preclude the persons. In his *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas, following in the tradition of Augustine and Anselm, writes, "The supreme unity and simplicity of God exclude every kind of plurality of absolute things, but not plurality of relations. Because relations are predicated relatively, and thus the relations do not import composition in that of which they are predicated."¹⁶⁸ While God cannot be composed of anything and remain simple, nonetheless, the one simple substance can be relationally distinguished.

First, the persons can be distinguished *ad intra* as subsisting relations. For Aquinas, the persons of God are the divine essence subsisting in three relations in the divine nature.¹⁶⁹ Butner writes, "A divine person is a unique subsistence of the singular and rational divine nature that is distinguished from yet inseparably united with the other divine persons by the divine relations."¹⁷⁰ While the persons are identical to the divine essence, they are *really* distinct from one another by virtue of opposing relations.¹⁷¹

In defining what it means to be a person, Aquinas, in agreement with Boethius, teaches that a person (*hypostasis*) is an "individual substance of a rational nature."¹⁷² In creatures, the person is the individuation of a human nature and possesses the

attributes of humanity. It is not just existence, rationality, or will that a person has; it is human existence, rationality, and will. However, DDS denies that God is composed of genus and species or nature and individuation. Therefore, the persons are the divine nature.

If the persons are the one, simple, divine nature, this means that the divine persons do not each have their own existence, rationality, or will. Rather, their existence, rationality, and will comes from their one divine nature. The Father, Son, and Spirit each think and will by virtue of the one divine essence. The persons, then, are modes of that divine essence toward one another. They are the one divine essence thinking and willing. Rather than being three exemplifications of the divine nature, each person exists identically to and in the divine essence and in, but distinct from, each other in what theologians call "perichoresis." Each person is considered in light of both their divine nature, which is common, and their personal relations, which are unique.¹⁷³

These relations do not proceed out of God, but from within, communicating the same nature.¹⁷⁴ These relations are not different than the divine essence, which would create a fourth thing, but are the same as the essence. "Everything that is not the divine essence," Aquinas writes, "is a creature."¹⁷⁵ The relations are not parts of God or external to God, but eternal relations in the divine essence. Augustine, on this basis, argues that anything predicated of the divine nature is true of all three persons, yet is true singularly by virtue of the divine nature. God is good, but there are not three goods. God is great, but there are not three greats. These things are predicated of God absolutely and of the persons relatively.¹⁷⁶

The key, then, for Aquinas' Trinitarian understanding of simplicity is that relations are not accidents in God.¹⁷⁷ If they were, they would be additions to God, parts of God, and would not be all that God is. As Dolezal writes, "Relation is predicated properly of God because, unlike all other accidents, its specific character is not found in its reference to the subject it describes, but in its reference of one subject to another."¹⁷⁸ The relations

¹⁷³ White, "Divine Simplicity and the Holy Trinity," 86.

¹⁷⁴ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.27.2.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.28.2.

¹⁷⁶ Augustine, *On the Trinity*, 5.8.9. Athanasian Creed echoes this conviction in teaching that there are three who are uncreated, immeasurable, eternal, almighty, and God, yet there are not three uncreated, immeasurable, eternal beings or three almighties, Gods, or Lords.

¹⁷⁷ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.28.2.

¹⁷⁸ Dolezal, "Trinity, Simplicity, and the Status of God's Personal Relations," 84.

¹⁶⁶ Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 1:192-93.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 1:193.

¹⁶⁸ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.30.1.3.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.39.1.

¹⁷⁰ Butner, *Trinitarian Dogmatics*, 127.

¹⁷¹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.39.1.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 1.29.1.1.

add nothing to the essence. Rather, they describe the essence relationally.

Second, then, the persons can be distinguished *ad intra* by their relations of origin. Because the persons are the divine essence subsisting, they must be distinguished by the manner in which they subsist. What distinguishes the persons of Father, Son, and Spirit are their opposing relations. The Father begets the Son (paternity), and the Son is begotten of the Father (filiation). The Father and the Son breathe out the Spirit (spiration) and the Spirit proceeds from the Father and Son (procession).¹⁷⁹ These, and only these, Aquinas argues, are sufficient to distinguish these persons *ad intra*.¹⁸⁰

These relations make Father truly Father and Son truly Son.¹⁸¹ In them, the Father communicates the divine essence to the Son, and the Father and Son communicate the divine essence to the Spirit. Without them, these relations are left to be mere social relations.¹⁸² In classical Trinitarianism, the relations are real relations brought about through processions in which the Father passionlessly communicates eternally the simple divine essence, such that the Father alone is unbegotten, but the Son is eternally begotten and the Spirit eternally proceeds from Father and Son. Because the one, simple, divine essence is being communicated, the three persons are not parts of God, nor are they three beings or accidental additions to the divine nature.¹⁸³

Finally, the persons can be distinguished *ad extra* through appropriations. As one being, God works inseparably in all He does. The persons do not act according to individual minds, powers, or wills. As John of Damascus states, in God there is:

one essence, one divinity, one power,
one will, one energy, one beginning,
one authority, one dominion, one
sovereignty, made known in three
perfect subsistences and adored with
one adoration, believed in and

¹⁷⁹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.28.3-4.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.41.1.

