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A SIMPLE ANSWER:  
DIVINE SIMPLICITY AND THE TASK OF CHRISTIAN APOLOGETICS

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To my wife, Shawna, and my daughters, Hannah, Brenna, and Kaylee,  
for your love, support, encouragement, patience, and forgiveness,  
which surpass all my understanding



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(1 Cor 15:58 NAU)

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## ABSTRACT

This project explores the apologetic and polemic implications of the doctrine of divine simplicity (DDS), seeking to fill the gap between defenses of the coherence of DDS and its apologetic implications. This dissertation will argue that a commitment to a classical understanding of divine simplicity provides an essential foundation for apologetic and polemic arguments for the Christian faith. The author will show that contemporary apologists who reject or redefine a classical understanding of divine simplicity are out of step with the history of the church and are undermining their own arguments with a deficient Theology Proper. Instead, like the theologians of old, commitment to a classical understanding of DDS can enable contemporary apologists to make effective apologetic arguments defending Christianity and polemic arguments against other religious viewpoints.

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

“There is but one only living and true God, who is infinite in being and perfections, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions, immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty, most wise, most holy, most free, most absolute, working all things according to the counsel of his own immutable and most righteous will, for his own glory.”<sup>1</sup>

—The Westminster Confession of Faith

#### **Introduction**

God is simple. This doctrinal assertion may seem like a contradiction in terms, as the subject of Theology Proper is complex in its vastness and detail. After all, exploring the subject the doctrine of God is the height of human purpose, experience, and joy. God created mankind to know, love, honor, glorify, and enjoy Him and such pursuit should never be assumed to be simplistic, easy, or merely academic.<sup>2</sup> As Augustine wrote when he began his treatise on the Trinity, “inquire into the unity of the Trinity, of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit; because in no other subject is error more dangerous, or inquiry more laborious, or the discovery of truth more profitable.”<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, though the doctrine of God is complex, theologians, creeds, and councils throughout the history of the Church have affirmed that God Himself, in His

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<sup>1</sup> John H. Leith, ed., “The Westminster Confession (1649),” in *Creeds of the Churches: A Reader in Christian Doctrine from the Bible to the Present*, 3rd ed. (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1982), 197.

<sup>2</sup> As put forward in verses such as Eccl 12:13 and Matt 22:37-38 and summarized in the Westminster Shorter Catechism as the chief end of man.

<sup>3</sup> Augustine, “The City of God,” in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, trans. Marcus Dods, vol. 2, 1 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 1.3.2.

essence, is fundamentally simple. He lacks all parts, complexity, and composition.

While there are many complex aspects of studying God, theologians have affirmed, in the spirit of Winston Churchill, that the only thing simple about God is the essence of God Himself.

### **A Summary of the Doctrine of Divine Simplicity**

The doctrine of divine simplicity (DDS) is a negative, or “apophatic,” description of God that declares that He lacks all composition. God is not a sum of lesser parts, as if one could add up the attributes of God to make a deity the way one might add the pieces of a pie together to get a whole pie. God is not composed of various attributes, material parts, existence and essence, act and potential, form and matter, or substance and accidents.<sup>4</sup> He is pure act (actuality).

Despite DDS being a negative description, several affirmative implications follow from this description of God’s simplicity. First, because God does not possess parts, He does not possess attributes, but rather is identical with them.<sup>5</sup> If God lacks all composition, then the divine perfections simply are the divine essence. God is His attributes and is identical to His essence. As James E. Dolezal has stated so comprehensively, “all that is in God is God.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See the discussions of DDS in Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, vol. 1, Christian Classics (Notre Dame: Ava Maria Press, 1948), 1.3; Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison Jr., trans. George Musgrave Giger, vol. 1 (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1992), 191-94, James E. Dolezal, *All That Is in God: Evangelical Theology and the Challenge of Classical Christian Theism* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2017), 41-44.

<sup>5</sup> James E. Dolezal, *God without Parts: Divine Simplicity and the Metaphysics of God’s Absoluteness* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011), 2.

<sup>6</sup> Dolezal, *All That Is in God: Evangelical Theology and the Challenge of Classical Christian Theism*, 41.

Second, if the divine attributes are identical to the divine essence, then they are, in some sense, identical to one another. God's love, holiness, power, knowledge, existence, and essence are not separate properties but simply are the one undivided essence.<sup>7</sup> If two attributes are identical to God, then, in keeping with the law of identity, they must be identical to one another. The attributes of God must somehow be one in God in ways that are unique to Him.

Third, given that these attributes are identical in God but are not identical in human creatures,<sup>8</sup> God's attributes can only be spoken of in analogical terms rather than in univocal or equivocal ones.<sup>9</sup> Analogical language means one cannot speak of God as if the terms used of Him and the terms used of humans possess one-to-one correspondence. Such a correspondence breaks down the creator-creation distinction that is seen in passages like Romans 1:18-25. God is not subject to the same limits, weaknesses, and change as humans.

God also cannot be spoken of as if there is no correspondence between terms, leaving God completely unknowable. Rather, because God is His attributes and we can know Him in some sense, we must speak in similar terms where the attributes that humans share with Him are compared analogically.<sup>10</sup> In Hosea 11:8-9, God bases His

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<sup>7</sup> Dolezal, *All That Is in God*, 2.

<sup>8</sup> For example, one can conceive of a chair that is red, plastic, and one hundred feet tall. However, while that chair may exist in the mind, it does not necessarily exist in the real world. Existence and essence are different things in creation. Likewise, a human is not identical with existence. The idea of humanity can exist apart from actual or individual humans. This is not the case with God. God is His own existence in that He is life and being itself and does not participate in these realities.

<sup>9</sup> Dolezal, *God without Parts*, 29.

<sup>10</sup> For a summary of this concept, see Norman Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Bethany House, 2003), 21-26.

actions in not destroying Israel on the fact that He is God and not man when He states, “I will not carry out My fierce anger; I will not destroy Ephraim again. For I am God and not a man, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath.”<sup>11</sup> Because God is God, He does not destroy His people as if He is subject to the same fleeting passions. God shows anger, but His anger is not grounded in emotional states, but rather in His eternal nature. God’s anger is similar to man’s but only analogically.

Fourth, since DDS necessitates the absolute uniqueness and oneness of God, it also follows that when the Scriptures speak of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, these three “persons”<sup>12</sup> are not three gods, but are identical with the one, undivided, divine essence. A commitment to the classical description of DDS leads to speaking of these three persons as three modes of subsistence or relations of the one essence, rather than as individual centers of consciousness, three beings, three gods, or three parts of God.<sup>13</sup> Though they are truly and eternally distinct, these persons are not differentiated according to individual centers of personhood, such as will, mind, or nature, but are differentiated according to their eternal relations of origin.<sup>14</sup> The Father is unbegotten, the Son is eternally begotten, and the Spirit eternally proceeds from the Father and

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<sup>11</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture is taken from the New American Standard Bible (La Habra, CA: Lockman Foundation, 2020).

<sup>12</sup> The language of “persons” as applied to the Father, Son, and Spirit has been historically problematic and often misunderstood, leading to various interpretations of the idea. See Gilles Emery, *The Trinity: An Introduction to Catholic Doctrine on the Triune God*, trans. Matthew Levering (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2011), 100-10.

<sup>13</sup> This is not to be confused with what has often been called “Modalism,” which posits that there is one divine Person who portrays Himself at various points in history as Father, Son, or Spirit.

<sup>14</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.40.2. See also James E. Dolezal, “Trinity, Simplicity, and the Status of God’s Personal Relations,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 16, no. 1 (January 2014).

Son. These three persons are relations of God *ad intra* who share the one essence, nature, will, and mind of God but who work inseparably in the world *ad extra*.<sup>15</sup>

DDS flows from texts in Scripture that address God's oneness, unity, being, and immaterial nature, such as Exodus 3:14, Deuteronomy 6:4, and John 4:24, as well as other texts that identify God with His attributes. For example, in 1 John 4:8, God does not merely love, but He *is* love. Further, many of God's attributes—such as His aseity, immutability, eternality, infinity, impassibility, and status as creator of all—entail DDS.<sup>16</sup> As Herman Bavinck writes, “This simplicity is of great importance, nevertheless, for our understanding of God. It is not only taught in Scripture (where God is called ‘light,’ ‘life,’ and ‘love’) but also automatically follows from the idea of God and is necessarily implied in the other attributes.”<sup>17</sup> Simplicity enables theologians to make sense of the biblical data of God's attributes by denying that God is composed of material, changeable, or temporal parts upon which He would depend. For this reason, Peter Sanlon writes, “The simplicity of God is the most fundamental doctrinal grammar of divinity.”<sup>18</sup>

DDS has enjoyed consistent and wide-ranging support throughout history.

Richard Muller has written, “The doctrine of divine simplicity is among the normative

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<sup>15</sup> D. Glenn Butner Jr., *Trinitarian Dogmatics: Exploring the Grammar of the Christian Doctrine of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2022), 75-99. See also Matthew Barrett, *Simply Trinity: The Unmanipulated Father, Son, and Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2021).

<sup>16</sup> See discussion in Steven J. Duby, *Divine Simplicity: A Dogmatic Account*, T&T Clark Studies in Systematic Theology, vol. 30 (New York: T&T Clark, 2018), 91-177.

<sup>17</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, Vol. 2: God and Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 176.

<sup>18</sup> Peter Sanlon, *Simply God: Recovering the Classical Trinity* (Nottingham, England: InterVarsity, 2014), 58.

assumptions of theology from the time of the church fathers, to the age of the great medieval scholastic systems, to the era of Reformation and post-Reformation theology, and indeed, on into the succeeding era of late orthodoxy and rationalism.”<sup>19</sup> The most notable theologians of old who assumed and utilized divine simplicity include Irenaeus, Athenagoras, Augustine, Athanasius, Basil, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Hilary of Poitiers, Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, John of Damascus, Anselm, Boethius, Duns Scotus, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Owen, Charnock, and Turretin, as well as many others.<sup>20</sup> Some contemporary theologians even claim that to be an orthodox Trinitarian Christian is to hold to divine simplicity.<sup>21</sup>

From the early years of the Church to modern times, DDS has been embraced, proclaimed, enshrined in confessions, and utilized to do theological, polemic, and apologetic work. This project contends that one way this doctrine functioned in history was to defend the orthodox Christian faith against criticisms and to attack pagan beliefs.<sup>22</sup> Ancient theologians argued from a particular view of God’s nature against the various worldviews of their day. By appealing to DDS, apologists throughout history were able to distinguish Christianity from the religions and cults around them.

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<sup>19</sup> Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to c.a. 1725*, 2nd ed., vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 39.

<sup>20</sup> These theologians held differing versions of DDS, some stronger and some weaker. This author will explore these differences in later chapters. For an external discussion on these differences, see Gavin Ortlund, “Divine Simplicity in Historical Perspective: Resourcing a Contemporary Discussion,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 16, no. 4 (2014).

<sup>21</sup> Stephen R. Holmes, “The Attributes of God,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology*, ed. John Webster, Kathryn Tanner, and Iain Torrance (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 65.

<sup>22</sup> Ortlund, “Divine Simplicity in Historical Perspective,” 441-43.



These men often appealed to DDS to defend the Trinity, demonstrate God as the one eternal cause, and combat polytheism against paganism, Islam, heresy, and cults.

### **Contemporary Apologetic Criticisms**

In spite of the long tradition and polemic and apologetic function of commitment to DDS, many contemporary theologians, philosophers, and apologists are calling the doctrine into question. Philosopher Ronald Nash has stated, “The doctrine of divine simplicity has a public relations problem.”<sup>23</sup> Some are calling for the doctrine to be modified to bring it in line with contemporary theological and philosophical commitments, while others are calling for DDS to be rejected entirely.

This rejection of DDS is especially true among theologians who function as apologists. Numerous theologians have criticized the doctrine from various angles.<sup>24</sup> In response, this dissertation will focus on how DDS serves to ground apologetic arguments by considering the criticisms of modern theologians and philosophers who have contributed significantly to the field of apologetics. In what follows, this author will present both the objections and defenses of DDS.

The list of contemporary critics of divine simplicity in the field of apologetics is long and distinguished. These men not only have written in the fields of systematic

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<sup>23</sup> Ronald H. Nash, *The Concept of God: An Exploration of Contemporary Difficulties with the Attributes of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 85.

<sup>24</sup> See Millard J. Erickson, *God the Father Almighty: A Contemporary Exploration of the Divine Attributes* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 210-32; Paul R. Hinlicky, *Divine Simplicity: Christ the Crisis of Metaphysics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016); Christopher Hughes, *On a Complex Theory of a Simple God: An Investigation in Aquinas' Philosophical Theology*, *Cornell Studies in the Philosophy of Religion* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989); and Thomas V. Morris, *Our Idea of God: An Introduction to Philosophical Theology* (Vancouver, BC: Regent College, 1991), 113-18.

theology and philosophy, but also have contributed to the field of apologetics at various levels. Among these apologist theologians and philosophers are such persons as Alvin Plantinga,<sup>25</sup> J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig,<sup>26</sup> R. T. Mullins,<sup>27</sup> Richard Swinburne,<sup>28</sup> Ronald Nash,<sup>29</sup> John Frame,<sup>30</sup> John S. Feinberg,<sup>31</sup> Jay W. Richards,<sup>32</sup> and K. Scott Oliphint.<sup>33</sup> Some of these writers wish to reject the doctrine outright, believing it to be unbiblical, wrong, and unnecessary. Others have sought to retain certain aspects, such as God being without physical parts, while rejecting or redefining the classic elements of the doctrine as presented above.

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<sup>25</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?* The Aquinas Lecture Series, 44 (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2017), 26-62.

<sup>26</sup> J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2003), 524-26.

<sup>27</sup> R. T. Mullins, "Simply Impossible: A Case against Divine Simplicity," *Journal of Reformed Theology* 7, no. 2 (2013). <https://philarchive.org/archive/MULSIA-2>.

<sup>28</sup> Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Clarendon Library of Logic and Philosophy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 258-60.

<sup>29</sup> Nash, *The Concept of God*, 85-97.

<sup>30</sup> As with others, Frame does adopt a version of simplicity. See John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God, Vol. 2: A Theology of Lordship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2002), 225-30. However, he revises it from his classical understanding, arguing that there is both simplicity and complexity in God. See John M. Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2013), 428-33.

<sup>31</sup> John S. Feinberg, *No One Like Him: The Doctrine of God*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology (Wheaton, IL.: Crossway, 2001), 325-37.

<sup>32</sup> Jay W. Richards, *The Untamed God: A Philosophical Exploration of Divine Perfection, Simplicity, and Immutability* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2003), 213-40.

<sup>33</sup> In 2019, Oliphint was charged with teaching views contrary to the Westminster Confession for his work in K. Scott Oliphint, *God with Us: Divine Condescension and the Attributes of God* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011). In this book, he defined immutability in such a way that it appeared to allow God to take on new attributes, which he calls "covenantal attributes." If this is true, then God is not identical to His attributes without changing in His essence. Oliphint later revised his statements, but all statements on the issue have been removed from Westminster Theological Seminary's website. However, his views of God taking on covenantal attributes are found throughout his other writings as well, such as in K. Scott Oliphint, *The Majesty of Mystery: Celebrating the Glory of an Incomprehensible God* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016), 72-75.

These contemporary theologians and philosophers have put forward several objections to DDS that can be found throughout their writings. First, they argue that DDS, as classically interpreted, is not explicitly found in Scripture. After all, there are no verses that state the doctrine clearly and succinctly. There is no 3 Corinthians 3:11 that says, “God is simple and identical to His essence, such that His attributes are one in Him.” For DDS to succeed and be of any value, it must first be taught in Scripture. However, many of these opponents argue that it is not even implied, much less supported, by the biblical authors.

Second, many argue that the implication of DDS that God’s attributes are identical to Him and thus identical to one another is absurd. For instance, power and love are clearly differentiated. One can be powerful and not loving and thus be a tyrant. One can be loving and not powerful and be impotent. Still further, being loving and powerful is far from being eternal and all knowing. To posit what is called the identity thesis,<sup>34</sup> that all God’s attributes are one in Him, is to run contrary to that which appears self-evident.

Third, many of these critics have contended that DDS reduces God to a nature. If God is identical to a nature, then God *is* a nature instead of a person. If God is a nature, how can He be personal and active in the ways in which Scripture indicates? After all, natures do not do things; persons do. For example, Stuart’s human nature does not love his wife or kids; Stuart loves his wife and kids. Stuart’s human nature

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<sup>34</sup> Dolezal, *God without Parts*, 125.

does not know things, go to work, or pay his taxes; Stuart does these things. To posit DDS, it is argued, is to identify God as an impersonal force.

Fourth, critics often argue that DDS's reliance on analogical language leaves Christians without the ability to know God as He is. If nothing can be predicated of God univocally, how can any language result in true knowledge? The only way a person can describe a thing is if those descriptions truly apply. But it seems that DDS leaves Christians in a state of agnosticism about God, only being able to describe what God is not rather than what He is.

Fifth, DDS critics argue that the doctrine makes a full Trinitarian theology impossible. The DDS account of the Trinity, in which the persons of the Trinity are not individual centers of will, knowledge, and emotion but are the one, undivided divine essence subsisting in three eternal relations, seems to take away all personal descriptions and traits and leave the persons very impersonal. Such a strong commitment to DDS would seem to erase the real separations and distinctions of the divine Persons and lead to Modalism or Unitarianism.

Sixth, critics of DDS point out the inherent limitations the doctrine places on God's freedom. DDS, they argue, leaves God without real freedom to be or do other than what He is or does, leading to a modal collapse. If God is identical with His attributes and is pure act without mixture of potential and act, then it would seem that God is identical with His knowledge and will. If that is the case, then it would logically follow that God could not know or will other than what He does without being other than He is. In this model, not only would creation be necessary for God to be what He is, this specific creation would be necessary for God to be what He is. On

this basis, the critics argue that DDS destroys God's genuine freedom to create or not create or to know counterfactuals.

For DDS proponents, these objections are cause for great concern both for theology and philosophy, as well as for apologetics. If these criticisms are legitimate, it would seem that DDS is a great hindrance to apologetics and a liability for apologists rather than an asset or foundation for such a discipline. On this basis, many theologians and philosophers over the last several decades have discarded the doctrine and have sought new models of Theology Proper that can bear the weight of contemporary philosophical concerns. Often, those who reject or redefine the classical version of DDS replace it with language of covenantal change, forms of social trinitarianism, and even process theology.

### **Contemporary Retrievals**

The contemporary criticisms and alternative approaches to Theology Proper in theology, philosophy, and apologetics have led a renewal of interest in classical theism in general and DDS in particular across various ecumenical perspectives. While many contemporary theologians, philosophers, and apologists argue that DDS is untenable and unhelpful, others interested in theological retrieval and renewal argue that DDS has been nearly universally affirmed throughout history and should be believed, embraced, and taken seriously in the modern world.

Numerous theologians and philosophers defended both classical theism and divine simplicity. Among the theologians and philosophers aiming to retrieve and strengthen DDS at the scholarly and popular levels are Norman L.

Geisler,<sup>35</sup> James Dolezal,<sup>36</sup> Steven Duby,<sup>37</sup> Jordan P. Barrett,<sup>38</sup> Stephen R. Holmes,<sup>39</sup> D. Stephen Long,<sup>40</sup> Oliver Crisp,<sup>41</sup> Brian Davies,<sup>42</sup> William E. Mann,<sup>43</sup> Eleonore Stump,<sup>44</sup> Katherin A. Rogers,<sup>45</sup> Gavin Ortlund,<sup>46</sup> Matthew Barrett,<sup>47</sup> Jeffrey E. Brower,<sup>48</sup> and Brian Leftow.<sup>49</sup> These theologians argue that

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<sup>35</sup> Norman L. Geisler, H. Wayne House, and Max Herrera, *The Battle for God: Responding to the Challenge of Neotheism* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2001), 142-69.

<sup>36</sup> Dolezal has written two important books on retrieving simplicity. See Dolezal, *God without Parts*; and Dolezal, *All That Is in God*.

<sup>37</sup> Duby, *Divine Simplicity*.

<sup>38</sup> Jordan P. Barrett, *Divine Simplicity: A Biblical and Trinitarian Account*, Emerging Scholars (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017).

<sup>39</sup> Stephen R. Holmes, “‘Something Much Too Plain to Say’ Towards a Defence of the Doctrine of Divine Simplicity,” *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 43, no. 1 (2001).

<sup>40</sup> D. Stephen Long, *The Perfectly Simple Triune God: Aquinas and His Legacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016).

<sup>41</sup> Oliver D. Crisp, “A Parsimonious Model of Divine Simplicity,” *Modern Theology* 35, no. 3 (2019).

<sup>42</sup> Brian Davies, “A Modern Defence of Divine Simplicity,” in *Philosophy of Religion: A Guide and Anthology*, ed. Brian Davies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>43</sup> William E. Mann, “Divine Simplicity,” *Religious Studies* 18, no. 4 (1982).

<sup>44</sup> Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, “Absolute Simplicity,” *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers* 2, no. (1985).

<sup>45</sup> Katherin A. Rogers, “The Traditional Doctrine of Divine Simplicity,” *Religious Studies* 32, no. 2 (1966).

<sup>46</sup> Gavin Ortlund, *Theological Retrieval for Evangelicals: Why We Need Our Past to Have a Future* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2019).

<sup>47</sup> Matthew Barrett, *Simply Trinity*. See also Matthew Barrett, *The Reformation as Renewal: Retrieving the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2023).

<sup>48</sup> Jeffrey E. Brower, “Simplicity and Aseity,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Theology*, ed. Thomas P. Flint and Michael C. Rea (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>49</sup> Brian Leftow, “Divine Simplicity,” *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers* 23, no. 4 (2006).

DDS, and classical theism as a whole, has been attacked and ignored with disastrous consequences. They claim that DDS is both biblically grounded and philosophically defensible. These retrieval theologians have responded to many of the criticisms of their opponents, and though much work remains, they have offered meaningful defenses of the doctrine. They have argued that divine simplicity, far from being a hindrance, is essential to maintaining Trinitarian orthodoxy and Christian uniqueness. F. J. Sheed states this sentiment strongly when he writes, “A study of what is happening to theology in its higher reaches would almost certainly take as its starting point the attribute of simplicity and show that every current heresy begins by being wrong on that.”<sup>50</sup>

### **Research Question**

As noted, among those who reject or significantly redefine DDS are many contemporary theologians and philosophers who are active in the field of apologetics. These apologists, in making the case for the truth of the Christian faith and in interacting with opposing worldviews, have called DDS into question and have sought to develop a Theology Proper that can withstand the criticisms of those they seek to engage. In response, the question this project will address is, beyond merely the concern of DDS’s coherence, what is lost in apologetics by rejecting or redefining it?

The contention of this project is that, in rejecting or redefining DDS, these apologists leave several holes that have been unconvincingly addressed. For example, many wish to argue that God is a necessary being, yet without divine simplicity,

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<sup>50</sup> F. J. Sheed, “The Modern Attitude to God,” in *God: Papers Read at the Summer School of Catholic Studies* (Cambridge: Sheed and Ward, 1930), 232.

precisely how can God be necessary for His own existence? Many who reject simplicity argue for a social form of Trinitarianism in which each person possesses the divine nature, much like three humans possess the human nature. Yet, how can such a model be truly consistent with a monotheistic view of God? How does such a model avoid the charge of tri-theism, the very attack Islam brings against Christianity?

In other cases, some of these apologists deny simplicity while appealing to it to make an argument. For example, William Lane Craig strongly denies the classical formulation of DDS. Yet, when confronted with the infamous Euthyphro dilemma as to whether God wills something because it is good (which would make “good” a Platonic standard to which God appeals) or whether something is good because God wills it (in which case “goodness” is arbitrary), Craig argues that there is a third option. Craig argues that God wills something because He is good.<sup>51</sup> In other words, what God wills is consistent with His nature. Since goodness is essential to God’s nature, God’s will is essentially good. But this is a component of divine simplicity. If God is not identical with goodness, then God must participate in goodness and the non-Christian has grounds for complaint.

While work has been done to defend DDS, far less has been written to expound upon its apologetic implications, though this was a major function of the doctrine throughout history. Such a function is only hinted at in many writings and is never fully engaged. Various authors have begun to explore these implications by exploring

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<sup>51</sup> William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 181-82.



individual arguments. Brian Leftow,<sup>52</sup> Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann,<sup>53</sup> Edward Feser,<sup>54</sup> Matthew Levering,<sup>55</sup> Robert J. Spitzer,<sup>56</sup> and numerous others have written articles or chapters claiming that simplicity can serve to ground apologetic arguments. These works recognize that divine simplicity serves to establish God as the first cause, as the source and standard of goodness, as the sole monotheistic deity, while maintaining His triunity, and as distinct from His creation.

To date, however, no work has presented a comprehensive case for this concept, and few, possibly none, have applied it specifically to engaging various systems. Ortlund has noted such absence when he writes, “To consider divine simplicity as an aspect of divine beauty, or to utilize it in the context of theistic apologetics, is to step into a larger domain of concerns than is typically present in contemporary treatments of the doctrine.”<sup>57</sup>

This dissertation serves to defend the merits of DDS and to strengthen the arguments of classical apologetics to demonstrate pragmatically that, by holding to a certain view of God, numerous apologetics concerns are defeated, and numerous polemic tools are created. As William F. Vallicela points out, “If true, the simplicity

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<sup>52</sup> Brian Leftow, “Individual and Attribute in the Ontological Argument,” *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers* 7, no. 2 (1990).

<sup>53</sup> Stump and Kretzmann, “Absolute Simplicity,” 375-78.

<sup>54</sup> Edward Feser, *Five Proofs for the Existence of God* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2017), 69-86.

<sup>55</sup> Matthew Levering, *Proofs of God: Classical Arguments from Tertullian to Barth* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 78.

<sup>56</sup> Robert J. Spitzer, *New Proofs for the Existence of God: Contributions of Contemporary Physics and Philosophy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 110-43.

<sup>57</sup> Ortlund, *Theological Retrieval for Evangelicals*, 123.

doctrine promises the theist considerable advantages: a possible way around the Euthyphro Paradox, an explanation of why God is a necessary being, and a premise for a short non-modal ontological argument.”<sup>58</sup>

### **Thesis**

This present project will seek to fill the gap between defenses of the coherence of DDS and its apologetic implications. *This dissertation will argue that a commitment to a classical understanding of divine simplicity provides an essential foundation for apologetic and polemic arguments for the Christian faith.* This author will show that contemporary apologists who reject or redefine a classical understanding of divine simplicity are undermining their own arguments with a deficient Theology Proper, opening themselves to rebuttal by those they seek to convince. Instead, like the theologians of old, commitment to a classical understanding of DDS can enable contemporary apologists to make effective apologetic arguments defending Christianity and polemic arguments against other religious viewpoints.

### **Methodology**

This project will argue for the polemic and apologetic function of DDS. This demonstration will begin in chapter 2 with a literature review of the debate concerning DDS. While the subject of DDS has been widely engaged and discussed, the apologetic implications of the doctrine have only been minimally examined. The various names and writings of those mentioned in chapter 1 will be examined and

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<sup>58</sup> William F. Vallicella, “Divine Simplicity: A New Defense,” *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers* 9, no. 4 (1992): 508.

summarized to understand the criticisms of DDS and the contemporary attempts at retrieval. Chapter 2 will also present and examine the works of authors who have noted the apologetic implications of DDS to show what has already been said and to argue that there is much work to be done.

Chapter 3 will offer a biblical and philosophical presentation and defense of DDS. This doctrine should not be accepted for purely pragmatic reasons but rather, first and foremost, because it is true to the text of Holy Scripture and because it is coherent. This chapter will present a unified definition of DDS and will defend it from Scripture and against three philosophical criticisms; namely, the criticisms of the identity thesis, the charge of modal collapse, and the charge that the doctrine makes the Trinity impossible and incoherent.

The argument of this project will be shown in chapter 4. This chapter will argue that when theologians throughout history discussed DDS, it was often in apologetic or polemic contexts to argue for the truth of the Christian faith. These theologians assumed a particular view of God, often called “classical theism” that included DDS, and this Theology Proper grounded their apologetic arguments. When interacting with paganism, Islam, atheism, or cults, orthodox Christians often assumed or appealed to DDS to make their case. Without DDS, it will be shown, many classical arguments lose their force.

In chapters 5 and 6, two constructive case studies will be presented to demonstrate how grounding apologetics and polemics in a classical view of DDS might work today. In chapter 5, as an argument against atheism, William Lane Craig’s *Kalam* cosmological argument will be analyzed in light of his rejection of a classical

understanding of DDS. Craig uses the principles of causation and the evidence for the beginning of the universe to argue for a transcendent, immaterial, timeless, spaceless, powerful, unchanging, and personal cause to the universe. This chapter will argue that, in light of Craig's denial of the metaphysical aspects of DDS, his cosmological argument, though sound in its major and minor premises and conclusion, is unable to support the attributes he rightly wishes to affirm. However, by reformulating the argument in light of a classical DDS, one is able to fill this gap and strengthen his argument.

In chapter 6, Alvin Plantinga's ontological argument will be presented. Plantinga argues for God as the greatest conceivable being. Such a being, he maintains, must have certain moral attributes. However, Plantinga denies that these attributes are identical to God. By doing so, he falls into the same trap that Islamic apologists do when they draw a distinction between God's unknowable essence and His moral attributes. This chapter will argue two essential points. First, that simplicity is necessary for God to be the greatest conceivable being. Second, that if the ontological argument is sound, it would not be the God of Islam that it would prove. By making these two arguments, grounded in a classical DDS, the ontological argument can be strengthened and used polemically against Islam.

Church be strengthened and may non-Christians come to see the same beauty and glory of God as Augustine did so long ago. As Moses declared to the people of God, "Hear, Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one! You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength" (Deut 6:4-5).

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Introduction

The doctrine of divine simplicity has been affirmed throughout history. Jordan Barrett, in his published dissertation on the subject, states, “The Christian church has consistently confessed that the triune God of the gospel is simple and therefore beyond composition.”<sup>1</sup> However, while DDS has been consistently affirmed, it has not always been affirmed with the same definitions, metaphysical assumptions, or emphases, nor is simplicity itself an explicitly Christian doctrine.<sup>2</sup> In spite of this diversity, there has been a persistent core orthodoxy, a “mere simplicity,” that was committed to the idea that God was metaphysically simple and lacked composition, complexity, and physical parts. Herman Bavinck notes, “On the whole, [the church’s] teaching has been that God is ‘simple,’ that is, sublimely free from all composition, and that therefore one cannot make any real [i.e., ontological] distinction between his being and his attributes.”<sup>3</sup>

However, while DDS has been historically and ecumenically affirmed throughout the history of the Church, this situation is no longer the case in contemporary theology. As Robert W. Jenson has written, “Rejection of the dominant

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<sup>1</sup> Jordan Barrett, *Divine Simplicity*, 4.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>3</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:118.

tradition just at this point [divine simplicity] is endemic in contemporary theology.”<sup>4</sup> DDS is being widely debated in the contemporary era with modern theologians, philosophers, and apologists rejecting or redefining it on the one hand or revitalizing and defending it on the other. Brian Davies argues that this change has come in light of the commitment of contemporary theologians and philosophers to theistic mutualism and personalism.<sup>5</sup> Whereas classical theology held firmly to the doctrines of simplicity, impassability, timelessness, and immutability, contemporary writers have rejected or redefined these ideas in favor of views that interpret God through the lens of univocal concepts of personhood.

For many in the field of contemporary apologetics, DDS is considered more of a liability than an asset, something to apologize for, rather than apologize with. This author’s contention is that divine simplicity is not only biblically and philosophically defensible, but it also aids in apologetics by grounding classical arguments in a robust Theology Proper.

In this dissertation, the author will argue that *a commitment to a classical understanding of divine simplicity provides an essential foundation for apologetic and polemic arguments for the Christian faith*. The first chapter of this project introduced the debate concerning DDS by noting the lack of comprehensive attention to its implications for apologetics. This second chapter reviews the secondary literature concerning DDS to expand the previous introduction and to orient the discussion and

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<sup>4</sup> Robert W. Jenson, “The Triune God,” in *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 2, ed. Carl Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 2:166.

<sup>5</sup> Brian Davies, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 1-16.

contributions of the next chapters. First, this chapter will survey the contemporary criticisms the doctrine has faced from theologians and philosophers who have contributed significantly to the field of apologetics. Second, it will survey modern attempts at retrieving and defending the doctrine. Third, it will survey contemporary attempts at revising the doctrine to avoid common objections. Finally, it will survey the various ways modern apologists have noted the polemic and apologetic usefulness of DDS to show that there is still work to be done to develop a truly comprehensive and effective synthesis of DDS and apologetics.

### **A Survey of Contemporary Critics of DDS**

While numerous theologians and philosophers have criticized the doctrine of simplicity from a variety of angles,<sup>6</sup> this literature review is confined to those theologians and philosophers who function as apologists. The concerns raised here by these various apologists are representative of the concerns in the fields of theology and philosophy at large.

#### **Alvin Plantinga**

Alvin Plantinga is an analytic philosopher and has been a professor at Calvin University and the University of Notre Dame. Plantinga specializes in the fields of metaphysics, epistemology, and philosophy of mind. Through his work on Reformed Epistemology, the free will defense, the evolutionary argument against naturalism, and

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<sup>6</sup> Erickson, *God the Father Almighty*, 210-32; Hinlicky, *Divine Simplicity*; Hughes, *On a Complex Theory of a Simple God*; Morris, and *Our Idea of God*, 113-18.

a modal version of the ontological argument, he has reinvigorated theistic arguments in the academy.

In his address to Marquette University in their annual Aquinas lecture series, Plantinga gave a lecture on February 24, 1980, titled, “Does God Have a Nature?”<sup>7</sup> In this lecture, he argues that since simplicity, classically defined, demands that God be identical to His properties, then the consequence of this doctrine is that God, in fact, *is* a property.<sup>8</sup> Despite simplicity’s ancient pedigree,<sup>9</sup> Plantinga finds this situation untenable for several reasons.

First, Plantinga roots the motivations for simplicity in sovereignty and aseity.<sup>10</sup> If God has a nature, then it seems He is limited to that nature and is not sovereign. But if He is sovereign and totally free, He cannot be limited by a nature.<sup>11</sup> This is the dilemma that simplicity seeks to answer by tying God to His nature and saying that God is His nature. For God to be life in Himself and dependent on nothing, He must be fundamentally simple, lacking all composition and participation in independent concepts like goodness or wisdom.<sup>12</sup>

However, Plantinga is not convinced that God is sovereign over abstract objects, at least not in the classical sense. Instead, he argues that many things, like

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<sup>7</sup> This lecture was later published as Alvin Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?* The Aquinas Lecture Series, 44 (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2017).

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 46-47.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 31.



numbers and logical concepts, exist independently of God. He states, “He didn’t create them and couldn’t destroy them. They do not owe their character to him. The properties they have and the relations in which they stand are not under his control.”<sup>13</sup> For Plantinga, properties are abstract objects,<sup>14</sup> in the sense of Platonic Forms. Therefore, concepts like justice, mercy, and wisdom must be independent of God and thus cannot be identical with Him.

Second, Plantinga argues that the implication of simplicity, as per a Thomistic model,<sup>15</sup> that properties such as goodness, power, wisdom, and eternality are all identical, seems patently false.<sup>16</sup> A person can be powerful but not merciful, or just but not all-knowing. He then argues that it may be the case that God is wise and powerful by the same identical nature rather than these properties being themselves identical. In this case, God is identical with *His* goodness, life, and wisdom, but not with goodness, life, and wisdom *per se*. Thus, “God having power is identical with God’s having wisdom.”<sup>17</sup> Plantinga finds this solution more tenable,<sup>18</sup> but still ultimately fallacious.

Third, Plantinga argues that if God is identical to a property, it would seem that, like a property, God is an impersonal concept rather than a personal being.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?*, 35.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>15</sup> Ortlund, “Divine Simplicity in Historical Perspective,” 438.

<sup>16</sup> Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?*, 48.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

Properties do not do things like create, have knowledge, or will anything. Properties are not causal agents. For God to be identical with a property like goodness or wisdom is to depersonalize God when Scripture speaks of God in fully personal terms.

Fourth, Plantinga argues that at least some properties of God are non-essential, or accidental, and thus are not identical with God. He holds that there are some properties that God has that He could not be without and some that He could be without. For example, Plantinga identifies the act of creation as a property of “having created Adam.”<sup>20</sup> God was God before Adam and thus this property was something God did not have before and cannot be identified with God. Even if, as Plantinga notes of Aquinas, creating Adam is not a “property,” it is a characteristic that God did not possess before.<sup>21</sup> Thus, God cannot be fully in act but must possess both accidents and potentiality. God cannot be identical to all His properties, attributes, or characteristics.

For these reasons, Plantinga rejects DDS. Therefore, in his apologetic arguments, such as his modal ontological argument, he does not make use of the doctrine. Instead of relying on the simplicity model of Anselm of Canterbury, who first proposed the argument, in which for God to be the greatest conceivable being includes, necessarily, existence (for God is identical to His existence and a being who exists is greater than a being who does not),<sup>22</sup> Plantinga denies that existence is a

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<sup>20</sup> Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?*, 43.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>22</sup> Anselm of Canterbury, “Proslogion,” in *Anselm: Complete Philosophical and Theological Treatises*, ed. Joseph Saint-George, trans. Jasper Hopkins and Herbert Richardson (Jackson, MI: Ex Fontibus, 2016), 93-94.

perfection<sup>23</sup> and instead focuses on God's great-making properties that all men acknowledge as great, such as omniscience, omnipotence, and moral excellence.<sup>24</sup> Rather than the greatest conceivable being proposed by Anselm, in which God is great by virtue of being identical with such properties, the God of Plantinga's argument is the greatest possible being in that He demonstrates these properties in the greatest way possible; it is an issue of degree rather than identity.<sup>25</sup>

### Ronald Nash

Ronald Nash was a professor at Reformed Theological Seminary, the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, and Western Kentucky University. His areas of specialty included worldview studies, apologetics, and ethics. In addition to his theological and philosophical works, Nash wrote several important books that have been used as textbooks for apologetics classes, and he often spoke on apologetics issues.

Nash's work on divine simplicity begins in his book *The Concept of God* with the statement, "The doctrine of divine simplicity has a public relations problem."<sup>26</sup> He traces the history of the doctrine as a response to two extremes: hyper-realism and nominalism.<sup>27</sup> In hyper-realism, properties are concrete realities, substances even, and God becomes a composite being of parts. In nominalism, these properties are merely

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<sup>23</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 108.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 105-7.

<sup>26</sup> Nash, *The Concept of God*, 85.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 88.

subjective realities in people, such that God does not possess any real attributes. For Nash, simplicity has been driven by a desire to form a middle way between these two dangerous paths. However, he does not believe that simplicity is a reliable path to safety.<sup>28</sup>

Nash levels three critiques of simplicity. His first criticism is that DDS leaves us unable to know God or talk about God as He is.<sup>29</sup> If God is absolutely simple and His attributes and properties are one in Him and with each other, how can humans have any real knowledge of what God is like? In this, though without using the explicit terminology, Nash is addressing the question of univocal versus analogical language. If humans cannot speak univocally about God's attributes because His properties are not really distinct but are only conceptually distinct, are they really speaking of God as He is or only as they perceive Him?<sup>30</sup>

Nash's second critique mirrors Plantinga's.<sup>31</sup> He rehearses Plantinga's arguments as representative of a contemporary analysis of this doctrine. He sides with Plantinga against the identity thesis that God is identical to His properties, and he also argues that DDS makes God a property, not a person.<sup>32</sup>

The third criticism Nash presents is that, for all its claims of being a way to safeguard the uniqueness of God, simplicity is not actually unique to God.<sup>33</sup> He argues

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<sup>28</sup> Nash, *The Concept of God*, 26.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 91-95.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 95.

that, in at least some way, humans are simple as well in that they are indivisible from their natures. Humans are, like God, “an indivisible whole.”<sup>34</sup> One cannot truly isolate properties in people, he argues, and any loss of a property would mean the person is no longer the same person. Thus, simplicity seems, in Nash’s estimation, meaningless as a distinct description of God. Nash argues, “charges about the possible incoherence of the property of simplicity are of little import, since the doctrine can be safely eliminated from the cluster of divine attributes.”<sup>35</sup>

Where does all of this lead Nash? In his book, *Faith and Reason*, Nash examines several key arguments for the existence of God, including the cosmological argument.<sup>36</sup> This argument has been used to argue for both the existence of God and the existence of a particular kind of God based off the principle of causation. Typically, the argument has been used to defend God’s eternity, and many have used it to defend the singularity of God on the basis that a divided cause would itself need a cause and could not, then, be the first cause. However, because he denies divine simplicity, Nash does not believe that natural theology, through the cosmological argument, can get one to the conclusion that God is one and to the rejection of multiple causes to the universe. This, he believes, can only be achieved through revelation.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Nash, *The Concept of God*, 95.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>36</sup> Ronald H. Nash, *Faith and Reason: Searching for a Rational Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988).

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 124.

## R. T. Mullins

R. T. Mullins is a philosopher and theologian and is a visiting professor of philosophy at Palm Beach Atlantic University and the University of Lucerne. He is also a speaker and writer for the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies, University of Helsinki. In addition to his writings, Mullins regularly speaks on issues relating to the coherence of theism at apologetics conferences and events, and he hosts the Reluctant Theologian podcast.

Mullins has become one of the most prolific critics of classical theism. His primary areas of writing include divine timelessness and impassibility,<sup>38</sup> as well as general concerns in the doctrine of God. As such, he has written an important paper on DDS titled, “Simply Impossible: A Case against Divine Simplicity,” in which he argues against DDS on the basis of the freedom of God.<sup>39</sup> He has also contributed a chapter on classical theism in which he presents a shortened version of his argument.<sup>40</sup>

Mullins lays out several objections. First, he argues that the various titles of God—such as creator, redeemer, and Lord—amount to accidental properties.<sup>41</sup> For God to have accidental properties is to have properties that are not essential to His nature. Thus, God cannot be identical with all His properties. Second, Mullins argues

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<sup>38</sup> R. T. Mullins, *The End of the Timeless God*, Oxford Studies in Analytic Theology (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); and R. T. Mullins, *God and Emotion*, Cambridge Elements: Philosophy of Religion (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

<sup>39</sup> Mullins, “Simply Impossible, 181-203.

<sup>40</sup> R. T. Mullins, “Classical Theism,” in *T&T Clark Handbook of Analytic Theology*, ed. James M. Arcadi and James T. Turner Jr. (London: T&T Clark, 2022), 85-100.

<sup>41</sup> Mullins, “Simply Impossible,” 200.

that the incarnation, in which God takes on flesh and its properties, is incompatible with DDS.<sup>42</sup> If God takes on properties or a nature, He must change and possess potential. Third, he argues that a person cannot be an act. Persons act but persons are not their action.<sup>43</sup> An action may become a part of a person's history, character, and personality, but "act" is something persons do, not something they are. Thus, for God to be pure act is to depersonalize Him. Fourth, he argues that, given the identity thesis that all God's attributes are one in Him and the idea that God is the grounding of all perfections, we cannot truly know what the various perfections are in creatures.<sup>44</sup> Finally, he argues that DDS is incompatible with both a realist and nominalist understanding of properties.<sup>45</sup>

The body of the Mullin's paper presents his primary argument: "It is my contention that divine simplicity is not a perfection because it is not metaphysically compossible with who God is. Why? The Triune God is perfectly free, and freedom, as I shall argue, is not compossible with pure act."<sup>46</sup> Mullins claims God cannot be simple because such a doctrine would diminish the freedom of God and lead to modal collapse. He writes:

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

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<sup>42</sup> Mullins, "Simply Impossible," 200.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 201.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 202.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 194.

God's act is identical to God's existence. . . . Thus, these divine actions are performed of absolute necessity, which entails a modal collapse.<sup>47</sup>

If God is identical to His actions, then for God to do otherwise He must have been otherwise. Given the claims of DDS, God must be unable to do other than He has done, sacrificing divine freedom.<sup>48</sup> Further, if God is act, as DDS claims, this would seem to entail that God's act of creation makes God what He is and that God then needs creation in order to be God.<sup>49</sup> Finally, if creation is necessary because God must create and must create the way He has created, all of creation is necessary and there is no real creaturely freedom.<sup>50</sup>

After presenting this argument, Mullins posits three possible responses from classical theists. First, DDS proponents can simply accept modal collapse and give up God's freedom to do otherwise.<sup>51</sup> This response jettisons divine freedom in a way that even DDS proponents find unacceptable. Second, DDS proponents can choose to deny aspects of simplicity and reject the thesis that God is identical to His actions.<sup>52</sup> Once proponents make this move, he argues, why hold to simplicity at all? Finally, and most commonly, DDS proponents can appeal to mystery.<sup>53</sup> How God can remain simple, free, and *a se* (having the attribute of aseity in having life in Himself) in His

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<sup>47</sup> Mullins, "Classical Theism," 95.

<sup>48</sup> Mullins, "Simply Impossible," 196.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 196-97.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Mullins, "Classical Theism," 95.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 96.



relationship to creation is simply unknowable to us. Mullins finds this answer unacceptable as well, arguing that mystery cannot be used to justify contradiction.

What does Mullin's view do for his apologetic approach? Instead of a classical view of God, Mullins advocates for what he calls neo-classicalism. He argues that appealing to God's nature as possessing attributes, rather than being identical with them, enables apologists to speak coherently of God, of creation *ex nihilo*, and of God's real relation to creation.<sup>54</sup> To do this, he affirms passibility and mutability, and he denies divine timelessness, resulting in God truly being affected by creation.

#### William Lane Craig

If Plantinga is the most respected living Christian philosopher, William Lane Craig is a close second and is widely held to be the most able living apologist. Craig serves as professor of philosophy and apologetics at Houston Christian University and Biola University and has debated numerous opponents, including Bart Ehrman, Sam Harris, Antony Flew, Sean Carroll, and Shabir Ally. He has published dozens of books and hundreds of articles and blogs on theology, philosophy, and apologetics and speaks often at apologetics conferences. His book *Reasonable Faith* launched the modern apologetics movement. Of all Craig's writings,<sup>55</sup> the most relevant for his doctrine of simplicity are *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* with

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<sup>54</sup> Mullins, "Classical Theism," 92-94.

<sup>55</sup> Many of Craig's works on philosophy and theology include contributions from J. P. Moreland and Paul Copan, both highly respected philosophers and apologists in their own rights. However, this section will focus on Craig and will make mention of Moreland and Copan as appropriate.

Moreland, and *Creation out of Nothing* with Paul Copan,<sup>56</sup> as well as his work on Platonism in *God and Abstract Objects*.<sup>57</sup>

Craig does not mince words when it comes to his view of DDS. He and Moreland write, “This is a radical doctrine that enjoys no biblical support and even is at odds with the biblical conception of God in various ways.”<sup>58</sup> They emphasize that DDS requires that none of God’s attributes are distinct, that He has no real relations with His creation, that His essence is identical to His existence, that He is the pure act of being itself subsisting, and that, as a result of the doctrine, we can only speak analogically about God.<sup>59</sup>

Craig and Moreland’s criticisms largely mirror the concerns others have raised. They criticize the resultant analogical language of simplicity, rather than univocal language. If, as shown in the quote above, simplicity means we can only speak analogically about God, because we cannot know the essence of God by considering its parts, then it would seem that we cannot say anything true or positive of God, leaving us in agnosticism.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Paul Copan and William Lane Craig, *Creation out of Nothing: A Biblical, Philosophical, and Scientific Exploration* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004).