¹⁸¹ Athanasius, "Four Discourses against the Arians," in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Archibald Robertson, vol. 4, 2 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2012), 1.5.

¹⁸² Proponents of the Eternal Functional Subordination view often argue that Son is Son by virtue of submission. However, reading relations of authority into God *ad intra* equates to positing multiple wills in God, a denial of simplicity. For more on this view, see D. Glenn Butner Jr., "Eternal Functional Subordination and the Problem of the Divine Will," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 58, no. 1 (2015).

¹⁸³ John Webster, *God without Measure: Working Papers in Christian Theology: Volume 1: God and the Works of God* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), 123-24.

ministered to by all rational creation,
united without confusion and divided
without separation.¹⁸⁴

However, while the three persons always act as the one God, they do so according to their own mode of subsistence. As Duby states, "Each of the persons does not have or express a distinct act of knowing, willing, or effecting things. But each of the persons has and expresses the one act distinctly."¹⁸⁵ He also states, "Each person, strictly speaking, does not 'possess' (much less have to acquire) God's essential knowing, willing, and loving but rather *is* that knowing, willing, and loving in his proper manner of being."¹⁸⁶

Therefore, the essential attributes of God exist in all three persons but do so uniquely according to their particular relations.¹⁸⁷ In their missions, various attributes and works can be appropriated in special ways to the persons as is fitting of their eternal relations of origin.¹⁸⁸ For example, in Ephesians 1 where the Father is said to elect, the Son is said to redeem, and the Spirit is said to seal, it is the one God who is saving, but each person is carrying out salvation according to their personal properties.

Does this picture of the persons do justice to the biblical data, particularly that of Jesus' descriptions of His relations with the Father and the Spirit? Does this classical account adequately capture the language of genuine love for one another in the Trinity?¹⁸⁹ It does if, unlike critics, one understands that the ways in which Jesus spoke was that of analogy and accommodation. Jesus used human concepts to communicate true but radically greater concepts in divine relations. As Duby argues, there are good reasons to affirm DDS and thus a strong impetus for affirming an analogical predication of personhood.¹⁹⁰

By insisting on real relations of the one, undivided essence, DDS is not only compatible with trinitarianism, but it actually establishes and enables it. DDS is what makes trinitarianism possible in the first place. As Gilles Emery notes, "The divine simplicity is a Trinitarian doctrine. It is essential for

¹⁸⁴ John of Damascus, *An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, trans. S.D.F. Salmond, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 9, 2 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2012), 1.6.

¹⁸⁵ Duby, *Jesus and the God of Classical Theism*, 65.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 77.

¹⁸⁷ Emery, *The Trinity*, 165.

¹⁸⁸ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.7.1.

¹⁸⁹ In fact, Augustine used the concept of love to illustrate the persons. God is love and thus is Father (the Lover), the Son (the Loved), and the Spirit (the Love). Augustine, "On the Holy Trinity," 8.10.14.

¹⁹⁰ Duby, *Divine Simplicity: A Dogmatic Account*, 214-15.

grasping the identity of substance of the three persons.”¹⁹¹ Ironically, while the argument that a simple God cannot be triune is often cited against DDS, historically, it was through DDS that the early Church established Trinitarianism. Only by holding to DDS was the Church throughout history able to maintain monotheism.¹⁹²

For example, DDS guards against Modalism/Sabellianism. DDS provides theologians with a language to speak of the oneness of God while maintaining distinction without division. Further, because God is simple, He is unchanging. Therefore, the Father cannot become various modes, but, if God is Father, Son, and Spirit, and He is simple, He must eternally be Father, Son, and Spirit. If the relations in God are real, then God is not one being playing three roles but is eternally and simultaneously three persons.

DDS also guards against Arianism. Because the Son proceeds from the Father’s divine essence eternally, He is of the same nature as the Father, *homoousia*, not of a similar nature, *homoousia*. By maintaining simplicity, contra the Arians, simplicity enables a full defense of the Son’s deity. If God generates the Son, and is simple, He does so eternally without change and thus the Son is eternally God, not a creation in time.

DDS further guards against tri-theism. By arguing that the divine persons are nothing but the single, simple, divine essence, monotheism is preserved against tri-theism and the idea that there are multiple divine beings. The three persons are not parts of God or distinct beings, but are three subsistences of the one simple nature, identical to the divine essence, nature, will, and mind.

Conclusion

Though DDS is not presented in Scripture using the developed terminology of the later centuries, it is nonetheless taken from biblical data, using philosophical language to make sense of the data, and its philosophical commitments are not inherently incoherent. Rather, the incoherence with which DDS is charged is often the case of imposing an alien metaphysic or of confusing categories. DDS should be adhered to and should serve as a theological foundation for apologetics.

¹⁹¹ Emery, *The Trinity*, 91.

¹⁹² Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520-c.a. 1725*, 2nd ed., vol. 4 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 199.