<sup>57</sup> William Lane Craig, *God and Abstract Objects: The Coherence of Theism: Aseity* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2017). This work is presented in a semi-popular form as well in William Lane Craig, *God over All: Divine Aseity and the Challenge of Platonism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

<sup>58</sup> Moreland and Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*, 524.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

Second, Craig and Moreland also criticize the identity thesis of DDS that denies distinct properties in God.<sup>61</sup> It seems obvious that a property, which Craig defines as a “universal quality which is exemplified by particulars”<sup>62</sup> cannot be identical to another property. Power is not the same as goodness regardless of the personal referent. For those who argue, as Eleonore Stump does,<sup>63</sup> that these distinctions are merely conceptual, such as God being the morning and the evening star when morning and evening are distinct, but it is the same star being referenced, Craig and Moreland respond that such an answer is unsatisfactory because being the morning star and being the evening star are still distinct properties.<sup>64</sup>

Third, like Mullins, Craig and Moreland argue that DDS leads to a modal collapse.<sup>65</sup> If God is identical to what He does and knows, He cannot do or know other than He does without being something other than He is. If DDS is correct, they argue, God can have no contingencies and thus is not free. They reject the Thomistic argument that, since God has no real relations and is pure act, God is the same in all possible worlds, but the worlds and creatures may be different because God is still His act of knowing in all possible worlds, but what He knows may be different. They

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<sup>61</sup> Moreland and Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*, 524.

<sup>62</sup> Craig, *God over All*, 215.

<sup>63</sup> Stump and Kretzmann, “Absolute Simplicity,” 356-57.

<sup>64</sup> Moreland and Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*, 525.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

reject this proposal on the grounds that even if it is the same God knowing in all possible worlds, it is still different things God is knowing.<sup>66</sup>

Fourth, Craig and Moreland argue that DDS is unintelligible in positing that God is His existence. DDS claims that God is identical to His act of existing; that He is existence itself. However, in their words, “it is unintelligible to say that *exists* just exists.”<sup>67</sup> This objection amounts to a criticism of the idea that God is not personal but is identical to the property of existing. Beings exist, persons exist, things exist, but verbs do not exist. If God is the act of existing, this would seem to diminish His ontological status as a personal being.

Finally, Craig and Moreland argue that DDS makes the Trinity incoherent. A being that is absolutely simple cannot truly have distinctions or relations.<sup>68</sup> If each of the persons are identical to the divine essence, then each person must, logically, be identical to each other, and therefore no real relations are possible. Craig and Moreland specifically deny a Thomistic understanding of relations as persons and argue that relations do not do anything, persons do. They conclude that the classical trinitarian model cannot be said to “rise to the standard of personhood.”<sup>69</sup> Instead, they advocate for what they call Trinitarian Monotheism in which each of the persons are

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<sup>66</sup> Moreland and Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*, 525.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 586.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 587.

parts of God.<sup>70</sup> This form of social trinitarianism argues that God is a tripart soul with three centers of consciousness.<sup>71</sup> Craig further specifically denies doctrines like eternal generation<sup>72</sup> and thus sees no need to postulate simplicity to maintain the unity of substance in the godhead.

While there are numerous similarities between Craig's concerns and those others have proposed, Craig also offers some unique perspectives in his criticism of DDS. First, Craig and Moreland state that the Thomistic motivation for such a doctrine is unnecessary.<sup>73</sup> In his argument from contingency, Thomas argues that the cause of all must be a being in whom existence and essence are identical and, in that sense, a non-composite being.<sup>74</sup> However, Craig and Moreland argue that such a concept of God is far too complicated and unnecessary. All one needs to postulate is a being whose existence is metaphysically necessary. In such a case, God exists necessarily in the sense that, if He exists, He cannot fail to exist and is the reason for His own existence and in the sense of being a necessary being to bring into existence all contingent beings and events.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Moreland and Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*, 591. In their model, Craig and Moreland use two analogies. First, they argue that the persons are parts of God in the way that a skeleton is a part of a cat. Thus, the skeleton is fully feline without being the whole cat. Second, on p. 593, they use the analogy of Cerberus the mythological dog with three heads to argue that each person is a distinct center of consciousness but dependent upon the common body.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 594.

<sup>72</sup> Craig, *God and Abstract Objects*, 59.

<sup>73</sup> Moreland and Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*, 524.

<sup>74</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.13.

<sup>75</sup> Moreland and Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*, 466.

Second, Craig's understanding of properties in a conceptual but non-realist fashion adds a unique dimension to his rejection of DDS. In *Creation out of Nothing*, Craig and Copan present the challenge that Platonism poses for theism and creation *ex nihilo* in positing that God is the creator of abstract objects.<sup>76</sup> If God is the creator of all and yet is *a se*, then God is the creator of abstract universals, such as abstract objects (like numbers), and abstract properties (like justice, power, or love). If He is the creator of abstract objects and properties, however, then He must be the creator of His own properties to remain *a se* or else He is dependent upon created properties to be what He is. So, either God creates the properties He requires to be Himself, the so-called "bootstrapping problem," which is incoherent, or abstract properties are co-eternal with God in a Platonic sense and thus independent of Him, making God dependent upon abstract concepts and properties to be God.

In response to this problem, Craig and Copan note that many have traditionally posited DDS as the solution.<sup>77</sup> If God simply is His properties, He can ground all created things and is dependent upon nothing to be what He is. Thus, abstract universals are identical to God's thoughts. This view has been seen as an aspect of divine conceptualism,<sup>78</sup> in which God's thoughts take the place of Platonic Forms, and it has been historically the path chosen to avoid the Platonic conundrum.<sup>79</sup> However,

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<sup>76</sup> Copan and Craig, *Creation out of Nothing*, 176.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 177.

<sup>78</sup> Craig, *God and Abstract Objects*, 123.

<sup>79</sup> Craig, *God over All*, 72.

Craig and Copan find this solution unconvincing, and they rehearse the objections from the works of Craig and Moreland.<sup>80</sup>

Craig does not put forward his alternative view in his book with Copan,<sup>81</sup> but in *God and Abstract Objects*, published more than a decade later, Craig presents arguments for anti-realism (a form of nominalism<sup>82</sup>) in which abstract objects and properties are not things that exist in the formal sense.<sup>83</sup> Rather, such universals are useful or figurative ideas, but not necessarily ontological realities in themselves. For example, there is no property of redness, there are only red cars. Only concrete particulars can be said to exist in the formal sense. Seeing the problem this way, as he states, “the challenge to divine aseity simply evaporates or, rather, never appears.”<sup>84</sup> If such abstract objects do not exist in the formal sense, they seem to pose no threat for the aseity of God. As a result of his anti-realism, saying God has properties is not a problem for Craig because these properties are not really things of which God is composed in the classical sense. Further still, Craig denies that beings are

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<sup>80</sup> Copan and Craig, *Creation out of Nothing*, 177-80.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 195.

<sup>82</sup> Craig, *God over All*, 7-8. Though he admits anti-realism is a form of nominalism, Craig objects to the usage of “nominalism” because he says it is such a broad term that can be easily misunderstood. He prefers “anti-realism” or “anti-Platonism.”

<sup>83</sup> Craig, *God and Abstract Objects*, 200-201. Craig is not denying that some abstract objects exist, such as a song or a story. Rather, he is denying the existence of so-called uncreated abstract objects like numbers or properties. See William Lane Craig, “Anti-Platonism,” in *Beyond the Control of God? Six Views on the Problem of God and Abstract Objects*, ed. Paul M. Gould, vol. 15 (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 116.

<sup>84</sup> Craig, *God and Abstract Objects*, x.

metaphysically constituent in the first place.<sup>85</sup> For Craig, objects are simple and are not composed of their metaphysical properties. In that sense, everything is simple and when everything is simple, simplicity is meaningless.

While Craig rejects the classical version of DDS, he admits that there are aspects of this doctrine that are important. He explicitly affirms that God is simple in the sense that He lacks physical parts, but Craig rejects the more metaphysical aspects, such as the identification of essence and existence in God.<sup>86</sup> He and Moreland write, “We have no good reason to adopt and many reasons to reject a full-blown doctrine of divine simplicity. Still, that does not mean that the doctrine is wholly without merit.”<sup>87</sup> They acknowledge that God is physically without parts and that He lacks the composition of mind and body. They also admit that it may be possible that God’s knowledge is simple in the sense of having undivided knowledge of reality.<sup>88</sup>

While Craig affirms aspects of simplicity, he rejects the strong, classical model of DDS, and this rejection impacts his apologetic methodology in several ways. First, Craig’s rejection of DDS impacts his cosmological argument. Craig is famous for his Kalam Cosmological argument. This version of the argument begins by arguing that, first, “whatever begins to exist has a cause.”<sup>89</sup> This premise is postulated on the

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<sup>85</sup> William Lane Craig, “#729 Divine Simplicity,” *Reasonable Faith with William Lane Craig* (blog), April 25, 2021, <https://www.reasonablefaith.org/writings/question-answer/divine-simplicity-2021>.

<sup>86</sup> William Lane Craig and Joseph E. Gorra, *A Reasonable Response: Answers to Tough Questions on God, Christianity, and the Bible* (Chicago: Moody, 2013), 173.

<sup>87</sup> Moreland and Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*, 525-26.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 526.

<sup>89</sup> Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, 111.



impossibility of things coming into existence out of nothing. Second, “the universe began to exist.”<sup>90</sup> This second premise is argued through the impossibility of an actual infinite regress of events and the scientific evidence for the universe presented by Big Bang cosmology. Therefore, he concludes, “the universe has a cause.”<sup>91</sup>

From this argument, Craig considers what kind of cause the universe must have. He argues that the cause of the universe must be changeless, immaterial, beginningless, uncaused, singular, personal, spaceless, powerful,<sup>92</sup> and must be a necessary being.<sup>93</sup> To argue these points, Craig reasons from the creation of the universe to the nature of the cause,<sup>94</sup> citing Thomas Aquinas’ remark that this “is what everybody means by ‘God.’”<sup>95</sup>

However, what Craig argues with confidence in his apologetic arguments, his denial of DDS takes away. If God is not simple divinity itself, if He is not being itself, if He is not identical to His attributes, if He does not lack composition of any kind, how can He truly be a changeless, timeless, immaterial, necessary, and uncaused first cause? Of note is that Craig cites Richard Dawkins as arguing that the cause of the universe must be incredibly simple, which Craig later admits.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, 116.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 150.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 152.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 188.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 152-53.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 171-72.

Second, Craig's rejection of DDS impacts his defense of God's goodness in light of the so-called Euthyphro Dilemma, from Plato's dialogue *Euthyphro*. In short, this dilemma poses the question: is something good because God wills it, which would seem to make goodness arbitrary, or does God will something because it is good, in which case goodness seems to be a Platonic category, eternal and external to God. The first makes goodness superficial and relative, the second challenges aseity itself. Craig addresses this dilemma with a third option.<sup>97</sup> By making God the standard for goodness, this dilemma seems defeated, for God's commands are reflective of His own nature.<sup>98</sup> Craig argues that God is essentially good in the sense that goodness is essential to His nature as God.

However, if this is the case, is the nature of goodness not still outside of God and a property He displays? Further, is this solution itself not arbitrary? While God's commands may not be arbitrary, why pick God as the standard? Craig's response is that there must be some standard and God, as the greatest conceivable being, is the "least arbitrary" one.<sup>99</sup> However, with this solution, Craig seems not to advance his argument very far at all. In classical theism with a commitment to DDS, God is His own goodness because God *is* goodness itself. Because Craig denies divine simplicity, God cannot be goodness itself without making God a property.

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<sup>97</sup> Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, 181-83.

<sup>98</sup> William Lane Craig, "#379 Anti-Platonism and Moral Realism," *Reasonable Faith with William Lane Craig* (blog), July 20, 2014, [https://www.reasonablefaith.org/question-answer/P60/anti-platonism-and-moral-realism#\\_ftnref2%20Scott%20Reasonable%20Faith](https://www.reasonablefaith.org/question-answer/P60/anti-platonism-and-moral-realism#_ftnref2%20Scott%20Reasonable%20Faith).

<sup>99</sup> Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, 182.

Finally, Craig's rejection of DDS impacts his doctrine of the Trinity and its defense against claims that Christianity is polytheistic. As already discussed, Craig advocates for a form of social trinitarianism called Trinitarian Monotheism. In Craig's view, the three persons are parts of God and are persons in the sense of being three centers of consciousness. The classical doctrine of the Trinity is one in which the three persons just are the divine substance so that God is one undivided essence, substance, and being subsisting in three relations/persons. However, in Craig's model, in true analytic fashion, he starts with a universal definition of personhood and univocally applies it to God.<sup>100</sup> But in doing so, it is difficult for him to address the question of how to answer the unitarian charge from Judaism or Islam that Christianity is polytheistic.

#### John Feinberg

John Feinberg is a dispensational, evangelical theologian who taught for many years at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, as well as at Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary and Western Conservative Baptist Seminary. Feinberg has done significant work on the problem of evil. His book, *No One Like Him: The Doctrine of God*, includes his challenge to DDS, and his two apologetics works, *Can You Believe It's True?*<sup>101</sup> and *The Many Faces of Evil*,<sup>102</sup> serve to demonstrate his apologetic methodology.

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<sup>100</sup> Moreland and Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*, 587.

<sup>101</sup> John S. Feinberg, *Can You Believe It's True? Christian Apologetics in a Modern and Postmodern Era* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2013).

<sup>102</sup> John S. Feinberg, *The Many Faces of Evil: Theological Systems and the Problems of Evil* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2004).

Feinberg presents several objections to DDS taken from Thomas Morris and Alvin Plantinga. Like Plantinga, he argues that the primary motivation for holding to DDS is the concern over divine aseity.<sup>103</sup> However, he argues that it is absurd to hold to the identity of God's attributes to one another and that simplicity eliminates the ability of God to take on any accidental properties or to change in any way.<sup>104</sup> Feinberg concludes that simplicity is both incoherent and unnecessary to the goal of protecting aseity and, in some versions, leaves one in the same spot.<sup>105</sup> He concludes that, while God has no physical parts, the metaphysical implications of DDS are too great to bear.<sup>106</sup> Rather, God's essence is the collective of His attributes.<sup>107</sup>

Feinberg's critique of simplicity is noteworthy because, while others often state that DDS is contrary to the biblical data, Feinberg provides arguments for such an assertion. His primary contention is that DDS is unsupported by the Bible, either explicitly or implicitly.<sup>108</sup> There are no verses in the Bible that state "God is simple" or that explain DDS as such. Further, Feinberg argues, the texts often used to promote DDS, such as those that identify God as something (such as statements that God is love, just, and righteous), have been pressed beyond their intentions. He argues that the biblical writers simply meant that God has the mentioned attribute, rather than

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<sup>103</sup> Feinberg, *No One Like Him*, 326.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 329-35.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 333.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 335.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 205.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 327.

identifying God with these attributes.<sup>109</sup> To insist that these writers of Jewish background were attempting to communicate Greek metaphysics seems to read far too much into the texts.

As a result of Feinberg's hermeneutic, he tends to question any doctrine not explicitly stated as such in Scripture or that cannot be applied univocally to God.<sup>110</sup> This impacts his approach to many other doctrines, such as the doctrines of aseity,<sup>111</sup> immutability,<sup>112</sup> temporality,<sup>113</sup> and the Trinity, which he attempts to interpret in light of his rejection of DDS and in ways that most univocally incorporate the language of Scripture.

For example, because words like "eternal generation" and "procession" are not explicitly given in Scripture, he has serious doubts about their usefulness, instead proposing that the term "Son" is merely a metaphor rather than an ontological statement.<sup>114</sup> Further, when discussing how the three persons are one, Feinberg confesses their unity of essence,<sup>115</sup> but argues that these persons are univocally in "conversation with one another" and even that one person can be thinking of things the others are not in order to foster genuine relationships, conversation, and

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<sup>109</sup> Feinberg, *No One Like Him*, 328.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 231. However, elsewhere he acknowledges that an idea may be theologically true even if it is not explicitly stated in Scripture.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 240.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 328.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 428.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 492.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 485.

fellowship.<sup>116</sup> In making such a proposal, Feinberg rejects anthropomorphic language for God's immanent relations in favor of univocal language.

How does Feinberg's rejection of DDS affect his apologetic approach? In his approach to the problem of evil, Feinberg argues that God is good in spite of the presence of evil.<sup>117</sup> Like Craig's response to the Euthyphro Dilemma, Feinberg also argues that God cannot do that which is contrary to His nature and thus His commands are not arbitrary.<sup>118</sup> He states:

In contrast [to the divine command theory of the theonomist], I believe that actions are inherently good or evil, because they reflect or fail to reflect something about God's nature. Consequently, God prescribes moral norms as a reflection of his character. For example, he is a God of truth, so he commands us not to lie. He is a God of love; to murder someone or steal from him isn't an act of love, so God forbids us from doing either.<sup>119</sup>

On this basis, the non-Christian cannot charge God with immorality because what God does is always good.<sup>120</sup> This argument mirrors that of classical theism, but the assumption must be questioned: in what sense is God good and are His actions good? For Feinberg, God is good in the sense that He does good things to His creation and in the sense of a "beneficent attitude."<sup>121</sup> God's goodness, for Feinberg, seems to be a univocal concept in God and creatures, albeit quantitatively higher and qualitatively superior. Feinberg seems to fall into the same Euthyphro Dilemma that Craig is trying

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<sup>116</sup> Feinberg, *No One Like Him*, 318-19.

<sup>117</sup> Feinberg, *Can You Believe It's True?*, 355.

<sup>118</sup> Feinberg, *The Many Faces of Evil*, 165.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 165-66.

<sup>120</sup> Feinberg, *Can You Believe It's True?*, 355-56.

<sup>121</sup> Feinberg, *No One Like Him*, 366.

to avoid. By contrast, DDS, in which God is goodness itself because goodness is identical to God, posits that all questions of goodness should be measured against God Himself as the object and standard of goodness. Feinberg would agree with this statement, but his rejection of DDS seems to make him unable to do so consistently.

This survey is sufficient to highlight the concerns among contemporary apologists regarding DDS and to explore some of the apologetic ramifications of rejecting or redefining the doctrine. While other theologians and philosophers who have written on apologetics have contributed to this discussion, their arguments mirror and borrow from the ones presented here. The primary concerns of these theologian and philosopher apologists who have rejected or redefined DDS is to maintain the univocity of theistic language, the coherence of theism, the diversity of the triune persons, the reality of the incarnation, and the freedom of God.

### **A Survey of Contemporary Retrievals of DDS**

In response to contemporary criticisms of DDS, a resurgence of scholarship has focused on the retrieval of classical theism in general and DDS in particular. The individuals in this review are those whose writings have focused on DDS at the academic and scholarly level and represent the various interpretations of DDS within the classical tradition.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Numerous authors have defended simplicity at the popular levels in recent books. See Matthew Barrett, *Simply Trinity*, as well as Sanlon, *Simply God*.

## James Dolezal

Arguably, the most prominent voice in the modern retrieval of DDS is that of James Dolezal. Dolezal teaches theology, history, and philosophy at Cairn University. His two books, *All That Is in God* and *God without Parts*, make the case for both classical theism and for the strong version of DDS against what he terms “theistic mutualism” and “theistic personalism.”<sup>123</sup> This theological viewpoint, characterized by a desire for a relational God of whom we can speak univocally, has led to the reformulation of many doctrines, such as eternity, impassibility, and immutability, as well as divine simplicity.

The chief concern for Dolezal is God’s aseity. For God to be *a se*, absolute and dependent upon nothing but Himself, He must be fundamentally and absolutely simple in the strongest sense of DDS.<sup>124</sup> Otherwise, God would be composed of lesser parts upon which He depends to exist or be what He is. In explaining simplicity, Dolezal begins by surveying various models of composition that cannot be true of God if He is to be *a se*. He cannot be composed of act and potency,<sup>125</sup> bodily parts,<sup>126</sup> matter and form,<sup>127</sup> supposit and nature,<sup>128</sup> genus and species,<sup>129</sup> substance and accident,<sup>130</sup> or

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<sup>123</sup> Dolezal, *All That Is in God*, 1-2.

<sup>124</sup> Dolezal, *God without Parts*, 1.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 58.



essence and existence.<sup>131</sup> If any of these composition models hold true of God, he argues, God would be dependent upon lesser parts, subject to change, and less than perfect and complete in Himself.

Dolezal further argues that simplicity is what grounds God's many absolute attributes. DDS grounds aseity because if God is simple and lacks any composition, He is truly not dependent upon anything other than Himself to be what He is.<sup>132</sup> DDS grounds God's unity because it makes God truly one in Himself.<sup>133</sup> DDS grounds God's infinity because God has no potential or limiting factor but is pure act.<sup>134</sup> DDS grounds God's immutability since God has no potency and thus cannot become anything.<sup>135</sup> Finally, DDS grounds God's eternality because an immutable and infinite being cannot be contained by time and because God is pure act.<sup>136</sup>

Dolezal responds to three objections. Regarding the identity thesis, Dolezal argues that the way out of the dilemma in which God is identical to His properties and thus the properties are identical to one another is to suppose that God has no properties at all.<sup>137</sup> Using the truthmaker account of attributes,<sup>138</sup> Dolezal proposes that God's

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<sup>131</sup> Dolezal, *God without Parts*, 62.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 68-72.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 73-76.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 77-81.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 81-88.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 88-92.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 127.

<sup>138</sup> This account is explored later under the contributions of Jeffrey Brower.

undivided essence is the basis for the various attributes that are predicated of Him.<sup>139</sup> God is that by which He is anything. Dolezal states, “God’s attributes are not intrinsic determinations of his being, but rather they are just so many truths about the one indivisible and infinite existence and essence of God.”<sup>140</sup>

Dolezal also responds to the challenge that DDS leads to a modal collapse. If God’s knowledge and will are identical to His essence, then it seems He cannot know or do other than He knows or does (counterfactuals) without being other than He is and is thus not free. Dolezal argues that the propositions “God is absolutely simple” and “God could have willed other than He did” are both true, though the exact manner in which God remains free while being absolutely simple is ultimately a mystery to us.<sup>141</sup> However, he seems to make a distinction between what God could have hypothetically done differently and what God could have actually willed differently.<sup>142</sup>

Finally, Dolezal argues DDS is necessary for safeguarding the Trinitarian relations. Simplicity guards against viewing the persons as composing God.<sup>143</sup> A commitment to DDS, in which the persons are eternal and subsisting relations, avoids the problem of making the persons accidents in God and thus distinct from the divine

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<sup>139</sup> Dolezal, *God without Parts*, 154-62.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 163.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid., 210-12.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 206.

<sup>143</sup> Dolezal, “Trinity, Simplicity, and the Status of God’s Personal Relations,” 87.

nature itself.<sup>144</sup> Further, DDS renders each person wholly God, rather than parts of God.<sup>145</sup>

### Steven Duby

Steven Duby has also been a key voice in recent efforts at retrieving classical theism and DDS. Duby teaches theology at Phoenix Seminary and has several works on DDS, including *Divine Simplicity: A Dogmatic Account*, a chapter in *The Lord Is One*,<sup>146</sup> which is largely a reproduction of the arguments from his book, and an article titled “Divine Simplicity, Divine Freedom, and the Contingency of Creation.”<sup>147</sup> In these works, he argues for a strong commitment to a classical understanding of DDS.<sup>148</sup>

Duby’s definitions of simplicity are not unique to him. He defines simplicity as including the same denials and affirmations as Dolezal in that God lacks all composition and is pure act.<sup>149</sup> However, what is unique to Duby is that, in his work, he approaches DDS through the “contours” of dogmatic theology.<sup>150</sup> After listing

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<sup>144</sup> Dolezal, “Trinity, Simplicity, and the Status of God’s Personal Relations,” 88.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>146</sup> Steven J. Duby, “A Biblical and Theological Case for Divine Simplicity,” in *The Lord Is One: Reclaiming Divine Simplicity*, Davenant Retrievals, ed. Joseph Minich and Onsi A. Kamel (Landrum, SC: Davenant Press, 2019).

<sup>147</sup> Steven J. Duby, “Divine Simplicity, Divine Freedom, and the Contingency of Creation: Dogmatic Responses to Some Analytic Questions,” *Journal of Reformed Theology* 6, no. 2 (2012).

<sup>148</sup> Duby also presents DDS indirectly in Steven J. Duby, *Jesus and the God of Classical Theism: Biblical Christology in Light of the Doctrine of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2022).

<sup>149</sup> Duby, *Divine Simplicity: A Dogmatic Account*, 80-88.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 55.

several exegetical presuppositions of dogmatic theology, including the divine inspiration of Scripture and the notion that theology is not merely historical but “touches” on God Himself,<sup>151</sup> he lays out several of these contours that distinguish his approach from a merely analytic philosophy approach.

First, he writes, “a dogmatic approach aims to remain, in its subject matter and its ends, transparent and answerable to the teaching of Holy Scripture.”<sup>152</sup> Rather than moving from philosophy to Scripture, Duby’s approach begins with the content and purpose of Scripture and then formulates a biblical philosophy. Second, “a dogmatic approach recognizes that reason itself is embedded in the history of salvation and has come under the effects of the fall and stands in need of reformation.”<sup>153</sup> One must recognize the noetic effects of the Fall upon man’s reasoning. Third, “a dogmatic *modus operandi* entails recognition of the biblical Creator-creature distinction and acknowledges that this effects a mortification of our tendency straightforwardly to transfer ratiocination about creatures to God the Creator.”<sup>154</sup> Duby’s approach recognizes that God is not on a continuum of being to non-being and that univocal attribution is impossible. God does not differ from creation merely in terms of degree but in kind and quality. Finally, “a dogmatic approach differs from an analytic approach in the divergent understandings of ontology.”<sup>155</sup> Whereas in modern

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<sup>151</sup> Duby, *Divine Simplicity: A Dogmatic Account*, 57-58.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid., 74-75.

philosophy, essence becomes a property something has, this dogmatic approach rather sees essence as something a being is, in a broadly Aristotelian sense.

Duby's case for DDS proceeds by establishing the doctrine biblically and then responding to various objections. Duby's work is, perhaps, the most thorough in its biblical argumentation. In both the book and in his single chapter in *The Lord Is One*, Duby establishes his biblical case by establishing the biblical grounds for several descriptions of God and then showing how each one terminates in the classical DDS. DDS follows from God's singularity, aseity, immutability, and infinity and from the reality of creation *ex nihilo*.<sup>156</sup> Though simplicity is not stated as such in Scripture, nevertheless, these doctrines entail simplicity.

Duby offers responses to three objections to DDS. First, Duby responds to the objections to the identity thesis. He affirms the absolute simplicity of God such that the various attributes of God are not qualities that inhere in God but are the divine essence itself being represented in creation in various ways.<sup>157</sup> God is not co-eternal with various immaterial properties, such as wisdom or love, but is wisdom and love subsisting, along with the other attributes attributed to Him.<sup>158</sup> How then are His attributes identical? Duby proposes that the various attributes in God are distinct virtually and eminently. He writes, "that is, the essence is capacious of producing various actions and effects whose diverse characters are traceable to attributes of diverse formal reasons *ad nos* even as these attributes are materially and formally

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<sup>156</sup> Duby, *Divine Simplicity: A Dogmatic Account*, 133-77.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid., 182.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid., 191.

identical as a *virtus eminens* in God himself, which is God's own plenitude and fecundity."<sup>159</sup> The various attributes of God are not distinct in God because God is the principle by which He is each of them. They are simply the one essence that is God acting, resulting in various effects, and are virtually distinct in God because they can be described and can result in varied effects. The attributes are not synonymous but are identical to God and thus one in Him because He is that by which He is all His perfections.<sup>160</sup>

Second, Duby responds to the objection of divine freedom. If God is simple, and His will and knowledge is Himself willing and knowing, then it seems that God cannot will or know other than He does without being other than He is. For example, it seems God must create and must create what He has created. Duby argues that God's freedom and simplicity are compatible. God's decree is identical to Himself in the sense that the will of God is nothing but God willing. Thus, God's will is necessary in the sense that God necessarily wills and does so without deliberation, succession, or movement from potency to act.<sup>161</sup> However, God is free to create or not create in the object of creation. God's decree is necessary in the willing of God, for God must will something,<sup>162</sup> and is free in regard to its objects, namely, creation.<sup>163</sup> Titles like Creator, Lord, or Redeemer are then to be thought of as relative properties, not

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<sup>159</sup> Duby, *Divine Simplicity: A Dogmatic Account*, 184.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 190.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid., 201.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid., 197-98.

<sup>163</sup> Duby, "Divine Simplicity, Divine Freedom, and the Contingency of Creation," 133.

accidental ones.<sup>164</sup> Duby further distinguishes between God's absolute power and God's actual power (i.e., the power to do more than God does and the power to do what God does).<sup>165</sup> While God's actual power is identical to Himself, God's theoretical power is merely hypothetical.

Finally, Duby responds to the Trinitarian objection. DDS proponents ask how God can be one if He is three, while the critics ask how God can be three if He is one. Duby argues that the persons bear the marks of personhood according to essence, not their particular mode of existence.<sup>166</sup> Instead, each person is a relation of the one essence according to a particular and eternal mode of subsisting: the Father unbegotten, the Son begotten, and the Spirit proceeding.<sup>167</sup> Simplicity enables us to make sense of the shared nature without running into the danger of tri-theism.

#### Norman Geisler

Norman Geisler was a professor of theology, philosophy, and apologetics at Dallas Theological Seminary, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Southern Evangelical Seminary, and Veritas Evangelical Seminary. Geisler was known for his conservative, evangelical, dispensational commitments and for his commitment to

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<sup>164</sup> Duby, *Divine Simplicity: A Dogmatic Account*, 204-5.

<sup>165</sup> Duby, "Divine Simplicity, Divine Freedom, and the Contingency of Creation," 139.

<sup>166</sup> Duby, *Divine Simplicity: A Dogmatic Account*, 227.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, 232-33.

Thomism and classical theology. In his *Systematic Theology*, Geisler put forward a comprehensive case for divine simplicity.<sup>168</sup>

Geisler's approach to DDS follows the same outline as his discussion of the rest of Theology Proper. In each theological discussion, he begins with the biblical basis for the doctrine and then moves on to the theological and historical bases before answering objections. Though Geisler's analysis is not overly detailed, it is nonetheless very comprehensive. Much like Thomas Aquinas, Geisler begins his discussion of the nature of God by arguing for God as pure act and as simple. Geisler defines God's simplicity as the doctrine that God is without parts, "for what has parts can come apart."<sup>169</sup> Biblically speaking, Geisler roots simplicity in verses that put forward God's unity, immateriality, aseity, and immortality.<sup>170</sup> Theologically, simplicity is inferred from God's pure actuality, immutability, infinity, and uncausality.<sup>171</sup> Historically, Geisler traces DDS from Irenaeus in the second century through to Bavinck in the twentieth century.<sup>172</sup>

After presenting the case for DDS, Geisler responds to seven objections. First, contrary to those who argue that DDS is unintelligible,<sup>173</sup> Geisler argues that this is

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<sup>168</sup> Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, 30-57. This material is taken and updated from Geisler, House, and Herrera, *The Battle for God*, 142-69, in which they respond to movements to recast the doctrine of God.

<sup>169</sup> Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, 2:39.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid., 2:39-42.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid., 2:42-43.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid., 2:44-50.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid., 2:51.



obviously not true in an absolute sense because people can understand it enough to deny it. Further, the fact that it is not apprehendable does not mean it is unintelligible.

Second, in response to the objection against identifying God's properties as identical to one another,<sup>174</sup> Geisler, citing Thomas, denies that all God's attributes are identical to one another, though they are identical to the one essence. Using the illustration of a stone that can be hard, round, or gray, Geisler applies the same logic to God. He states, "None of these are the same attribute but each of them refers to one and the same stone. In the same way, God's many attributes are not the same, but the same God has all these attributes."<sup>175</sup> Geisler further argues that critics, such as Plantinga, err in that they attempt to describe God univocally rather than analogically.

Third, against the objection that simplicity makes God a property,<sup>176</sup> Geisler argues that only on an account of properties as independent and eternally existing realities and in using univocal language does it become a problem to predicate many properties in God. He further attacks the view that a nature is a conjunctive property on the basis that such a concept is incoherent itself. How can multiple properties inhere in one conjunctive property?

Fourth, to those who argue that the Trinity requires complexity in God and thus is defeating for simplicity, Geisler responds that this objection results from a

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<sup>174</sup> Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, 2:51-52.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid., 2:52.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid., 2:52-53.

confusion of person and essence.<sup>177</sup> The distinctions in God are according to relations while simplicity is according to essence.

Fifth, though some argue that DDS makes the Trinitarian persons identical to one another,<sup>178</sup> Geisler argues that, as a triangle has three sides and yet remains one triangle and as fatherhood and sonship refer to the same relationship and yet are opposing relations, God can be one while having multiple relations.

Sixth, some object that an absolutely simple God cannot do multiple actions,<sup>179</sup> to which Geisler replies that while the actions may be multiple, the source, God, can be one. He uses the illustration that one doctor can once prescribe a course of medication that might be required to be taken multiple days.

Finally, against those who argue that simplicity is borrowed from Greek philosophy,<sup>180</sup> Geisler points out the genetic fallacy inherent in this objection and that many theological concepts use Greek philosophical terms to express themselves. Further, the Trinity itself is certainly not a Greek philosophical concept.

#### William Mann

William Mann was an emeritus professor of philosophy at the University of Vermont after teaching at Illinois State University and St. Olaf College. Mann specialized in the philosophy of religion and in medieval philosophy. He wrote on

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<sup>177</sup> Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, 2:53-54.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid., 2:54.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid., 2:55.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid., 2:55-56.

DDS in several places, but his articles “Divine Simplicity”<sup>181</sup> and “Simplicity and Properties: A Reply to Morris”<sup>182</sup> capture his thought.

Mann wants to avoid the problem of aseity by making God independent upon lesser parts.<sup>183</sup> His article “Divine Simplicity” focuses on the identity thesis objection of DDS, namely, that it is difficult to conceive how God’s attributes, such as love, power, eternality, and knowledge, can be identical to one another as DDS seems to require. More than that, given that identifying God with His properties seems to make God a property, it is, as Plantinga points out, extremely difficult to explain how God remains a person.

In contrast to the property view, in which God is identical with His various properties, Mann posits the property instance view.<sup>184</sup> In Mann’s model, God is not identical with wisdom, life, power, and love *per se*, but with *His* wisdom, life, power, and love. Thus, God is identical, not with properties, but with property instances. God is His own instance of wisdom, power, and love. Mann states, “‘God,’ ‘the omniscience of God,’ and ‘the omnipotence of God’ all refer to the same property instance, namely, God.”<sup>185</sup> Thus, God is identical to His life and His wisdom, but wisdom and life are not identical to one another.<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>181</sup> Mann, “Divine Simplicity.”

<sup>182</sup> William E. Mann, “Simplicity and Properties: A Reply to Morris,” *Religious Studies* 22, no. 3/4 (1986).

<sup>183</sup> Mann, “Divine Simplicity,” 470.

<sup>184</sup> Mann, “Simplicity and Properties,” 343.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*, 344.

<sup>186</sup> Mann, “Divine Simplicity,” 455.

However, if God is a property instance, how is He a person any more than if He were a property? Mann's answer is that all persons are property instances.<sup>187</sup> All persons, he argues, form conjunctive properties. Conjunctive properties are the property of being all other properties. Mann calls these conjunctive properties "rich properties." In humans, these rich properties are very complex, being a mixture of essential and accidental properties. Persons instantiate rich properties and can be property instances in that they are the instances of their properties. God, too, is a rich property instance. However, unlike human persons, who possess complex rich properties, God has but one simple property: being a godhead (i.e., divinity).<sup>188</sup> This property is identical to being all God's property instances. God is the property instance of being God.

In this model, Mann attempts to demonstrate that God can be both a property instance and a person. To the extent his model is successful, he has given an account of DDS in which the identity thesis that the attributes of God appear synonymous is unnecessary. However, in Mann's model, if God is not identical with the attributes/properties of wisdom, life, and power, then the ontological basis of these attributes remains outside of Him for definition and existence. If God is identical to the property instance of being wise or of His wisdom, then wisdom is still not identical to God and is thus metaphysically independent of Him. Mann's account of DDS seems to fall prey to the aseity concern that Mann tries to avoid.<sup>189</sup>

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<sup>187</sup> Mann, "Divine Simplicity," 466-67.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid., 467.

<sup>189</sup> Richard M. Gale, *On the Nature and Existence of God*, Cambridge Philosophy Classics (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 28.

## Jeffrey Brower

Jeffrey Brower is a philosopher who teaches at Purdue University. The most significant contribution of Brower to the DDS discussion has been his pairing of DDS with a truthmaker philosophy. Brower's truthmaker account of DDS has been appropriated by many others as well.<sup>190</sup> His chapter on DDS titled "Simplicity and Aseity"<sup>191</sup> and his article "Making Sense of Divine Simplicity"<sup>192</sup> capture his argument.

Brower borrows from truthmaker philosophy to argue for the coherence of DDS, especially the identity thesis. How can God be identical to His properties without being nothing more than a property? For a statement such as "the car is red" to be true, something must make it true. In this case, it is the redness of the car that makes the statement true. Brower's account posits that for any intrinsic predication of God, such that God is good, just, wise, and powerful, the truthmaker account argues that what makes these predications true is God Himself.<sup>193</sup> God's substance itself plays the role of truthmaker in that He Himself necessitates the truth of the predication.<sup>194</sup> These predicates, though conceptually distinct,<sup>195</sup> are not properties of God that He

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<sup>190</sup> Brian Leftow even states that Brower's truthmaker approach is "now approaching canonical status." Brian Leftow, "Divine Simplicity and Divine Freedom," *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 89 (2015): 46.

<sup>191</sup> Brower, "Simplicity and Aseity," in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Theology*, 105-28.

<sup>192</sup> Jeffrey E. Brower, "Making Sense of Divine Simplicity," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers* 25, no. 1 (2008).

<sup>193</sup> Brower, "Simplicity and Aseity," 111-12.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>195</sup> Brower, "Making Sense of Divine Simplicity," 16.

exemplifies, but are God Himself; whereas in creatures, these predicates are properties.<sup>196</sup>

In “Making Sense of Divine Simplicity,” Brower presents his truthmaker argument and contrasts it with other attempts to respond to the contention that DDS makes God a property or object such as property interpretations of simplicity.<sup>197</sup> In these models, God’s attributes are seen as properties in just the way Plantinga argues they are. These properties are seen as being either universals, concrete individuals, or as substances themselves. However, on these models, it is very difficult to see how God can still be personal or individual.

Other interpretations of DDS interpret God’s attributes as state-of-affairs.<sup>198</sup> For example, God’s being wise is the state-of-affairs in which God displays wisdom. Yet, state-of-affairs are no more personal than properties. Still others argue that viewing predications as constituents helps to give DDS coherence.<sup>199</sup> Whereas contemporary interpreters describe subjects as exemplifying properties, this view argues that, historically, subjects were thought to possess properties as constituents. If God is identical with His constituents, He then only has one constituent: Himself. While Brower sees this as a promising development, he argues that such a theory is incomplete; it does not give a way to distinguish God’s constituents, even conceptually. What the theory needs, he argues, is the notion of a truthmaker, by

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<sup>196</sup> Brower, “Making Sense of Divine Simplicity,” 13.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid., 7-11.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid., 11-14.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid., 14-17.

which God “has only one constituent, himself, that makes true each of the [intrinsic] predications that can be truly made about him.”<sup>200</sup> Brower puts forth his argument that God is the truthmaker for the truth that God is power, wisdom, goodness, and life. These predicates can then be concrete particulars in God but properties which are exemplified in creatures.<sup>201</sup>

Brower defends his thesis on three fronts. Against the objection that this account makes divine contingency in creation impossible, Brower’s primary argument is that this objection is irrelevant if statements such as “God knows such and such” are external predications rather than intrinsic ones.<sup>202</sup> Against the objection that the truthmaker account cannot fit both God and creatures when each requires different kinds of predication, he reasons that such an account can apply perfectly well, just as water can be hot in the accidental sense and fire is hot in the essential sense.<sup>203</sup> Finally, against the objection that calling the truthmaker account the only viable interpretation of DDS is too strong, Brower argues that only such an account is “thin” enough to be neutral toward the categories of its referents and “thick” enough to distinguish such referents.<sup>204</sup>

In “Simplicity and Aseity,” Brower takes the discussion further by exploring how such a model of DDS can explain contingency and freedom in divine volition and

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<sup>200</sup> Brower, “Making Sense of Divine Simplicity,” 16.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid., 21-22.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid., 23.

knowledge. If God is to be free in will or knowledge, there must, Brower argues, be some contingency whereby He may choose or know this or that. However, DDS makes God identical to His act of willing or knowing. How does the truthmaker account aid in this dilemma? Brower argues for volitional contingency by arguing for extrinsic contingency.<sup>205</sup> He assumes a libertarian agent-causal model of freedom, which he summarizes as holding that “volitions are the irreducible products of free agents.”<sup>206</sup> On this view, if agent A (God) wills volition  $V_1$  in possible world  $W_1$  and wills  $V_2$  in possible  $W_2$ ,  $V_1$  and  $V_2$  are what distinguish the possible worlds. If A’s volitions are intrinsic to A then A cannot have contingent volitions without ceasing to be A. However, Brower argues, if one supposes a direct causal relationship between A and the effects, there is no longer a problem.

In this model, A directly causes effect  $E_1$  in  $W_1$  and  $E_2$  in  $W_2$ , though in the previous model  $E_1$  and  $E_2$  would be effects of  $V_1$  and  $V_2$ . This model does not deny A’s volitions but identifies them with A’s direct acts. In this sense, the contingency lies not in God but in the effects and their relationship to God. Brower states, “To say God freely chooses to create the universe is just to say that he stands in a certain relation to something wholly distinct from himself—namely, the relation of agent causation.”<sup>207</sup> In this model, God, the universe, and God’s relation to the universe stand as the truthmakers for extrinsic predications. However, since the universe causally depends upon God, Brower argues that this preserves divine aseity as well.

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<sup>205</sup> Brower, “Simplicity and Aseity,” 118-19.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid., 120.



Finally, Brower addresses the issue of contingency in God's knowledge if God is identical to His knowledge. His account utilizes compatibilism to argue that God creates a universe in such a way that His knowledge can be dependent upon free creatures.<sup>208</sup> In a statement such as, "God knows that James exists and that he is freely choosing to wash his car," the truthmaker for this statement is God Himself. God knows that James exists and is freely choosing to wash his car because it is by God's knowing that He knows. However, it is also the case that the sentence demands the real existence and activity of James. For God to know something, that thing He knows must be true. Does this then violate aseity, making God's knowledge dependent upon something external to Him? Brower does not think so. James' existing and washing his car are dependent upon God's causing the kind of universe where James exists and does so freely through causal history.<sup>209</sup> Thus, God is identical to His act of knowing James exists and does contingent things.

Brower's attempt to wed truthmaker theory to DDS has laid an important foundation for arguing that DDS is not inherently incoherent. However, not all are convinced that Brower's model is the way forward.

#### Jordan Barrett

Jordan Barrett has taught systematic theology in adjunct roles at several universities and seminaries, including Moody Bible Institute. Barrett's contribution

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<sup>208</sup> Brower, "Simplicity and Aseity," 121.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid., 122. This solution is not to be confused with Molinism, which takes James' actions to be wholly determined by James and a brute fact for God, which Brower admits would in fact cause problems for aseity. Rather, God is the initiator of a causal history leading to James existing and washing his car.

comes from his adapted and published dissertation work on DDS titled *Divine Simplicity: A Biblical and Trinitarian Account*. His book contains a significant history of DDS, tracing the doctrine from Greek pagans and Jewish philosophers through the early, medieval, and reformation churches to the era of Karl Barth.

Barrett makes two primary arguments in his book. First, he argues that “the divine names and indivisible operations of the Trinity *ad extra* are the biblical roots of the more developed doctrine of divine simplicity.”<sup>210</sup> While acknowledging that the concept of simplicity was borrowed from Greek philosophy, a commitment to Greek philosophy is not what drove the formulation of DDS. Rather than see the early Church as primarily motivated by Greek philosophy, Barrett argues that they used Greek philosophy to make sense of the divine names and trinitarian inseparable operations.<sup>211</sup>

To make the case that DDS is rooted in the themes of Scripture, Barrett argues that the various names, attributes, and ascriptions of praise given to God in Scripture are not simply descriptions of what God does, but of what God is. For Barrett, in order to praise God Himself, and not some external concept God is demonstrating, God must be identical with the names ascribed to Him.<sup>212</sup> Further, the doctrine of inseparable operations, that God acts indivisibly as one and yet with distinction in the modes among the persons of the Trinity, demonstrates the simplicity of God. Barrett’s argument is that the indivisible works of God demonstrate the individual nature of

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<sup>210</sup> Jordan Barrett, *Divine Simplicity*, 1.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>212</sup> *Ibid.*, 149-50.

God.<sup>213</sup> The fact that the work of salvation, or creation, or any other work of God, is ascribed to all three persons demonstrates that the works of God are not separable from the person of God and are not separable from each other. Thus, they must be the work of the One divine will and power.

Barrett's second primary argument is that the divine names are to be understood as identical to the divine essence, but idiomatically distinct from one another.<sup>214</sup> As he notes in the history of interpretation of DDS, all theologians have affirmed that distinctions among the attributes of God exist, but the question is how these attributes are distinct.<sup>215</sup> These distinctions have been discussed from various approaches (i.e., real distinctions, formal distinctions, conceptual distinctions, and virtual distinctions), each seeking to avoid the errors of nominalism and realism as well as the radical unity of Eunomius or the radical diversity of the Socinians.<sup>216</sup>

Barrett presents what he identifies as idiomatic distinction when he argues that the Trinity itself should inform how one thinks about the simplicity of God. While affirming that the attributes of God are conceptually distinct, he takes one step further and argues "as the divine persons are relatively or modally distinct and not identical to one another, so the divine attributes are idiomatically distinct and not identical to one another."<sup>217</sup> Using the Trinity itself as the model for God's attributes, Barrett argues

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<sup>213</sup> Jordan Barrett, *Divine Simplicity*, 156.

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>215</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.*, 166-67.

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

that they are identical to the divine essence but idiomatically distinct from one another. While Barrett agrees with the critics against the idea that the attributes of God are synonymous with one another, he nonetheless argues for a strong account of DDS by maintaining the claim that the attributes of God are still identical to God's essence.<sup>218</sup> God's attributes, he declares, are one without being synonymous and diverse without division.<sup>219</sup>

### Brian Leftow

Brian Leftow is a philosopher specializing in the fields of metaphysics and medieval philosophy. He teaches at Rutgers University after succeeding Richard Swinburne at Oxford University. Leftow has contributed significantly to the discussion of necessity in his book *God and Necessity*<sup>220</sup> and has argued for DDS in several writings, including his dissertation "Simplicity and Eternity"<sup>221</sup> and his chapter "Aquinas, Divine Simplicity, and Divine Freedom."<sup>222</sup> His articles "Divine Simplicity,"<sup>223</sup> "Is God an Abstract Object?"<sup>224</sup> and "Divine Simplicity and Divine

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<sup>218</sup> Jordan Barrett, *Divine Simplicity*, 182.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid., 183.

<sup>220</sup> Brian Leftow, *God and Necessity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>221</sup> Brian Leftow, "Simplicity and Eternity" (PhD diss., Yale University, 1984).

<sup>222</sup> Brian Leftow, "Aquinas, Divine Simplicity, and Divine Freedom," in *Metaphysics and God: Essays in Honor of Eleonore Stump*, ed. Kevin Timpe (New York: Routledge, 2009), 21-38.

<sup>223</sup> Leftow, "Divine Simplicity."

<sup>224</sup> Brian Leftow, "Is God an Abstract Object?" *Nous* 24, no. 4 (1990).

Freedom”<sup>225</sup> capture many of his contributions. Leftow is committed to DDS and has done much work on the problem of the identity thesis.

In *God and Necessity*, Leftow argues that God is the cause of even abstract necessities because these are not self-existent, Platonic things but simply are the thoughts of God. Thus, God is a necessary being Himself.<sup>226</sup> In this work, Leftow does not fully develop DDS, but argues briefly for two aspects of it as formulated by Aquinas. First, “God does not have an attribute of deity distinct from Himself.”<sup>227</sup> Deity is not a thing, category, or trope to which God belongs but is identical with God Himself. “There is no such thing as deity,” he writes, “God is the whole ontology for ‘*God is divine*.’”<sup>228</sup> Second, “God’s essence is His existence.”<sup>229</sup> God Himself necessitates both essence and existence by the same power: Himself.

In “Divine Simplicity,” Leftow presents Augustine’s version of DDS to argue against Plantinga’s criticisms of DDS. Leftow engages with three problems.<sup>230</sup> First, if God is identical to each of His properties, then it seems that God has only one property and thus each is identical to each other. Second, if God is identical with His properties, then God is a property. Third, if God is His properties, such as wisdom, and God is wise, then Wisdom is wise, which is a category error. In response, Leftow

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<sup>225</sup> Leftow, “Divine Simplicity and Divine Freedom,” *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 89 (2015).

<sup>226</sup> Leftow, *God and Necessity*, 20.

<sup>227</sup> Ibid., 307.

<sup>228</sup> Ibid.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid.

<sup>230</sup> Leftow, “Divine Simplicity and Divine Freedom,” 366.

demonstrates that Augustine, as a Platonist, held that “what God has, He is.”<sup>231</sup> For Platonism, abstract realities like goodness, wisdom, justice, and power are shadows of eternal Forms of the Good, Wisdom, Justice, and Power. Humans are said to have these qualities as they participate in them by activity to various degrees.

However, Augustine posits that God does not participate in goodness, wisdom, justice, or power. Rather, God Himself stands in for these Forms.<sup>232</sup> God is goodness itself, as well as wisdom, justice, and power. God being good, wise, just, and powerful is just God being Himself.<sup>233</sup> These are not qualities in which God participates the way creation would participate in Plato’s eternal Forms. Rather, creation participates in God to the extent that they imitate God. This means, Leftow argues, that Augustine is identifying God with a set of standards.<sup>234</sup>

For Augustine, Forms are not properties, but are standards against which something is measured. Statements such as “God is wisdom” or “God is goodness” are saying that God is the standard of such ideas.<sup>235</sup> For Leftow, then, there is a univocal aspect to these attributes in creatures and creator in that creatures participate in mercy only to the extent that they imitate God.<sup>236</sup> However, he acknowledges that there is still a non-univocal aspect to this predication, namely, the way in which each is

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<sup>231</sup> Leftow, “Divine Simplicity and Divine Freedom,” 365.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid., 366-67.

<sup>233</sup> Ibid., 371.

<sup>234</sup> Ibid., 367.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid., 374.

<sup>236</sup> Ibid., 374-75.

merciful. Creatures are merciful by participation, while God is mercy Himself. As a result, God is not an abstract object, but what is abstract for humans is actually God Himself. Plantinga, Leftow argues, assumes that if God is identified with something abstract, God must be abstract. Rather, the opposite is the case. If God is identified with something abstract, that thing may not be abstract and may be rooted in a person.<sup>237</sup>

In “Is God an Abstract Object?,” Leftow responds to Plantinga’s criticisms that DDS makes God an abstract object by identifying God with His properties and nature, and he also addresses Thomas Morris’s criticism and proposals that argue that God possesses and creates the divine nature but is not identical to it. That God must be identical to His nature and not prior (logically or temporarily) to it can be seen in Leftow’s three arguments.<sup>238</sup> First, he argues that the ability to create what God has created is a prerogative of having the divine nature. But God must logically have the divine nature in order to create anything. Second, if God creates His nature, then the divine nature does not exist until God creates it. Third, God cannot exist until His nature does, since to be God is to be divine in nature. Thus, nothing can make itself God.<sup>239</sup>

Leftow argues that the identity thesis follows logically from the intuitive theistic belief that God is the ultimate assumption of all things.<sup>240</sup> Theists wish to

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<sup>237</sup> Leftow, “Divine Simplicity and Divine Freedom,” 367.

<sup>238</sup> Leftow, “Is God an Abstract Object?,” 588.

<sup>239</sup> Ibid., 591.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid.

maintain that God is the ultimate assumption (i.e., that all explanations “trace back to God, rather than through God to some more ultimate context”<sup>241</sup>). God is the ultimate source of all that is not God. If God cannot create His nature and His nature possesses the various divine properties, then God is identical to His nature and to the divine attributes. But does the identity thesis not make God a nature rather than a person? Leftow responds by arguing that this assumes too much without justification.<sup>242</sup> God being identical to His nature does not mean God is purely abstract. Rather, the fact that God is His nature may mean that the identity thesis helps explain why God can have properties that no other concrete entity has, such as eternality and immutability.<sup>243</sup>

Finally, in “Divine Simplicity and Divine Freedom,” Leftow defines DDS as the doctrine that God has no material, spatial, temporal, or metaphysical parts, constituents, or structure. He simply is what He has.<sup>244</sup> Leftow then makes the case that, though truthmaker theory, which posits that God is the truthmaker for what is predicated of Him, has become standard, it nevertheless results in four problems.<sup>245</sup> First, this account does not deal with the question of what God is, but only of the role God plays. God serves the truthmaker role. Second, such an accounting is unnecessary. Leftow argues that the truthmaker theory rests on many contentious issues. He argues that it is far better to express the relationship between God and His

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<sup>241</sup> Leftow, “Is God an Abstract Object?,” 587.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid., 593.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid., 593-94.

<sup>244</sup> Leftow, “Divine Simplicity and Divine Freedom,” 45.

<sup>245</sup> Ibid., 46-47.



predications in terms of reference and satisfaction. Third, there is no warrant from Scripture to utilize the truthmaker account.

Leftow's fourth objection is the basis for the article. He argues that the truthmaker account of DDS makes the problem of divine freedom even more pronounced.<sup>246</sup> God must, he argues, have contingent intentions, the ability to have willed otherwise. However, by making God identical with His intentions, DDS makes such contingent intentions seem irreconcilable. On the basis of the truthmaker account, Leftow argues, whatever truthmakers make true they necessarily make true.<sup>247</sup> How, then, can God be free?

Leftow then analyzes Timothy O'Conner's proposal, which truthmaker accounts often utilize.<sup>248</sup> Conner's approach, through the lens of Leftow, argues that our actions are the result of the connection between us and our purposes, beliefs, and intentions. But a simple God has no internal contingent intentions so His beliefs and purposes must be matched with an external intention.<sup>249</sup> This intention is the causal relation of God to the created universe. God's only intentions, then, are that the universe would fulfill His purposes, and He believes that this universe, rather than another, best fulfills His purposes.<sup>250</sup> What creates this external intention? It cannot be the universe itself, for the universe has no intrinsic purpose, nor can it be God because

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<sup>246</sup> Leftow, "Divine Simplicity and Divine Freedom," 47.

<sup>247</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>248</sup> Timothy O'Conner, "Simplicity and Creation," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers* 16, no. 3 (1999).

<sup>249</sup> Leftow, "Divine Simplicity and Divine Freedom," 49.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid., 50.

this would create internal contingent mental states, which DDS aims to avoid. Rather, the match between the universe and God's purposes is what gives God an external intention, and this universe, rather than a different one, best fulfills these purposes.<sup>251</sup>

However, Leftow states, "if the match between a universe and a divine purpose is what settles God's purpose in creating it, the character of the universe determines God's purpose in creating."<sup>252</sup> Thus, he rejects O'Connor's solution because of its implications of retrospective purpose, such that it makes God's purpose logically posterior to the existence of the universe.<sup>253</sup> Instead, though without elaboration, he states that an event-causal modal may be more profitable for understanding extrinsic intentions.

Many others, such as Thomas Schärfl,<sup>254</sup> D. Stephen Long,<sup>255</sup> Stephen R. Holmes,<sup>256</sup> Brian Davies,<sup>257</sup> Thomas Joseph White,<sup>258</sup> W. Michael Grant,<sup>259</sup> and William F. Vallicella<sup>260</sup> have written on DDS as well. Though each approach has its

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<sup>251</sup> Leftow, "Divine Simplicity and Divine Freedom," 51.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>254</sup> Thomas Schärfl, "Divine Simplicity," *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 10, no. 2 (2018).

<sup>255</sup> Long, *The Perfectly Simple Triune God*.

<sup>256</sup> Holmes, "Something Much Too Plain to Say."

<sup>257</sup> Davies, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, 158-80.

<sup>258</sup> Thomas Joseph White, "Divine Simplicity and the Holy Trinity," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 18, no. 1 (2016).

<sup>259</sup> W. Matthews Grant, "Divine Simplicity, Contingent Truths, and Extrinsic Models of Divine Knowing," *Faith and Philosophy* 29, no. 3 (2012). <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2173&context=faithandphilosophy>.

<sup>260</sup> Vallicella, "Divine Simplicity: A New Defense," 508-25.

own emphases and strengths and weaknesses, they agree that God is simple in the sense that God's attributes are somehow identical to God, and that DDS helps to give grammar to the doctrine of the Trinity. However, these various approaches disagree as to the nature of the identity of God's attributes and as to the question of how God can be free while being simple.

### **A Survey of Contemporary Revisions of DDS**

The previous section surveyed those who wish to retrieve DDS in its classical articulations and in its strongest forms. However, there are numerous contemporary theologians who argue that a "mere simplicity" should be maintained but with serious reformulations, revisions, or even redefinitions. This survey will proceed from those whose versions of DDS most retain the classic formulations, but with substantial revisions of key elements, to those who use the terminology of DDS but in an equivocal sense such that their versions bear little resemblance to its historic usage and understanding.

#### **Eleonore Stump**

Eleonore Stump is a Catholic philosopher who specializes in medieval philosophy and religion, especially the thought of Aquinas, and is a professor of philosophy at Saint Louis University. Though she has written on DDS in multiple places, Stump's article "Absolute Simplicity,"<sup>261</sup> co-authored with Norman Kretzmann, and her book *The God of the Bible and the God of the Philosophers*, part

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<sup>261</sup> Stump and Kretzmann, "Absolute Simplicity."

of the same lecture series as Plantinga's *Does God Have a Nature*, lay out her thoughts on DDS and are the most commonly cited by others.<sup>262</sup>

DDS, for Stump, involves three key commitments.<sup>263</sup> First, God cannot have any spatial or temporal parts. Second, God cannot have intrinsic accidental properties. Third, there can be no real distinction between essential properties in God. The attributes of God are identical in reference (God) but distinct in sense, in the same way that Venus is the morning and evening star.<sup>264</sup>

Stump responds to several objections against DDS. In *The God of the Bible and the God of the Philosophers*, she responds to the objection that DDS, by denying that God is a being and insisting that God is only being itself, makes God impersonal and unknowable. She insists that such an understanding misunderstands Aquinas and misunderstands DDS itself: it is not that God is being itself alone, it is that God is a being *and* being itself. In God, to be an individual (*id quod est*) and to be being itself (*esse*) are one.<sup>265</sup>

In "Absolute Simplicity," Stump and Kretzmann respond to three objections concerning God's will. First, they respond to the supposed incompatibility of simplicity and free choice. If God is simple, then it seems He is unable to do other than He does without being other than He is. Instead, if God is free, it seems that He

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<sup>262</sup> Eleonore Stump, *The God of the Bible and the God of the Philosophers*, The Aquinas Lecture Series (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2016).

<sup>263</sup> Stump and Kretzmann, "Absolute Simplicity," 354.

<sup>264</sup> *Ibid.*, 356-57.

<sup>265</sup> Stump, *The God of the Bible and the God of the Philosophers*, 86-87.

must choose to take on accidental properties.<sup>266</sup> Second, they respond to the charge of inconsistency in claiming essential omnipotence and perfect goodness.<sup>267</sup> The idea of perfect goodness, it seems, limits what God can do in that He cannot do evil. Third, they respond to the objection that the idea of perfect goodness itself is incoherent.<sup>268</sup>

In response to these objections, Stump and Kretzmann argue that Aquinas' model of the will can serve as a guide.<sup>269</sup> Aquinas taught that every will is inclined to happiness. Evil only gets chosen due to ignorance or a false belief that such practice will lead to happiness. God, however, being omniscient and goodness itself, is neither ignorant nor susceptible to false beliefs. God's omnipotence, then, is not at odds with His goodness but is that by which He brings about His goodness. In this model, the ability to do evil is not an ability at all, but an inability or lack of knowledge and, according to DDS, God lacks nothing.<sup>270</sup>

But what about God's freedom to choose not to create or to create a different world than He has? Stump and Kretzmann insist, with their understanding of Aquinas, that God is able to create or not create and to create this world or that one. How do they maintain this belief in light of DDS? Stump and Kretzmann reply that, since God's will is eternal, God cannot will other than He has willed.<sup>271</sup> Therefore, God's

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<sup>266</sup> Stump and Kretzmann, "Absolute Simplicity," 357.

<sup>267</sup> Ibid., 358.

<sup>268</sup> Ibid.

<sup>269</sup> Ibid., 359.

<sup>270</sup> Ibid., 362-65.

<sup>271</sup> Ibid., 367.

creating is necessary. But in what sense is it necessary? God's creating the world is not logically necessary. After all, the sentence "God did not create" is not an incoherent statement. God's creating the world is thus necessary, but only conditionally necessary. God could, in another possible world, have willed not to create.<sup>272</sup>

This argument, however, seems to imply that God would be different, in some sense, in another possible world where He did not create or where He created something else. Rather than explain away this implication, Stump and Kretzmann embrace it, stating, "God is not the same in all possible worlds."<sup>273</sup> God is this-world immutable but trans-possible-world mutable. Thus, God does have accidental properties and potential but only in the sense that He could have been different if He had created different. However, since He did not create different, Stump and Kretzmann consider the point to be moot. God, in willing Himself, wills all He wills in a single, immutable act,<sup>274</sup> which might have been other than it is hypothetically, but not in reality. While Stump admits her model is a weakening of DDS,<sup>275</sup> she feels that such an approach maintains God's freedom and the identity of God with His will.

Katherin A. Rogers

Katherin A. Rogers is a professor of philosophy at the University of Delaware. She specializes in the philosophy of religion and the history of medieval philosophy in

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<sup>272</sup> Stump and Kretzmann, "Absolute Simplicity," 368.

<sup>273</sup> Ibid., 369.

<sup>274</sup> Ibid., 371.

<sup>275</sup> Ibid., 369.

general and in the work of Anselm in particular. Her work on simplicity is primarily found in an article titled “The Traditional Doctrine of Divine Simplicity” and in a chapter in her book *Perfect Being Theology*.<sup>276</sup> Rogers argues that, for many reasons, one ought to adhere to DDS.<sup>277</sup> For example, DDS enables a more satisfactory answer to the Euthyphro Dilemma, and it supports cosmological and ontological arguments. DDS also enables one to consistently hold to aseity, incorruptibility, and perfection.

In light of her commitment to DDS, Rogers’ work focuses on two issues. First, she argues that “God simply is an act” and that the attributes used to describe God are simply adjectives used to describe that act.<sup>278</sup> Confusion on this point, in her estimation, is the root of much of the rejection of DDS.<sup>279</sup> Rogers believes this view shields her from the criticisms of Plantinga and others that the identity of God’s properties with God Himself makes God a property.<sup>280</sup> When DDS adherents say that God is “pure act” or “wholly in act,” they mean that God has no properties in the sense of having unactualized potentials. God just does things and is what He does. God does not possess the property of omniscience; He just knows all. God does not possess the property of power; He just does what He intends.<sup>281</sup> Unlike humans, who actualize

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<sup>276</sup> Katherin A. Rogers, “Divine Simplicity,” in *Perfect Being Theology, Reason and Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000).

<sup>277</sup> Rogers, “The Traditional Doctrine of Divine Simplicity,” 167.

<sup>278</sup> Ibid., 166.

<sup>279</sup> Rogers, “Divine Simplicity,” 27.

<sup>280</sup> Ibid., 171.

<sup>281</sup> Ibid., 172.

properties, God is fully in act. All God's acts are one in His eternal act of willing, though the effects of these acts are many.<sup>282</sup>

However, how can God remain a person if He is an act? After all, persons act but are not identical to their action. Rogers responds to this question by arguing that, even in human experience, we do not know ourselves, but only our experiences of our actions, our thoughts, and our feelings. In that sense, we are our actions. We are known, to ourselves and to others, by what we do. This is analogous, she argues, to God.<sup>283</sup> Whereas there is a diverse self behind the actions in the case of humans, God is pure act.

Further, since God is pure act, all His acts are one. This is the same identity thesis concept raised before but seen from the perspective of divine action rather than attributes. The critic, however, still maintains that power and goodness, for example, do not mean the same thing, as one can be powerful without being good. Rogers counters this objection by arguing that our concepts of power and goodness are skewed. In reality, true power is not the ability to force one's will but is "possession of all strengths."<sup>284</sup> She then argues that cruelty is not a strength, but a weakness. Power is only "all power" when it is good. With this understanding, Rogers argues that the identity thesis no longer appears incoherent.

Rogers' second focus interacts with the problems raised by DDS. She notes two such problems, eternity and freedom, but only focuses her attention on the

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<sup>282</sup> Rogers, "Divine Simplicity," 174.

<sup>283</sup> Rogers, "The Traditional Doctrine of Divine Simplicity," 172-73.

<sup>284</sup> Ibid., 175-76.



second. If God is an act, then, once again, it seems He cannot do other than He does without being other than He is. But, if God allows a level of freedom in creatures, then the free choices of creatures seem to have an actual affect on God for He would then act differently than He did if they chose differently.<sup>285</sup>

In the end, Rogers argues that we must “bite the bullet” on this issue and accept that for God to possess freedom and for creatures to possess freedom, He must be affected by creation.<sup>286</sup> This is not necessarily a problem in her view because God’s limiting Himself by creaturely freedom is self-limiting. God chooses to be affected by creation because doing so is best for creation and God does what is best.<sup>287</sup> Here, while Rogers uses the same language as a classical understanding of DDS, her solution to this problem seems to run contrary to the motivation behind the doctrine, namely, God’s aseity, despite her protests to the contrary.

### Oliver Crisp

Oliver Crisp is an analytic theologian who teaches at the University of St. Andrews after having taught at Fuller Theological Seminary. His primary work on DDS is in his chapter on divine simplicity in his book *Analyzing Doctrine*,<sup>288</sup> a work that seeks to apply the methods of analytic philosophy to the discipline of systematic theology.

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<sup>285</sup> Rogers, “The Traditional Doctrine of Divine Simplicity,” 180-85.

<sup>286</sup> Ibid., 166, 185.

<sup>287</sup> Ibid., 186.

<sup>288</sup> Oliver D. Crisp, “Divine Simplicity,” in *Analyzing Doctrine: Toward a Systematic Theology* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2019), 53-75. This work is reproduced in Oliver D. Crisp, “A Parsimonious Model of Divine Simplicity,” *Modern Theology* 35, no. 3 (2019): 558-73.

Crisp calls his model the parsimonious model of DDS, in contrast with the minimalist and maximalist versions of the doctrine.<sup>289</sup> In the minimalist form, loosely following Anselm, it is asserted that God is without parts upon which he can be composed or depend. However, the nature of this non-composition, Crisp contends, is mysterious.<sup>290</sup> The maximal account, following Aquinas, develops this thesis much further. In this maximal version, God's lack of parts applies to His physical, as well as all metaphysical parts, resulting in the identification of God as pure act.<sup>291</sup> As a result, God has no potentiality, no distinction between attributes, and no accidental properties.

While Crisp can accept the minimal doctrine as good and necessary, he argues that the maximal doctrine creates more problems than it fixes. Such a model, he argues, risks turning God into nothing more than a property or property instance and warrants a "cut-down version" of DDS.<sup>292</sup> Crisp does, however, grant that part of the confusion over the nature of God as He relates to His properties lies in Plantinga's view of ontology.<sup>293</sup> Plantinga's model is that of relational ontology, in which a being is a substance that exemplifies properties that are abstract objects and entities. By contrast, Aquinas and others of the maximal version of DDS are operating from a

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<sup>289</sup> Crisp, "Divine Simplicity," 56. Crisp never formally defines what "parsimonious" means, but the term typically carries the idea of being modest or frugal.

<sup>290</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>291</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>292</sup> Ibid., 62-63.

<sup>293</sup> Ibid., 64-65.

constituent ontology in which a substance is composed of its essential and accidental properties and thus owes its very essence to those properties.

Nevertheless, Crisp still insists that a simpler DDS is in order. In his version, he is making the modest claim that God is not composite, arguing for an apophatic version of DDS rather than positing the positive statements that take Aquinas, in Crisp's view, too far.<sup>294</sup> His proposal involves six steps.<sup>295</sup> First, "God is a concrete entity," not an abstract object. Second, "God is an immaterial person" and personal agent. Third, "God is a necessary being" in that He exists in all possible worlds. Fourth, "God is metaphysically simple" in the sense that He is not composed of lesser parts. Fifth, "God is essentially metaphysically simple." Metaphysical simplicity is essential to God being God. Finally, though God is simple, He "has distinct attributes that He exemplifies." In this model, then, like in that of Plantinga, God is a substance that exemplifies properties.<sup>296</sup>

This parsimonious model goes beyond the minimal version and allows for the possibility that God is indeed far more simple than He is in that version. The parsimonious model also rejects the more difficult claims of the maximal version. Crisp states, "God is at least this simple, and may be more simple still, though we are not clear at present just how to explain such greater simplicity."<sup>297</sup> Further, Crisp acknowledges that this model leaves God dependent upon independent properties, thus

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<sup>294</sup> Crisp, "Divine Simplicity," 67.

<sup>295</sup> Ibid. 70.

<sup>296</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>297</sup> Ibid., 71.

sacrificing aseity.<sup>298</sup> However, Crisp does not think this objection is insurmountable because God exemplifies these properties essentially, that is, in all possible worlds.<sup>299</sup>

### John Frame

John Frame has been a professor of theology and apologetics at Westminster Theological Seminary, as well as Reformed Theological Seminary. Frame is a prime example of a theologian apologist. He has written extensively on theology, philosophy, and apologetics and is one of the primary representatives of reformed theology and the presuppositional school of apologetics.<sup>300</sup> Frame has been a promoter of Cornelius Van Til's model, while also being a moderate critic of aspects of it.<sup>301</sup>

Frame argues that God is simple in that He lacks parts.<sup>302</sup> He affirms that God is, at least in some sense, identical to His essence.<sup>303</sup> However, while Frame broadly affirms simplicity, his version of it shows distinct revision of the classical model of DDS. He argues for both simplicity and complexity in God.<sup>304</sup> For Frame, while God's attributes are identical to His essence, they are not identical to one another.<sup>305</sup> God's

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<sup>298</sup> Crisp, "Divine Simplicity," 73.

<sup>299</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>300</sup> John M. Frame, "Presuppositional Apologetics," in *Five Views on Apologetics*, ed. Steven B. Cowan (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000).

<sup>301</sup> John M. Frame, *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1995).

<sup>302</sup> Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 429.

<sup>303</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 226.

<sup>304</sup> Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 432.

<sup>305</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 229.

attributes like goodness, power, mercy, and knowledge are mutually connected and serving, but not identical. Rather, God's essence includes all of His attributes and thus *is* His attributes.<sup>306</sup> God's attributes describe different aspects of His single essence.<sup>307</sup> God is a personal being. His attributes are not different parts of Him such that sometimes God is merciful and sometimes He is just. Rather, God always acts with the totality of His attributes. Frame states, "God relates to us as a whole person, not as a collection of attributes."<sup>308</sup>

For Frame, simplicity may be thought of as the unity of God's attributes.<sup>309</sup> Thus, Frame rejects the thesis that God "is one in the sense of having no plurality or complexity," even going so far as to confess agreement with Moltmann in his rejection of the classical DDS.<sup>310</sup> While Frame denies that attributes are parts of God,<sup>311</sup> with his redefinition of DDS, he nonetheless makes God the sum of His attributes. By allowing for complexity in the attributes of God, making God the totality of His attributes, it is clear that Frame's version of the doctrine leaves one with a God who is dependent upon His attributes to be what He is.<sup>312</sup> In Frame's thought, God's attributes

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<sup>306</sup> Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 429.

<sup>307</sup> Ibid., 432.

<sup>308</sup> Ibid.

<sup>309</sup> Ibid., 433.

<sup>310</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 628. While Frame does confess agreement with Moltmann here, on pp. 629-30 he rejects Moltmann's rejection of God's sovereign rule and other key doctrines.

<sup>311</sup> Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 429.

<sup>312</sup> Ibid.

are essential to His being, such that God cannot be God without them.<sup>313</sup> Thus, Frame prefers to talk about God's necessary existence rather than DDS.<sup>314</sup>

A large part of Frame's desire to maintain complexity in God is to genuinely differentiate the persons of the Trinity. In his view, the classical version of DDS does not enable one to do so.<sup>315</sup> Such a doctrine, he argues, is inconsistent with the biblical doctrine of the Trinity.<sup>316</sup> Though God is a unity, He is nevertheless a complexity of persons. Frame rejects what he describes as Aquinas' model of the Trinity in which the persons are distinguished only nominally.<sup>317</sup> If there is real distinction in God, Frame claims there must be real complexity. Thus, the persons of the Trinity, like the attributes of God, exhaust the entirety of God and yet remain plural. Frame argues that they are, in fact, three beings.<sup>318</sup> Frame shows a great sympathy for a social trinitarianism model but remains fairly agnostic on the subject and cautions against being too specific on the nature of these persons.<sup>319</sup>

As a result of Frame's version of DDS, other aspects of classical theism are questioned and reinterpreted in Frame's theology as well. Frame argues that God is

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<sup>313</sup> Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 429.

<sup>314</sup> Ibid., 431.

<sup>315</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 228.

<sup>316</sup> Ibid., 628.

<sup>317</sup> Ibid., 702.

<sup>318</sup> Ibid., 705.

<sup>319</sup> Ibid., 724-26.

both temporal and atemporal, passionate and impassible,<sup>320</sup> changing and unchanging.<sup>321</sup> The way Frame can maintain these opposing ideas is by positing that God has aspects (Frame's description of attributes) that are essential and aspects that are not, aspects that are and aspects that are becoming, aspects that are eternal and aspects He takes on for the sake of relationships.<sup>322</sup> Frame uses the term "covenantal" to characterize this becoming. Frame's model necessitates act and potential in God in that God covenantally, or relationally, takes on characteristics that are temporal and changing. But he maintains that God is simple because it is the One God who is doing it all.

For his apologetic approach, because he sees God as simple in number and essence but complex in attributes, Frame argues against polytheism on the one hand and argues that this one God is able to produce multiple effects in creation on the other because He possesses multiple attributes.<sup>323</sup> However, even though Frame posits several apologetic benefits of his model, several questions remain. For example, given that God is the sum of His attributes, how can God truly be *a se* and independent and the first cause of all? How are these qualities, attributes, or properties not logically prior to God? Also, if God's covenantal attributes are able to change, and experience emotion, even suffering,<sup>324</sup> how is God not dependent upon the world to be what He

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<sup>320</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 558-59.

<sup>321</sup> Ibid., 571.

<sup>322</sup> Ibid., 226.

<sup>323</sup> John M. Frame, *Nature's Case for God: A Brief Biblical Argument* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2018), 34.

<sup>324</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 613.

is?<sup>325</sup> Finally, given that Frame classifies the Trinity as three beings within God, how would he be able to cogently answer the charge of the Jew or Muslim that Christianity is not truly monotheistic?<sup>326</sup> In the final analysis, Frame's version of simplicity looks very little like the classical DDS and opens him up to several apologetic criticisms.

### Richard Swinburne

Richard Swinburne is an English philosopher from the University of Oxford and is well known for his arguments for the existence and nature of God. Swinburne's three books, *The Existence of God*,<sup>327</sup> *The Christian God*,<sup>328</sup> and *The Coherence of Theism*<sup>329</sup> capture his theology, philosophy, and apologetic approaches.

Swinburne presents his understanding of God as follows: "There exists necessarily and eternally a person essentially bodiless, omnipresent, creator and sustainer of any universe there may be, perfectly free, omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good, and a source of moral obligation."<sup>330</sup> For Swinburne, each of these properties coalesce in the divine nature because all these properties follow logically and necessarily from God's "pure, limitless, intentional power."<sup>331</sup> God is simple,

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<sup>325</sup> Frame admits that making God's attributes dependent upon the world is a problem. Making God's love, for example, dependent upon their being a world to love makes God dependent upon the world. However, while he argues this is not biblical, his version of DDS seems to fall into the same pit. See John M. Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God: An Introduction* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1994), 49.

<sup>326</sup> Ibid., 46-50.

<sup>327</sup> Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

<sup>328</sup> Richard Swinburne, *The Christian God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

<sup>329</sup> Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*.

<sup>330</sup> Swinburne, *The Christian God*, 125.

<sup>331</sup> Ibid., 151.



then, in the sense that His essence is a monadic property, with each of His other properties following logically from it.<sup>332</sup>

Swinburne states explicitly that “all theologians hold that there is a natural unity to the divine essence, and so that he is a very simple being, a claim that I certainly endorse.”<sup>333</sup> However, though Swinburne endorses the concept that God is a unity and is the simplest being, he nevertheless rejects the strong identity thesis aspect of DDS, arguing that Aquinas himself, in contrast to Anselm, did not affirm such a paradoxical idea. Rather, the DDS should be understood as “the claim that all the traditional divine properties are essential properties to God,”<sup>334</sup> that is, that all the properties traditionally ascribed to God must be ascribed to Him for Him to be God. For God’s properties to be identical to God is to say there “is no more to God than His essential properties.”<sup>335</sup> Thus, Swinburne’s view of simplicity mirrors others who affirm that God is the whole of His properties. Further, Swinburne also rejects the idea that simplicity (or omnipotence) entails there can only be one divine being,<sup>336</sup> a concept that affects his discussion of Trinitarianism.

In addition to his revision of DDS, Swinburne also revises several other key classical terms. Though he affirms God’s eternity, he does not mean that God is unaffected by time and immutable in the classical sense, but that God is everlasting,

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<sup>332</sup> Swinburne, *The Christian God*, 154.

<sup>333</sup> Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*, 258-59.

<sup>334</sup> *Ibid.*, 259.

<sup>335</sup> Swinburne, *The Christian God*, 163.

<sup>336</sup> Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*, 256-58.

experiencing a succession of moments and experiences with history.<sup>337</sup> Further, God's omniscience is not a complete knowledge of all events past, present, and future, for that would limit freedom.<sup>338</sup> Rather, God knows all events past and present and all future events that are necessitated by past events. While the classical DDS would entail both divine timelessness and omniscience, as God lacks the composition of act and potency and God is identical with His knowledge, Swinburne's understanding does not include such doctrines. Swinburne also explicitly denies that all moral truths are grounded in God, positing that things like rape or breaking promises are brute wrongs, "whether or not there is a God."<sup>339</sup> While God is the highest good and always does what is good, He is not identical with goodness itself.

Swinburne's doctrine of the Trinity is also revised in light of his version of DDS. Though others have advocated for forms of social trinitarianism, Swinburne is the most forthcoming of his convictions in this regard. Though classical DDS posits only one being who is tripersonal, Swinburne posits multiple beings. For Swinburne, for God to be God, He must be tripersonal. For God to love, there must be two to love and a third to receive the benefit of that love.<sup>340</sup> Thus, if there is one divine being, there must be three. But why not four? For Swinburne, there simply does not need to be four to accomplish anything and so simplicity would render the one God tripersonal.<sup>341</sup>

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<sup>337</sup> Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*, 231.

<sup>338</sup> Ibid., 194-95. This view has often been classified as a variation of Open Theism.

<sup>339</sup> Ibid., 225.

<sup>340</sup> Swinburne, *The Christian God*, 177-78.

<sup>341</sup> Ibid., 179.

Thus, there are three simple beings that are God. Swinburne's contention is that there are essentially three divine individuals.<sup>342</sup> These individual beings are one only in the sense of having the same nature. The persons of the Trinity are to be conceived of as a collective, a unity of three essentially divine individuals of the same kind, characterized by mutual dependence.<sup>343</sup> The Son and the Spirit are then eternal creations of the Father, and, in the case of the Spirit, of the Son, not by will, but by nature.<sup>344</sup> They are fully divine in the sense that each possess the divine qualities and properties. Though previous theologians, creeds, and councils rejected the idea of three distinct beings, indicating polytheism and denying monotheism, Swinburne contends that they were not denying the presence of three beings that are God, only of three independent beings.<sup>345</sup> However, in his model, the three individuals are dependent upon each other to be what they are.

Though he claims to hold to DDS, Swinburne's version denies its core commitments. Swinburne's simplicity does not mean God is identical to His attributes or that He is one undivided being or being itself for that matter. Simplicity for him is such that God is the least complicated proposition for various metaphysical questions and is unified in His essence. In regard to God's goodness, Swinburne does not fall

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<sup>342</sup> In an earlier form of his work, it is noteworthy that Swinburne originally called the three individuals the first, second, and third "God." Richard Swinburne, "Could There Be More Than One God?," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers* 5, no. 3 (1988): 233. In *The Christian God*, he largely copied his material from the article, but he substituted the language of "Gods" with the wording of "individuals," while leaving the numerical designations as G<sub>1</sub> and G<sub>2</sub>. Swinburne, *The Christian God*, 173-75.

<sup>343</sup> Swinburne, *The Christian God*, 184.

<sup>344</sup> *Ibid.*, 185.

<sup>345</sup> *Ibid.*, 180.

into the Euthyphro Dilemma. He jumps in with both feet. He claims to hold to the independent nature of goodness for some things and the necessity of divine commands for others.<sup>346</sup> In this view, then, God is the ground of morality only insofar as He is owner of all, and perhaps the highest example, but not as goodness itself.

As for his doctrine of the Trinity, not only does Swinburne's model seem to lie outside of classical orthodoxy, but it also seems incoherent and leaves him with no foreseeable way to counter charges of polytheism. Swinburne oscillates between using the terms "being" and "person" interchangeably for God collectively and for the individual persons of the Father, Son, and Spirit, albeit recognizing that the second two are derivative and dependent upon the first. This seems to lead to the conclusion that God is one person and three persons at the same time, which is a contradiction in terms. Further, on this account, it is nearly impossible to see a difference between Swinburne's argument that there are three divine individuals who are God and the claim that there are three gods.

### **A Survey of Contemporary Discussions on DDS and Apologetics**

In this section, the impact of DDS on apologetics is considered. Others have noted the apologetic implications of DDS, but few have mined these implications comprehensibly or effectively. Gavin Ortlund states, "To consider divine simplicity . . . or to utilize it in the context of theistic apologetics, is to step into a larger domain of concerns than is typically present in contemporary treatments of the doctrine."<sup>347</sup> This

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<sup>346</sup> Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*, 224.

<sup>347</sup> Ortlund, *Theological Retrieval for Evangelicals*, 123.

section will survey various writers who have demonstrated this thesis in isolated forms, beginning with several names already presented.

Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann

In “Absolute Simplicity,” Stump and Kretzmann argue for two apologetic implications of DDS. First, they argue that DDS answers the Euthyphro Dilemma concerning God’s goodness. In contrast to those who argue that God either wills the good, making it good, or measures up to the good, making goodness a platonic standard, Stump and Kretzmann argue that God *is* goodness itself.<sup>348</sup> They write, “Thus there is an essential relationship between God and the standard by which he judges; the goodness for the sake of which and in accordance with which he acts, in accordance with which he wills only certain things to be morally good, is identical with his nature.”<sup>349</sup> DDS provides an ontological foundation for goodness: God. Goodness is what God is and God wills Himself. Goodness is not a Platonic standard to which God must measure nor is it an arbitrary choice. God is goodness itself, providing a universal and binding standard for morality in creation.

Second, Stump and Kretzmann argue that DDS effectively grounds cosmological arguments by supplying an explanation of why God is a necessary being.<sup>350</sup> Stump and Kretzmann argue, “If his nature is internally consistent, it exists in all possible worlds, and so God, identical with his nature, exists in all possible

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<sup>348</sup> Stump and Kretzmann, “Absolute Simplicity,” 376.

<sup>349</sup> Ibid.

<sup>350</sup> Ibid., 377.

worlds. . . . God's existence is . . . a logical consequence of God's absolute simplicity."<sup>351</sup> Contrary to those who deny that God is a logically necessary being, who deny that God is a necessary being at all, or who argue that God is a necessary being but treat His existence as a mere brute fact, God must not only exist necessarily because He is the ground of all contingent things, but also because His existence is identical to His nature.

Brian Leftow

In his article "Is God an Abstract Object?," Leftow presents a version of the ontological argument grounded in DDS. To make this argument, he presents a series of premises.<sup>352</sup> First, "If God exists, possibly God's nature is exemplified." If God exists, God will exemplify His divine nature. Second, "If possibly God's nature is exemplified, God's nature exists." In order to be exemplified, God's nature exists. Third, "If possibly God exists, God's nature exists." The conclusion, then, is that if God exists, His nature must as well. These premises set up his ontological argument. Fourth, "possibly God exists." It is possible that God exists in the sense that "God exists," which is not an incoherent idea. Fifth, "God's nature exists." If it is possible that God exists, and it is possible, God's nature must exist, too, in order to be exemplified. Sixth, "God equals His nature." This point is where DDS enters Leftow's argument. In DDS, God is His nature. Leftow argues that, by necessity, whatever is not identical with God is created and maintained by God.<sup>353</sup> So, if God's attributes are

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<sup>351</sup> Stump and Kretzmann, "Absolute Simplicity," 377.

<sup>352</sup> Leftow, "Is God an Abstract Object?," 595.

<sup>353</sup> Ibid., 582.

not created by God, they must be identical with Him. God cannot create His nature, for such thing would require God to be a certain being with divine causal power. Therefore, seventh, “God exists.” If God’s nature exists, then there must be a God who is this nature.

Leftow then concludes that God exists necessarily. This argument, he believes, has three advantages over other ontological arguments,<sup>354</sup> such as those put forward by Plantinga, Descartes, and others. First, the form of the argument is valid. Second, these premises do not rely on forms of modal logic. Third, the premises are all plausible, though the fourth premise is contentious.

Leftow develops this argument further in “Individual and Attribute in the Ontological Argument.” In this paper, Leftow presents the argument as developed by Anselm. Anselm argues that something than which nothing greater can be thought (S) must exist in the real world because something that exists in a thing and in the mind, which even a fool can grasp, is greater than that which exists in the mind only.<sup>355</sup> However, William Rowe has argued that the ontological argument, specifically as formulated by Anselm, is question begging.<sup>356</sup> The idea that S exists in the mind assumes we can be sure that such a thing does exist in the mind. One can only know that the idea of God, or S, exists in the understanding truly if He exists in the real world.

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<sup>354</sup> Leftow, “Is God an Abstract Object?,” 595.

<sup>355</sup> Leftow, “Individual and Attribute in the Ontological Argument,” 235.

<sup>356</sup> Ibid.

In response, Leftow argues that, though it seems like Anselm goes back and forth between S in the mind and S in a thing, between an attribute and an individual, Anselm is able to talk interchangeably about a property or attribute and an individual because he is expressing the identity thesis of DDS.<sup>357</sup> God can exist as an individual and as a property in the mind because, as S, He is absolutely simple and is identical with His properties.<sup>358</sup> For Anselm, because that which has its attributes through something else is dependent on that something else and is not as great as something that has its attributes through itself, and because God cannot create His own attributes without first possessing them, God must be identical with His attributes.<sup>359</sup> By appealing to DDS, Leftow is able to avoid an objection that the ontological argument is an exercise in question begging.<sup>360</sup>

#### Edward Feser

Edward Feser is a professor of philosophy at Pasadena City College. He has written numerous volumes on Thomas Aquinas, Aristotle, and medieval metaphysics. His most significant apologetic argument based on DDS is found in his book *Five Proofs for the Existence of God*.

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<sup>357</sup> Leftow, "Individual and Attribute in the Ontological Argument," 236.

<sup>358</sup> Ibid.

<sup>359</sup> Ibid., 239-40.

<sup>360</sup> Leftow also presents elements of DDS in a version of the cosmological argument in his article, "A Leibnizian Cosmological Argument," *Philosophical Studies* 57, no. 2 (1989). Here, he follows Leibniz in arguing that God's nature is to exist such that, if it is possible for Him to exist, He then exists in all possible worlds. However, Leftow does not explicitly connect this to DDS, and so it is not given a full treatment in this section.



In the second proof for God's existence, which Feser calls the Neo-Platonic Proof, he relies heavily on DDS to make his case. God must be simple to be the only uncaused cause of all. He begins his argument with the observation that everything we know and experience is made of parts upon which these things depend for their identity and existence.<sup>361</sup> Composite things are caused. This dependence may be causal in the sense of bringing into existence or may be causal in the sense of owing identity to them. Everything composite is less fundamental than its parts and thus owes its existence and definition to its parts. It is and it is what it is because of its parts. These parts may be material, or they may be metaphysical, such that a thing is composite of form and matter, essence and existence, potential and actual.<sup>362</sup>

However, Feser argues, if all composite things are caused by something composite, such a series must have a first member. The first member of all must lack all composition and thus be absolutely simple. He writes, "For any of the composite things of our experience to exist at all here and now, then, there must also exist here and now a noncomposite or utterly simple ultimate cause of their existence."<sup>363</sup> From the simplicity of this being, what Plotinus called "the One," many attributes can be inferred.<sup>364</sup> This simple being is unique because it is the ultimate source of all; it is immutable, since to change requires having parts to change; it is eternal because, if it cannot change, it is not subject to time; it is personal because abstract entities are not

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<sup>361</sup> Feser, *Five Proofs for the Existence of God*, 69.

<sup>362</sup> Ibid., 72-74.

<sup>363</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>364</sup> Ibid., 75-76.

causal. This simple being is purely actual since it lacks composition of actuality and potential; it is a mind because, as a personal cause, it is not abstract or physical and cannot be in a mind as the cause of all things. Feser then identifies this One with Aristotle's Unmoved Mover by identifying it as perfect, all powerful, good, and all knowing since it is purely actual.<sup>365</sup>

Feser then introduces the identity thesis and argues that the attributes are conceptually different just as, following Stump, Venus is both the morning and evening star.<sup>366</sup> They are describing the one, undivided thing in different ways. However, in humans, to be powerful is not merely conceptually but actually different than to be intelligent. This is where Feser argues that to speak of an absolutely simple being requires that we speak analogically rather than univocally.<sup>367</sup> God's attributes are similar to attributes in us, yet fundamentally distinct.

Feser concludes by responding to objections. Perhaps something other than an absolutely simple being can account for the existence of composites. Feser responds by arguing that if A and B are then held together by C, which is not simple and is itself composite, then C needs an explanation.<sup>368</sup> Perhaps A and B parts are just irreducible facts about C. But this amounts to the claim that C is the cause of A and B, which then describe and make C what it is, hence, the bootstrapping problem.<sup>369</sup> Perhaps, there is

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<sup>365</sup> Feser, *Five Proofs for the Existence of God*, 82.

<sup>366</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>367</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>368</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>369</sup> Ibid., 84.

no explanation. Composite things just exist and there is no reason why. But this begs the question as to why there is no explanation.<sup>370</sup> Or perhaps it is just the physical laws of nature that compose composite things. In this case, law L is the cause of the composition of A and B in C. However, the question then comes: what is it about L that causes the composition of A and B in C, which will inevitably lead to more composition.<sup>371</sup> For Feser, the only way to avoid composition is to hold to DDS in its strong form.

### Matthew Levering

Matthew Levering is a Catholic theologian and philosopher at Mundelein Seminary. In his book *Proofs of God: Classical Arguments from Tertullian to Barth*, Levering surveys the history and usage of classical apologetics. Though he does not develop the idea of simplicity in any meaningful way, in several places he notes the implications of simplicity for apologetics.

Levering demonstrates that the concepts of DDS, explicitly or implicitly, are found throughout the history of apologetics. For many apologists throughout history, God's simplicity was assumed on the basis of his aseity and infinity, the identification of essence and existence in Him, and His nature as pure act. He writes, "When we demonstrate the existence of pure actuality (a first cause, unmoved mover, source of all things), we demonstrate the existence of something whose being and power are absolutely simple, infinite, unlimited, and unrestricted."<sup>372</sup>

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<sup>370</sup> Feser, *Five Proofs for the Existence of God*, 84-85.

<sup>371</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>372</sup> Levering, *Proofs of God*, 78.

Various theologians, Levering argues, have utilized DDS in apologetics, even coming to different conclusions at times. For Anselm, simplicity means that God can be that than which nothing greater can be thought.<sup>373</sup> Because God is identical to His nature, He can ground the ontological argument. For Aquinas, simplicity means that God lacks all composition and is pure act and a necessary being.<sup>374</sup> For Descartes, simplicity means one cannot think of God without positing existence, despite the fact existence and essence can be separated in all other things.<sup>375</sup> For Pascal, simplicity means that God is far beyond our understanding.<sup>376</sup> This resulted in “Pascal’s Wager.” For Pascal, simplicity actually rules out traditional apologetics because God is absolutely simple, and mankind cannot comprehend absolute simplicity; mankind can only wager as to the existence of God and take a step of faith. For Pierre Rousselot, simplicity means being able to distinguish God from man.<sup>377</sup> God alone is simple, and man and angels are not.

### Cornelius Van Til

Cornelius Van Til was professor of theology and apologetics at Princeton and Westminster Theological Seminary and was the founder of the system of apologetics known as presuppositionalism. Throughout his works, Van Til argues that unless one presupposes the existence of the triune God of the Bible as He is revealed in Scripture,

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<sup>373</sup> Levering, *Proofs of God*, 54-55.

<sup>374</sup> Ibid., 66-67.

<sup>375</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>376</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>377</sup> Ibid., 160.

one can have no certain knowledge of anything in creation.<sup>378</sup> He often sets up Aquinas as his sparring partner as an example of autonomous reasoning.<sup>379</sup> However, though a critic of many in the classical tradition, Van Til himself affirms a version of DDS in both his *Introduction to Systematic Theology* and in his *Christian Apologetics*.

Van Til makes a number of statements in continuity with the classical DDS. He argues that God as Trinity must not deny that He is simple.<sup>380</sup> Each attribute of God, he writes, is “coterminous with God,” such that God is His attributes, yet distinctions can be made between each of these attributes.<sup>381</sup> God is unchanging because He depends upon nothing besides His own eternal being and thus is not made or composed of parts in any way, nor have His attributes developed over time.<sup>382</sup> Rather, Van Til affirms that God’s attributes are just aspects of His one, simple being.<sup>383</sup> Finally, Van Til emphasizes the need for analogical reasoning to avoid bringing God down to the level of a creature.<sup>384</sup>

Despite his own protests against scholastic theology, Van Til held to a form of DDS that had much continuity with the classical tradition. Van Til’s version of DDS then enables him to make apologetic arguments. He makes this connection explicit in

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<sup>378</sup> Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2003), 20.

<sup>379</sup> Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology: Prolegomena and the Doctrines of Revelation, Scripture, and God*, 2nd ed., ed. William Edgar (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1974), 297.

<sup>380</sup> Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 25.

<sup>381</sup> Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 323.

<sup>382</sup> Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 24-25.

<sup>383</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>384</sup> Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 31, 178.

*Christian Apologetics* when he writes, “The importance of this doctrine for apologetics may be seen from the fact that the whole problem of philosophy may be summed up in the question of the relation of unity to diversity; the so-called problem of the one and the many receives a definite answer from the doctrine of the simplicity of God.”<sup>385</sup> Because God is simple, He has unity. Because of the plurality of persons and the distinction of attributes, there is plurality. Because God is unity and plurality, the universe made by God can have unity and plurality.

Robert J. Spitzer

Robert Spitzer, former president of Gonzaga University, is a philosopher and serves as the president of the Magis Center of Reason and Faith. In his book *New Proofs for the Existence of God*, Spitzer surveys several arguments that have been developed in the last dozen years based upon new findings in physics and new trends in philosophy.

In the third chapter of this book, Spitzer lays out what he calls a metaphysical argument for God. This argument proceeds in five steps. In his first premise, Spitzer argues that there is “at least one unconditioned reality.”<sup>386</sup> In order to account for all conditioned realities, there must be one that is not conditioned upon any external reality. Second, he argues that this “unconditioned reality itself is the simplest possible reality.”<sup>387</sup> This reality must lack all composition and physical and metaphysical

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<sup>385</sup> Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 25.

<sup>386</sup> Spitzer, *New Proofs for the Existence of God*, 110.

<sup>387</sup> Ibid.

boundaries. Third, he argues this “unconditioned reality itself is absolutely unique.”<sup>388</sup> There cannot be two unconditioned realities as there would have to be some difference between them. But if there is difference then they cannot both be absolutely simple. Fourth, he argues this “unconditioned reality itself is unrestricted.”<sup>389</sup> This one reality is infinite in its ability because it is not limited by conditions. Finally, he argues this unique “Unconditioned Reality is the continuous Creator of all else that is.”<sup>390</sup> Essentially, Spitzer argues that because there cannot be an infinite regress of causal realities, there must be one uncaused and unconditioned reality that does not depend on anyone or anything for its existence. While this argument is not necessarily new, Spitzer uses updated forms of arguments for each of the premises.

In the second premise of his argument, Spitzer argues for the absolute simplicity of unconditioned reality. In this premise, he argues that this unconditioned reality must exist through itself rather than by the cause of itself, avoiding the bootstrapping objection.<sup>391</sup> Absolute simplicity, as he defines it, is “the complete absence of intrinsic and extrinsic boundaries, finitude, or restriction in a reality.”<sup>392</sup> This point grounds his argument that only an absolutely simple being can be compatible with all conditioned and contingent realities. The ultimate unconditioned reality must be simpler than quarks, protons, fields, waves, and particles because each

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<sup>388</sup> Spitzer, *New Proofs for the Existence of God*, 110.

<sup>389</sup> Ibid.

<sup>390</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>391</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>392</sup> Ibid., 122.

of these have limited boundaries that make them unable to account for everything else.<sup>393</sup> An absolutely simple being has no restrictions or boundaries but is pure act. Thus, it can be pure power, simplicity, act, inclusivity, being, and capacity (not potentiality).<sup>394</sup>

### Richard Swinburne

Swinburne's doctrine of simplicity plays a key role in his apologetics. However, his concern is more functional than ontological. As noted previously, Swinburne redefines and refocuses simplicity. Rather than focusing on God's simple essence, Swinburne focuses on God as the most simple explanation for various things. Simplicity becomes a vital criterion for evaluating truth claims, much like Ockham's Razor. Swinburne rejects many deductive arguments,<sup>395</sup> such as standard cosmological arguments, in favor of largely inductive and probabilistic ones.<sup>396</sup> He states:

Its [a theory's] degree of simplicity and its scope determine the intrinsic probability of a theory. . . . The simpler a theory, the more probable it is. The simplicity of a theory, in my view, is a matter of it postulating few (logically independent) entities, few properties of entities, few kinds of entities, few kinds of properties, properties more readily observable, few separate laws with few terms relating few variables, the simplest formulation of each law being mathematically simple.<sup>397</sup>

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<sup>393</sup> Spitzer, *New Proofs for the Existence of God*, 123.

<sup>394</sup> Ibid., 127.

<sup>395</sup> Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 136. He rejects such deductive arguments from effect to cause because they would require that statements like "God does not exist" be incoherent and self-contradictory, which he does not believe they are.

<sup>396</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>397</sup> Ibid., 53.



On this basis, Swinburne argues that the proposition “God exists” is probably true. God, as “a substance who is essentially omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly free is necessarily a terminus of complete explanation.”<sup>398</sup> Such a God is the simplest, and thus most probable, explanation for why there is something rather than nothing,<sup>399</sup> for cosmic fine-tuning,<sup>400</sup> for the resurrection,<sup>401</sup> and for objective moral values.<sup>402</sup> He states, “Simplicity is evidence of truth. If the divine predicates all fit together, the claim that there is a God becomes a very simple claim and for that reason much more likely to be true.”<sup>403</sup>

One unique aspect of Swinburne’s apologetic is his approach to divine necessity. Swinburne states that God is the ultimate brute fact.<sup>404</sup> He just necessarily is. But in what sense is God a necessary being? Swinburne puts forward two alternatives: the weak and strong accounts of necessity. The weak account is simply a recognition that God is uncaused and does not owe His existence to some other thing.<sup>405</sup> Though Swinburne once defended this view, he believes that it does not go far enough. The strong view postulates that God is metaphysically, or logically,

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<sup>398</sup> Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 98.

<sup>399</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>400</sup> Ibid., 164-66.

<sup>401</sup> Ibid., 237.

<sup>402</sup> Ibid., 136-37.

<sup>403</sup> Swinburne, *The Christian God*, 126.

<sup>404</sup> Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 96.

<sup>405</sup> Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*, 261-62.

necessary in the sense that it is logically impossible for God not to exist.<sup>406</sup> This version is often the basis of various ontological arguments for God. However, Swinburne rejects this view as well, arguing that such a being is not logically possible.<sup>407</sup> Such a view would entail that the proposition “God does not exist” is a logical contradiction, which it is not.

Instead of these versions, Swinburne posits an intermediate account of necessity, in which God is ontologically necessary: He exists by virtue of his own nature (i.e., aseity).<sup>408</sup> Swinburne argues that for any event, there must be a partial or determinant cause.<sup>409</sup> The only exception to this rule must be the ultimate cause of all things. The cause of all things must have its reason for existing in itself. This is not self-creation or self-causation in the sense of bringing oneself into existence, which is an incoherent concept, but “intrinsic, causal necessity.”<sup>410</sup> This kind of causality, he argues, avoids the idea that God is a mere brute fact by locating His cause in His own nature. Existence must be a necessary property of this ultimate cause. He states, “If there is an essentially ontologically necessary being, God, he is caused to exist by

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<sup>406</sup> Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*, 262-63.

<sup>407</sup> Ibid., 265.

<sup>408</sup> Ibid., 272-73.

<sup>409</sup> Ibid., 272-73. Swinburne offers here a modified version of the principle of sufficient reason. While events may be not wholly determined, no event happens “unless some substance exercises causal influence to bring about the occurrence of either it or of some member of a set of alternative events.” Ibid., 272. Though he does not see this principle as logically necessary, he argues that it is extremely improbable that an event may occur totally uncaused.

<sup>410</sup> Ibid., 274.

himself in virtue of his essence for the whole time that he exists and so for ever, and all other substances are either caused or permitted to exist by God.”<sup>411</sup>

Swinburne’s argument here resonates with that of Aquinas and a classic sense of DDS. God is necessary as both grounding of all contingent beings and as the ground of His own existence. However, this is possible ontologically because, in DDS, God is existence and being itself. God’s essence can be the ground of His existence without leading to incoherence because God’s essence and existence are identical rather than one property having to cause another. But by denying the identity thesis of DDS, how is Swinburne able to maintain the claim that God’s essence causes Him to exist without leading to the same dilemma as self-creation? If these are distinct properties, how can one ground the other?

### **Conclusion**

This survey has demonstrated two key ideas. First, it has demonstrated that others have noted various apologetic implications of DDS. Though they each use the doctrine in various ways and to various degrees, each has noted its apologetic value. Second, it has demonstrated that the apologetic implications of DDS have not been developed deeply or presented as a comprehensive argument for DDS; rather, they are often presented in a passing comment or in a basic form. The task of this dissertation will be to show that DDS had a polemic and apologetic function in historical theology and to consider how it might serve to comprehensively ground apologetic arguments today.

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<sup>411</sup> Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*, 275.



## CHAPTER 3

### A PRESENTATION AND DEFENSE OF DIVINE SIMPLICITY

#### **Introduction**

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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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

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

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 47.

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.<sup>3</sup>

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.<sup>4</sup>

### **A Summary of the Doctrine of Divine Simplicity**

While there have been various models and emphases of simplicity throughout history,<sup>5</sup> for the 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.<sup>6</sup> Joel R. Beeke and Paul M. Smalley summarize the doctrine well when they state,

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<sup>3</sup> 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.

<sup>4</sup> James Oliver Buswell, *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1962), 19-24.

<sup>5</sup> 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 operating in the Augustine/Anselm/Aquinas tradition. Chapter 4 of this dissertation will cover the history of the doctrine.

<sup>6</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:173.

“God’s simplicity means that he has no parts, and his attributes and essence are all one in him.”<sup>7</sup>

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.”<sup>8</sup> 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.”<sup>9</sup> 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 that can be predicated of him intrinsically.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Beeke and Smalley, *Reformed Systematic Theology*, 1:625.

<sup>8</sup> Augustine, “On the Holy Trinity,” trans. Arthur West Haddan, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 3, 1 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2012), 1.5.

<sup>9</sup> Dolezal, *All That Is in God*, 41.

<sup>10</sup> Brower, “Simplicity and Aseity,” 105.



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.<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup>

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.<sup>13</sup> If God were

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<sup>11</sup> Duby, *Divine Simplicity: A Dogmatic Account*, 44-46.

<sup>12</sup> 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.

<sup>13</sup> Stephen Charnock, *Discourses upon the Existence and Attributes of God*, 11th ed., vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993), 333.

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.”<sup>14</sup>

Given that DDS is a denial of composition, of what is God not composed? Throughout his 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.<sup>15</sup> 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

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<sup>14</sup> Dolezal, *All That Is in God*, 42.

<sup>15</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.2.3 and 1.3.7.

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.<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup> 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

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<sup>16</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.3.1 and 2.

<sup>17</sup> Aristotle, "Physics," in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, vol. 1 (Princeton University Press, 1984), 330.

which He is dependent to exist or function. Rather, He is pure spirit and pure form.<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup> 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.”<sup>20</sup> 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.”<sup>21</sup>

Fourth, DDS denies any composition of essence and existence in God.<sup>22</sup> 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

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<sup>18</sup> 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.

<sup>19</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.3.3.

<sup>20</sup> Augustine, “The City of God,” 11.10.

<sup>21</sup> Dolezal, *God without Parts*, 55.

<sup>22</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.3.4.

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 absolutely simple being, He is existence and being itself.<sup>23</sup>

Fifth, DDS denies any composition of genus and difference in God.<sup>24</sup> 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.<sup>25</sup> He is divinity itself.

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<sup>23</sup> Stump, *The God of the Bible and the God of the Philosophers*, 86-87.

<sup>24</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.3.5.

<sup>25</sup> Leftow, *God and Necessity*, 345.

Sixth, DDS denies any composition of substance and accident in God.<sup>26</sup> 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.”<sup>27</sup>

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.<sup>28</sup> God’s attributes are not

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<sup>26</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.3.6.

<sup>27</sup> Dolezal, *God without Parts*, 61.

<sup>28</sup> Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 1:187.

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.”<sup>29</sup> 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.<sup>30</sup> 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.<sup>31</sup> 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.”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Augustine, “On the Holy Trinity,” 6.4.

<sup>30</sup> Duby, *Divine Simplicity: A Dogmatic Account*, 204-5.

<sup>31</sup> 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 Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:216-26.

<sup>32</sup> Duby, *Divine Simplicity: A Dogmatic Account*, 145.

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.<sup>33</sup> God's substance does not take on accidental properties but is experienced in time by creation as relative properties.

### **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.<sup>34</sup> 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

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<sup>33</sup> Duby, *Divine Simplicity: A Dogmatic Account*, 205.

<sup>34</sup> Sanlon, *Simply God*, 58.



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.<sup>35</sup>

Thus, Aquinas argues, language about God is analogical.<sup>36</sup> 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.<sup>37</sup>

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.<sup>38</sup> If God is simple, then God is

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<sup>35</sup> John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 1.5.9.

<sup>36</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.13.3.

<sup>37</sup> Matthew Barrett, *The Reformation as Renewal*, 8-9.

<sup>38</sup> These realities stand in stark contrast to the theology proper of mutualism, theistic personalism, and process theology.

*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.<sup>39</sup> 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.<sup>40</sup> 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.”<sup>41</sup> 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

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<sup>39</sup> Brower, “Simplicity and Aseity,” 107.

<sup>40</sup> Anselm, “Monologion,” 8-9.

<sup>41</sup> Augustine, “The City of God,” 11.10.

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. 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."<sup>42</sup>

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.<sup>43</sup> 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.<sup>44</sup> Rather, God's simplicity means that anything predicated of God is infinitely predicated of His single infinite nature.

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<sup>42</sup> Matthew Barrett, *None Greater: The Undomesticated Attributes of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2019), 115.

<sup>43</sup> Dolezal, *All That Is in God*, 48-49.

<sup>44</sup> Charnock, *Discourses upon the Existence and Attributes of God*, 1:186.

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."<sup>45</sup> 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."<sup>46</sup>

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."<sup>47</sup> 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.

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<sup>45</sup> Augustine, "On the Holy Trinity," 6.7.

<sup>46</sup> 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.

<sup>47</sup> Dolezal, *God without Parts*, 125.

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."<sup>48</sup> 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.<sup>49</sup> 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.<sup>50</sup> 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,

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<sup>48</sup> Augustine, "The City of God," 11.10.

<sup>49</sup> Butner, *Trinitarian Dogmatics*, 83.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

“The divine persons are nothing but the divine essence, upon the account of an especial property, subsisting in an especial manner.”<sup>51</sup>

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 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.<sup>52</sup> 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.<sup>53</sup> 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 Arius? 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.<sup>54</sup> Given DDS, that there are no parts in God, the God revealed in the person of

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<sup>51</sup> 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.

<sup>52</sup> Leith, *Creeds of the Churches*, 705.

<sup>53</sup> Butner, *Trinitarian Dogmatics*, 84.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

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."<sup>55</sup> 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."<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Moreland and Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*, 524.

<sup>56</sup> Dolezal, *All That Is in God*, 44.

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.<sup>57</sup>

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.<sup>58</sup> 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

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<sup>57</sup> Lloyd P. Gerson, *From Plato to Platonism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013), 11.

<sup>58</sup> See discussion in Barrett, *The Reformation as Renewal*, 205-83.



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.”<sup>59</sup> 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 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.<sup>60</sup>

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

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<sup>59</sup> Jordan Barrett, *Divine Simplicity*, 37.

<sup>60</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:296-98.

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.<sup>61</sup> 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

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<sup>61</sup> For a brief explanation of biblicism, see Matthew Barrett, *The Reformation as Renewal*, 21.

Church as it sought to communicate what Scripture was teaching.<sup>62</sup> 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.”<sup>63</sup> 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.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> See Stephen R. Holmes, *The Quest for the Trinity: The Doctrine of God in Scripture, History, and Modernity* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2012).

<sup>63</sup> Leith, *Creeds of the Churches*, 195.

<sup>64</sup> Jordan Barrett, *Divine Simplicity*, 33.

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

### **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.”<sup>65</sup> 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.”<sup>66</sup> Further, there cannot be two simple beings, for to differentiate them would mean difference, and difference would mean parts that can differ.

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<sup>65</sup> Sanlon, *Simply God*, 20.

<sup>66</sup> Duby, *Divine Simplicity: A Dogmatic Account*, 100-108.

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.”<sup>67</sup> Rather, as God states in Exodus 3:14, “I AM WHO I AM!”<sup>68</sup>

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

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<sup>67</sup> Duby, *Divine Simplicity: A Dogmatic Account*, 118-31.

<sup>68</sup> 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 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).

not change or repent.<sup>69</sup> This immutability, Duby argues, demonstrates that God Himself does not change or become in His being, but that creation changes in relation to God.<sup>70</sup> 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.<sup>71</sup>

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

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<sup>69</sup> 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.

<sup>70</sup> Duby, *Divine Simplicity: A Dogmatic Account*, 143-50.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 155-60.

into being.” Matter and God are not cotemporaneous or coequal; rather, God is absolutely sovereign over all creation. On this basis, Duby argues that God must be pure act and noncontingent.<sup>72</sup> 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.<sup>73</sup> 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.

### **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

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<sup>72</sup> Duby, *Divine Simplicity: A Dogmatic Account*, 167-75.

<sup>73</sup> In this part of his discussion, Duby addresses the challenge of Platonic forms as abstract objects in the works of Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Woltersdorff 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.

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.<sup>74</sup>

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 (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*.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:173.

<sup>75</sup> Jordan Barrett, *Divine Simplicity*, 149-50.



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.

### **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 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,”<sup>76</sup> 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. Adonic Vidu writes, “The persons share the same power, the same will, because they share the same essence. At the same time, the order must

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<sup>76</sup> Butner, *Trinitarian Dogmatics*, 175-97.

be observed.”<sup>77</sup> As articulated by Bavinck, all things “proceed from the Father, are accomplished by the Son, and are completed in the Holy Spirit.”<sup>78</sup> 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.<sup>79</sup> 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.<sup>80</sup> 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.”<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Adonis Vidu, *The Same God Who Works All Things: Inseparable Operations in Trinitarian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2021), 143.

<sup>78</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:319.

<sup>79</sup> 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.

<sup>80</sup> Scott R. Swain, *The Trinity: An Introduction, Short Studies in Systematic Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 109.

<sup>81</sup> Dolezal, *All That Is in God*, 105.

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

### **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.”<sup>82</sup> Likewise, Augustine proclaimed God’s “simple multiplicity, or multiple simplicity.”<sup>83</sup> Even Aquinas argued that the divine attributes, or “names” as he called them, are not synonymous with one another.<sup>84</sup> 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.<sup>85</sup> Properties are eternal and abstract objects functioning like Plato’s forms, which exist

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<sup>82</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:124-26.

<sup>83</sup> Augustine, “On the Holy Trinity,” 6.4.6.

<sup>84</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.13.4.

<sup>85</sup> Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?*, 47.

independently of God.<sup>86</sup> God is a person who participates in and exemplifies in these platonic properties at a maximally great level.<sup>87</sup> 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.<sup>88</sup> Craig is concerned that such forms of Platonism lead to a denial of divine aseity in making eternal, uncreated, abstract objects independent of God.<sup>89</sup> 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.<sup>90</sup> In his view, properties are conceptual tools and do not exist in the proper sense.<sup>91</sup> 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,<sup>92</sup> but are predicated of God in a univocal sense with creation.

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<sup>86</sup> Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?*, 9.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>88</sup> Craig, *God and Abstract Objects*, 488.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 201.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 200-201.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

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,<sup>93</sup> but argue for a *formal* distinction between the essence and attributes of God and between the attributes themselves.<sup>94</sup> For Scotus, the divine attributes are *really* identical to God, but *formally* distinct from each other and from the divine essence.<sup>95</sup> 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.<sup>96</sup> 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 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.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> John Duns Scotus, "Lectura," in *Opera Omnia*, vol. 17 (Vatican City, 1966), I.8.1.1, p. 2.

<sup>94</sup> 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.

<sup>95</sup> Scotus, "Lectura," 1.8.1.4.

<sup>96</sup> Richard Cross, *Duns Scotus on God*, Ashgate Studies in the History of Philosophical Theology (New York: Routledge, 2005), 109.

<sup>97</sup> Scotus, "Lectura," 1.8.1.4.

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,<sup>98</sup> though they exist infinitely in God because they are united to the infinite divine essence.<sup>99</sup> 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.<sup>100</sup> 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.<sup>101</sup>

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

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<sup>98</sup> Matthew Barrett, *The Reformation as Renewal*, 234-39.

<sup>99</sup> Richard Cross, "Duns Scotus on God's Essence and Attributes: Metaphysics, Semantics, and the Greek Patristic Tradition," *Recherches de Théologie et Philosophie Médiévales* 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.

<sup>100</sup> Jeff Steele and Thomas Williams, "Complexity without Composition: Duns Scotus on Divine Simplicity," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 93, no. 4 (2019): 20.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.



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.<sup>102</sup> 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.<sup>103</sup> Thus, the divine attributes are distinct perfections of the divine nature.<sup>104</sup>

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

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<sup>102</sup> Jordan Barrett, *Divine Simplicity*, 182.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 180.

attributes because He demonstrates them the best.<sup>105</sup> 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.<sup>106</sup> 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.<sup>107</sup>

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, whereas in creatures they are received, divided and multiplied."<sup>108</sup> 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."<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, 182.

<sup>106</sup> Augustine, "On the Holy Trinity," 5.16.17.

<sup>107</sup> Rogers, *Perfect Being Theology*, 29.

<sup>108</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.1.13.5.

<sup>109</sup> Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 1:187.

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.<sup>110</sup>

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.<sup>111</sup> In this way, God is not a property. As Leftow points out, forms are not properties.<sup>112</sup> Rather, to say God stands in for Plato's forms is to say that

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<sup>110</sup> Dolezal, *God without Parts*, 135.

<sup>111</sup> 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.

<sup>112</sup> Leftow, "Divine Simplicity," 366.

God acts as a “set of standards.”<sup>113</sup> 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.”<sup>114</sup>

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.<sup>115</sup> 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

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<sup>113</sup> Leftow, “Divine Simplicity,” 367.

<sup>114</sup> Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, trans. John Hammond Taylor (New York: Newman Press, 1982), 3, 7-8.

<sup>115</sup> Brower, “Simplicity and Aseity,” 112.

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.<sup>116</sup>

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 participation.<sup>117</sup> By reading God as the 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.

### **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.<sup>118</sup>

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

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<sup>116</sup> Augustine, "On the Holy Trinity," 5.10.11.

<sup>117</sup> Dolezal, *God without Parts*, 150-51.

<sup>118</sup> Mullins, "Classical Theism," 95.

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"<sup>119</sup> 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."<sup>120</sup> However, she does not feel this is a problem because God

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<sup>119</sup> Rogers, "The Traditional Doctrine of Divine Simplicity," 182.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 185.

chooses to allow Himself to be changed in this way.<sup>121</sup> 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.<sup>122</sup> However, in another possible world, God could have chosen not to create.<sup>123</sup> 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."<sup>124</sup> 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,<sup>125</sup> 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

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<sup>121</sup> Rogers, "The Traditional Doctrine of Divine Simplicity," 186.

<sup>122</sup> Stump and Kretzmann, "Absolute Simplicity," 367.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 368.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 369.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

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.<sup>126</sup>

Jay Richards argues that DDS needs to be modified to allow for God's taking on accidental properties and for potential.<sup>127</sup> 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.<sup>128</sup> "Surely," he writes, "God is at least as free as we are when we exercise freedom."<sup>129</sup> He argues that God chooses to take on attributes like creator and redeemer and has potential in Him because He possesses freedom.<sup>130</sup>

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.<sup>131</sup> In Richards' view, while it is necessary to maintain that God is not composite,<sup>132</sup> 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"<sup>133</sup>) 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.

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<sup>126</sup> Dolezal, *God without Parts*, 199.

<sup>127</sup> Richards, *The Untamed God*, 202.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 234.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 239.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 234.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 217, 231.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 232.



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.<sup>134</sup>

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."<sup>135</sup> God, according to Aquinas, does not do all that He is able to do<sup>136</sup> and does not act by mere necessity, but by intellect and will.<sup>137</sup> 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.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Dolezal, *God without Parts*, 210-12.

<sup>135</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, trans. Anton C. Pegis, vol. 1 (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), 2.23.1.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.23.3.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.23.5.

<sup>138</sup> 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.

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.”<sup>139</sup> 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.<sup>140</sup> He asks, “Does God will some things necessarily and others freely?”<sup>141</sup> 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

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<sup>139</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.19.3.

<sup>140</sup> Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 1:218-20.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:218.

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 in two forms. There is the freedom of spontaneity and the freedom of indifference.<sup>142</sup> 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.<sup>143</sup> 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

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<sup>142</sup> Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 1:219.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:219.

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.<sup>144</sup>

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.<sup>145</sup> 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.<sup>146</sup> 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.<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> Dolezal, *God without Parts*, 202.

<sup>145</sup> Duby, "Divine Simplicity, Divine Freedom, and the Contingency of Creation," 128.

<sup>146</sup> Charnock, *Discourses upon the Existence and Attributes of God*, 1:141.

<sup>147</sup> Duby, "Divine Simplicity, Divine Freedom, and the Contingency of Creation," 139.

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.

### **A Defense of a DDS Account of Trinitarianism**

A final common objection to consider is that if God is simple He cannot be Trinity.<sup>148</sup> Richards states bluntly, "The most basic trinitarian claims are impossible to

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<sup>148</sup> 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.

square with simplicity.”<sup>149</sup> He goes on to state, “The problem here is not with trinitarianism *per se* but with trinitarianism shackled with strong simplicity . . . surely the latter should give way.”<sup>150</sup> 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.”<sup>151</sup> 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.”<sup>152</sup> 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.”<sup>153</sup> God is His actions in history and His actions are social. Therefore, God must be social in Himself.

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<sup>149</sup> Richards, *The Untamed God*, 229.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 230.

<sup>151</sup> Moreland and Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*, 586.

<sup>152</sup> Karl Rahner, *The Trinity* (New York: Crossroad, 1970), 22.

<sup>153</sup> Matthew Barrett, *Simply Trinity*, 77.

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.”<sup>154</sup> He states that these three are “three persons, one community”<sup>155</sup> and that their unity lies “in their fellowship, not in the identity of a single subject.”<sup>156</sup> 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.<sup>157</sup> The three persons are three individuals<sup>158</sup> who are one in the sense that they share the divine nature (like three humans share humanity) and are mutually dependent upon one another.<sup>159</sup> Moreland and Craig also argue for a social trinitarian model. However, in their model, the three persons are parts of God.<sup>160</sup> Each person is

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<sup>154</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 150.

<sup>155</sup> Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel and Jürgen Moltmann, *Humanity in God* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1983), 96.

<sup>156</sup> Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 95-96.

<sup>157</sup> Swinburne, *The Christian God*, 184.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, 173-75.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, 184.

<sup>160</sup> Moreland and Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*, 591.

fully divine but is not the whole God. God, in this view, is a soul with three distinct centers of consciousness.<sup>161</sup> Only in this way, they argue, can the concept of personhood take on any real coherence.<sup>162</sup>

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-insession (*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.<sup>163</sup>

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

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<sup>161</sup> Moreland and Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*, 594.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid., 587.

<sup>163</sup> Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 1:265.



In Turretin's view, the persons do not compose the divine essence but "characterize" it as particular modes of subsistence.<sup>164</sup> 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."<sup>165</sup>

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."<sup>166</sup> 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.<sup>167</sup> Butner writes, "A divine person is a unique subsistence of the

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<sup>164</sup> Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 1:192-93.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid., 1:193.

<sup>166</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.30.1.3.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid., 1.39.1.

singular and rational divine nature that is distinguished from yet inseparably united with the other divine persons by the divine relations.”<sup>168</sup> While the persons are identical to the divine essence, they are *really* distinct from one another by virtue of opposing relations.<sup>169</sup>

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.”<sup>170</sup> 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

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<sup>168</sup> Butner, *Trinitarian Dogmatics*, 127.

<sup>169</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.39.1.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.29.1.1.

of both their divine nature, which is common, and their personal relations, which are unique.<sup>171</sup>

These relations do not proceed out of God, but from within, communicating the same nature.<sup>172</sup> 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.”<sup>173</sup> 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.<sup>174</sup>

The key, then, for Aquinas’ Trinitarian understanding of simplicity is that relations are not accidents in God.<sup>175</sup> 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

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<sup>171</sup> White, “Divine Simplicity and the Holy Trinity,” 86.

<sup>172</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.27.2.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid., 1.28.2.

<sup>174</sup> 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.

<sup>175</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.28.2.

to another.”<sup>176</sup> The relations 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).<sup>177</sup> These, and only these, Aquinas argues, are sufficient to distinguish these persons *ad intra*.<sup>178</sup>

These relations make Father truly Father and Son truly Son.<sup>179</sup> 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.<sup>180</sup> 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

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<sup>176</sup> Dolezal, “Trinity, Simplicity, and the Status of God’s Personal Relations,” 84.

<sup>177</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.28.3-4.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid., 1.41.1.

<sup>179</sup> Athanasius, “Four Discourses against the Arians,” in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Archibald Robertson, vol. 4, 2 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2012), 1.5.

<sup>180</sup> 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).

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.<sup>181</sup>

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 ministered to by all rational creation, united without confusion and divided without separation.<sup>182</sup>

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.”<sup>183</sup> 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.”<sup>184</sup>

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<sup>181</sup> 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.

<sup>182</sup> 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.

<sup>183</sup> Duby, *Jesus and the God of Classical Theism*, 65.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

Therefore, the essential attributes of God exist in all three persons but do so uniquely according to their particular relations.<sup>185</sup> 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.<sup>186</sup> 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?<sup>187</sup> 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 reason to affirm DDS and thus a strong impetus for affirming an analogical predication of personhood.<sup>188</sup>

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 grasping the identity of substance

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<sup>185</sup> Emery, *The Trinity*, 165.

<sup>186</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.7.1.

<sup>187</sup> 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.

<sup>188</sup> Duby, *Divine Simplicity: A Dogmatic Account*, 214-15.

of the three persons.”<sup>189</sup> 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.<sup>190</sup>

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, *homoiousia*. 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

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<sup>189</sup> Emery, *The Trinity*, 91.

<sup>190</sup> 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.

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.



## CHAPTER 4

### THE POLEMIC AND APOLOGETIC USAGE OF THE DOCTRINE OF DIVINE SIMPLICITY IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

#### **Introduction**

Divine simplicity has been essential for theology in the history of the Church, and it has been essential for polemics (engaging the doctrines of other religious beliefs) and apologetics (defending Christian beliefs) as well. *The thesis of this dissertation is that a commitment to a classical understanding of divine simplicity provides an essential foundation for apologetic and polemic arguments for the Christian faith.* In the previous chapter, DDS was presented and defended on its own terms to show that it is biblically faithful and philosophically coherent. This chapter will present the historical aspect of this thesis and will present several categories of arguments to show that grounding polemics and apologetics in a classical doctrine of simplicity, as presented in chapter 3, enabled historical apologists to engage with their critics successfully.

#### **Divine Simplicity and Causal Arguments**

The consistent testimony of Scripture and of theologians throughout history is that God is the cause of all that is not God, that He created all that exists *ex nihilo*, and that He continues to sustain creation by His power. Throughout history, various formulations of what are called “cosmological arguments,” or arguments for a first cause of creation, have been developed from these premises. What this section will show is that DDS, in various forms, was seen as an indispensable link in first cause arguments. DDS was used to defend God’s absolute aseity, transcendence, and

independence and to argue for one absolute creator. The logic employed is rather straightforward. To avoid an infinite regression of causes, there must exist something uncaused. However, composite things are either caused to be or are caused to be what they are by something else. Therefore, the first cause must be simple.

This conviction enabled apologists to argue for a first cause. In the early years of the Church, for example, Athenagoras (AD 130–190), in “A Plea for Christians,” pleaded with the Emperor Marcus Aurelius Anoninus not to persecute the Christians in the Roman Empire. The Christians were unfairly persecuted for false charges of atheism (because they denied the gods of Rome), of cannibalism (on account of the Lord’s Supper), and of incestuous sexual relations (on account of marrying those they called brother and sister in Christ).<sup>1</sup> Against the charge of atheism, specifically, he argued that Christians do indeed worship God, just not the inferior gods of the Romans. What makes these gods inferior is that they are composed of parts and are subject to change. However, the God of the Christians is unchanging and thus uncreated, impassible, and indivisible.<sup>2</sup> Only this God, he argues, can be truly transcendent to be creator of the world, being distinct from the matter of the world.

After Athenagoras, in “Against Hermogenes,” Tertullian of Carthage (AD 155–220) responded to Hermogenes’ belief that matter is co-eternal with God and that God created all things out of preexisting matter.<sup>3</sup> Hermogenes reasoned that God made

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<sup>1</sup> Athenagoras, “A Plea for Christians,” in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, vol. 2 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2012), 130.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 132.

<sup>3</sup> Tertullian, “Against Hermogenes,” in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, vol. 3 (Peabody, MA: Hackett, 2012), 477.

all things either out of Himself, out of nothing, or out of something.<sup>4</sup> Using divine simplicity himself, he first concluded that God could not have made all things out of Himself because these things would be parts of God.<sup>5</sup> But if God exists already, He cannot be made by creating parts of Himself. Nor, second, could He have made all things out of nothing, *ex nihilo*, because God, being good, can only will that which is good. However, there is evil and corruption in the world. The evil and corruption cannot be inherent in God and must therefore be inherent in the thing from which all things came. He concludes that God made all things out of something, namely, matter, making matter co-eternal with God. Further, Hermogenes argued, if God has always been “God,” “Lord,” and “Father,” He must be God, Lord, and Father of something and therefore matter must co-exist eternally with God.<sup>6</sup>

Tertullian gave several responses to these arguments grounded in DDS. In regard to the titles of “God,” “Lord,” and “Father” of creation, he argued that while the title “God” always belonged to Him because it indicates His nature and substance, the titles of “Lord” and “Father” are only relative terms. God can become these things to creation because they describe His relationship relative to creation.<sup>7</sup> Further, he argued that Hermogenes turned matter into a second God by giving it the divine attribute of

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<sup>4</sup> Tertullian, “Against Hermogenes,” 488.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 478.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 479.

eternity. This, of course, contradicts Hermogenes' own claim that God is one and the only God.<sup>8</sup> But matter changes and, as Hermogenes noted previously, God does not.<sup>9</sup>

However, Tertullian did not seek to refute Hermogenes' argument that God did not create out of Himself. Tertullian accepted this first premise and agreed that simplicity rules out God creating lesser parts of Himself.<sup>10</sup> Instead, he attacked the claim that God cannot create out of nothing by arguing that Hermogenes' position still makes God the author of evil because He makes all things out of matter that has both good and evil. Rather, Scripture and reason show that God created all things from nothing. Given that all things reduce to nothing in the will of God in the future, there is no reason to think matter must be eternal.<sup>11</sup>

After the early years of the Church came the era of the Nicene councils. Augustine of Hippo (AD 354–430) was, in many ways, the most important theologian of the Nicene era. His work represents a developed model of both simplicity and trinitarianism that would come to serve as the foundation for all future models. In his monumental work, *The City of God*, Augustine writes, "There is, accordingly, a good which is alone simple, and therefore alone unchangeable, and this is God."<sup>12</sup> For Augustine, creatures are a composite of substance and accidents, which are attributes the creature takes on in time, making it changeable. But God is unchanging and

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<sup>8</sup> Tertullian, "Against Hermogenes," 479.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 484.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 485.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 496.

<sup>12</sup> Augustine, "The City of God," 11.10.

therefore has no accidents but is pure substance.<sup>13</sup> Creatures are changeable, but whatever is simple is not changeable.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, God alone is simple without parts.

DDS, as a denial of change and accident, became vital for Augustine's polemic. Changeable things begin and can be corrupted, neither of which can be true of God. Against atheism, he formulated a cosmological argument that reasons that since heaven and earth exist and are good and beautiful, but change and vary as created things, they cannot be self-created but owe their existence to something else.<sup>15</sup> Unmade things, however, do not change or vary. Therefore, heaven and earth owe their existence and goodness and beauty to something unmade. For Augustine, because God is simple, He is without changeable accidents. Therefore, He is unchanging and is able to be that eternal standard of being, goodness, and beauty that gives rise to created being, goodness, and beauty.

Moving to the medieval era, John of Damascus (AD 675–759) was a theologian who was well versed in many disciplines, including theology, philosophy, law, and music. Regarding God, he writes:

God is without beginning, without end, eternal and everlasting, uncreate, unchangeable, invariable, simple, uncompound, incorporeal, invisible, impalpable, uncircumscribed, infinite, incognisable, indefinable, incomprehensible, good, just, maker of all things created, almighty, all-ruling, all-surveying, of all overseer, sovereign, judge; and that God is One, that is to say, one essence; and that He is known, and has His being in three subsistences, in Father, I say, and Son and Holy Spirit; and that

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<sup>13</sup> Augustine, "On the Holy Trinity," 5.2.3.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 6.6.8.

<sup>15</sup> Augustine, "Confessions," in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff, vol. 1, 1 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 11.4.6.

the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit are one in all respects, except in that of not being begotten, that of being begotten, and that of procession.<sup>16</sup>

John argues that an orthodox understanding of God includes the idea of God's simplicity and immutability. He then forms a cosmological argument for the existence of God against atheism. That there is a God is of no doubt to those who believe the Scriptures.<sup>17</sup> However, John's argument moves beyond Scripture to demonstrate from natural theology the need for a creator. All things that exist, he argues, are either created or uncreated. Things that are created are mutable, for they came to be, but things that are uncreated are immutable, for they did not come to be. Created things must be the work of some maker (cause) and, at bottom, there must be a maker that was uncreated and entirely unchangeable. John then declares, "And what could this be other than Deity?"<sup>18</sup> Further, this cause must be incorporeal, for that which is infinite and unchangeable cannot possess a body. Thus, John concludes, the cause must be "in short, simple and not compound."<sup>19</sup>

After John, most famously came Thomas Aquinas (AD 1225–1274), an Italian Dominican friar. His doctrine of simplicity is widely recognized to represent the height of historical development and he relied upon this doctrine heavily in his demonstrations of God, often called the five proofs. He states succinctly that:

the first mover must be simple. For any composite being must contain two factors that are related to each other as potency to act. But in the first mover, which is altogether immobile, all combination of potency and act is impossible,

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<sup>16</sup> John of Damascus, *An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, 1.2.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.3.2.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.4.3.

because whatever is in potency is, by that very fact, movable. Accordingly the first mover cannot be composite. Moreover, something has to exist prior to any composite, since composing elements are by their very nature antecedent to a composite. Hence the first of all beings cannot be composite. Even within the order of composite beings we observe that the simpler things have priority. . . . Hence the truth remains that the first of beings must be absolutely simple.<sup>20</sup>

Aquinas' view of simplicity affirms that God lacks all composition. There is no composition of act and potency in God, or of material and immaterial, existence and essence, or subject and accident.<sup>21</sup> There is nothing in God that needs to be activated, caused, or defined by what is not God. This is because composites are preceded, formed, and caused by components, but God, as the first cause, can have no prior causes. Rather, God is pure act and just is His essence.<sup>22</sup> For God, to be and to be what He is are identical and so God is what He is through Himself rather than through some external cause. Aquinas then employs DDS to argue that God is the first and necessary cause of creation. The argument, rooted in Aristotle, is that there must exist an unmoved mover.<sup>23</sup> Created things are in motion and change and all things in motion are put into motion by something else or are moved themselves. However, the chain of causes of motion cannot be infinite and thus there must be a first mover/cause.

This first cause cannot be in motion from an external force, for this would require a prior mover, leading to an infinite regression. This first cause also cannot be moved by itself, for such a thing would be composite, with part of it being in act to

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<sup>20</sup> Aquinas, *Compendium Theologiae*, chapter 9, in translation as *Compendium of Theology*, trans. Cyril Vollert (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1947).

<sup>21</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.3.

<sup>22</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 1.21.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.13.

move/change and the other part being in potential to be moved/changed. Further, composite, self-moved causes are corruptible in that they are moved by accidents. Composites, Aquinas argues, require composers and are decomposable. God, however, is the “peak of simplicity,” and thus the most noble and incorruptible being and first cause.<sup>24</sup>

Aquinas then argues that the first cause of the universe, this unmoved mover, must be pure act with no potential, contingency, or composition, for each would require a prior cause.<sup>25</sup> In the case of created things, for example, to be a thing (existence) and to be a certain thing (essence) are distinct. A red car, for example, can exist in theory without existing in the real world. For a red car to exist requires a red car maker who brings the existence and essence of a car together. However, the first cause, God, has no composer and so must be a simple being in which to be (existence) and to be a certain thing (essence) are one.

For Aquinas, this causal act is far more than a mere temporal or mechanical causation. In fact, Aquinas’ argument proceeds even allowing for a past eternal universe for the sake of argument.<sup>26</sup> God is not some deistic deity that merely starts the dominoes falling but is the very being in which all causation takes place.<sup>27</sup> Aquinas’ model relies on an essential causal link, rather than merely a temporal one.

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<sup>24</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 1.18.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 1.13.30.

<sup>27</sup> Andrew Davison, *Participation in God: A Study in Christian Doctrine and Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 32.



God, as being itself, is that in which all creation finds its being, power, and nature. He alone is about to bring about change in creation because He is simple and unchanging.

Creation, for Aquinas, therefore participates in God, who is existence and being itself, deriving all it is from Him. God is what He is through Himself, while creation is what it is through God. He writes, “Every being in any way existing is from God. For whatever is found in anything by participation, must be caused in it by that to which it belongs essentially. . . . Therefore, all beings apart from God are not their own being, but are beings by participation.”<sup>28</sup> God does not merely create the world in a mechanistic way, but actually gives it its essence as it participates in God. God is the formal cause of creation, with His intellect giving form to creation, giving it its “whatness” (essence) and its “whatforness” (purpose).

Building upon Aquinas and those who came before, throughout the Reformation and beyond, DDS was assumed to be an essential component of first cause arguments. Three examples can be given that represent this commitment. Like most of his contemporaries, John Owen (AD 1616–1683) held firmly to DDS in his doctrine of God. He affirms that God is fully in act without composition and that He is absolutely free from all dependence upon that which is not God to be what He is.

Regarding God’s nature as first cause, then, Owen writes:

Now if God were of any causes, internal or external, any principles antecedent or superior to him, he could not be so absolutely first and independent. Were he composed of parts, accidents, manner of being, he could not be first; all of these are before that which is of them, and therefore his essence is absolutely simple.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.44.1

<sup>29</sup> Owen, “The Mystery of the Gospel Vindicated,” 72.

Owen affirms that for God to be the first cause of all causes, He must be simple. If He were not simple and were composed of anything, He would owe His existence and nature to something else.

Francis Turretin (AD 1623–1687), in his polemic work *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, strongly proclaims the simplicity of God in classical formation against those, such as the Socinians, who divide God’s essence from His attributes. He affirms that God’s attributes are identical with His essence and that God has no accidental properties and lacks all composition.<sup>30</sup> He also argues, in his work against atheism, that God is the first cause with no superior cause beyond Him.<sup>31</sup> However, for this to be the case, DDS must be ascribed to God. Turretin argues that simplicity is a necessary implication of God’s independence. For God to be composed in any way would make Him dependent because “that which is composed is composed by another; (but) God is the first and independent being, recognizing no other prior to himself.”<sup>32</sup> If God is to be the first cause, He must be simple and uncaused.

Further, Stephen Charnock (AD 1628–1680), a pastor and theologian contemporary with Owen and Turretin, argued that DDS is necessary for God’s independence and for His status as creator of all things. In *Discourses upon the Existence and Attributes of God*, Charnock writes, “God is the most simple being; for that which is first in nature, having nothing beyond it, cannot by any means be thought to be compounded; for whatsoever is so, depends upon the parts whereof it is

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<sup>30</sup> Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 1:187.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:170.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:191.

compounded, and so is not the first being.”<sup>33</sup> However, because He is simple, God’s existence and essence are one, such that He does not depend upon any prior cause or compositional cause to be or to be what He is.

Those theologians and apologists who argued for God as first cause against atheism did so by assuming and using DDS. If God were divisible or compound, He would be dependent upon what is not God (creation) to be or to be what He is. If this was the case, these theologians argued, God could not be first cause. Therefore, in their apologetic for the Christian faith, DDS was essential for them to defend God’s aseity and creation *ex nihilo*.

### **Divine Simplicity and Ontological Arguments**

The polemics and apologetics of the Church formed arguments not only from cause and effect, but also from the nature of God Himself. Such arguments argue for God on ontological, especially moral, grounds. These arguments reason that God is a necessary being in the sense that His very definition entails His existence. Further, God, as a simple being, is necessary as a foundation for morality.

#### **Ontological Arguments**

The most famous ontological argument from history, of course, is that proposed by Anselm of Canterbury. Anselm (AD 1033–110) was an Archbishop and theologian. He saw himself in the tradition of Augustine and sought to apply his principles to developing a doctrine of God and an argument for His existence that was

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<sup>33</sup> Charnock, *Discourses upon the Existence and Attributes of God*, 1:333.

independent of empirical data.<sup>34</sup> In this endeavor, he relied heavily upon the doctrine of simplicity to argue that God is the Supreme Being than which none greater can be conceived. The argument, as formulated by Anselm, proceeds as follows:

So even the Fool is convinced that something than which nothing greater can be thought is at least in his understanding. . . . But surely that than which a greater cannot be thought cannot be only in the understanding. For it were only in the understanding, it could be thought to exist also in reality—something which is greater [than existing only in the understanding]. Therefore, if that than which a greater cannot be thought were only in the understanding, then that than which a greater *cannot* be thought would be that than which a greater *can* be thought! But surely this [conclusion] is impossible. Hence, without doubt, something than which a greater cannot be thought exists both in the understanding and in reality.<sup>35</sup>

Anselm's argument can be stated in the following form. First, everyone, even a fool, can imagine a being than which none greater could be conceived. Second, such a being, if it exists in the mind only, would not be as great as a being that exists in the real world. Therefore, a being than which nothing greater can be conceived must exist in the real world and is God.

For this argument to succeed, however, the criteria for the greatest conceivable being must be clear. Anselm defines these criteria as those qualities which it is greater to have than not to have, such as life, wisdom, love, justice, and power. As he writes:

What, then, are You, O Lord God, than whom nothing greater can be thought? What indeed are You except that which—as the highest of all things, alone existing through Himself—made all other things from nothing? For whatever is not this is less great than can be thought. But this [less greatness] cannot be thought of You. Therefore, what good is lacking to the Supreme Good, through

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<sup>34</sup> Anselm, "Monologion," 1.

<sup>35</sup> Anselm, "Proslogion," 93-94.

whom every good exists? Consequently, You are just, truthful, blessed, and whatever it is better to be than not to be.<sup>36</sup>

Anselm argues that God is not merely another creature who happens to demonstrate these qualities in a greater degree than any other. He reasons that things are what they are either through something else (causally) or through themselves.<sup>37</sup> Things that are what they are through something else cannot be the greatest conceivable being because they are dependent upon those things. The supreme being, then, must be what it is, not by virtue of something else, but through itself. He writes:

Hence, only that which alone is good through itself is supremely good; for that is supreme which so excels others that it has neither an equal nor a superior. Now, what is supremely good is also supremely great. Therefore, there is one thing which is supremely good and supremely great—i.e., [which is] the highest of all existing things. . . . Now, since only what is supremely good can be supremely great, it is necessary that something be the greatest and the best, i.e., the highest, of all existing things.<sup>38</sup>

God is the greatest conceivable being because He does not merely do or possess these qualities, as does a creature, but because He *is* these qualities. Here is where his doctrine of simplicity becomes vital. God is “life, wisdom, truth, goodness, blessedness, eternity—You are every true good.”<sup>39</sup> Because God is not made of parts, all His attributes are one. As he states, “You are Oneness itself, divisible in no respect. Therefore, life and wisdom and the other [characteristics] are not parts of You but are all one thing; and each one of them is the whole of what You are and the whole of

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<sup>36</sup> Anselm, “Proslogion,” 95.

<sup>37</sup> Anselm, “Monologion,” 8-9.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Anselm, “Proslogion,” 105.

what all the others are.”<sup>40</sup> God is the supreme Being because He is simple. The ontological argument, as formulated by Anselm, only works by grounding it in DDS. Without it, God is dependent for His great making qualities upon something external to Himself.

Others also formulated versions of the Ontological Argument after Anselm. Although their versions of DDS varied and did not always fully affirm all the elements of a classical DDS, they nevertheless still argued that key aspects of the doctrine were necessary for the Ontological Argument to succeed. René Descartes (AD 1596–1650) argued that God must exist because, by definition, He possesses all perfections and it is more perfect to exist than not to exist. In God, as a necessary being, existence and essence cannot truly be separated.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, “God is His existence”<sup>42</sup> and possesses all unity, simplicity, and inseparability.<sup>43</sup>

Gottfried Leibniz (AD 1646–1716) praised the ontological argument but stated that, while sound, the argument falls short because it assumes that the idea of God is possible and coherent. How can multiple perfections exist in God in a way that would be necessary for a Supreme Being? Using simplicity, Leibniz argues that a perfection is a “simple quality which is positive and absolute, or expresses whatever it expresses

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<sup>40</sup> Anselm, “Proslogion,” 105.

<sup>41</sup> René Descartes, “Third Meditation,” in *The Ontological Argument: From St. Anselm to Contemporary Philosophers*, ed. Alvin Plantinga (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1965), 32-33.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>43</sup> René Descartes, “Meditation Three: Concerning God, That He Exists,” in *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. Donald A. Cress, 4th ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998), 79.

without any limits.”<sup>44</sup> If a quality is perfect, it has no limits and therefore must be simple. If they cannot be limited, then they cannot contradict each other. Thus, all perfections may be compatible with one another in the greatest conceivable being, who must exist because existence is one of those perfections.

### Moral Arguments

Though not explicitly connected to *the* Ontological Argument, many examples throughout history argued that God Himself was the ontological grounding for moral realities and these arguments relied on DDS to make this case. During the Nicene era, for example, Augustine taught that God Himself, as a simple being, was the standard for morality and goodness. God, in Augustine’s thought, is simple in the sense that God is identical with His substance. He writes that God, as Trinity, “has not anything which it can lose, and . . . it is not one thing and its contents another.”<sup>45</sup> Since everything that is predicated of God refers to the substance of God,<sup>46</sup> all His attributes are identical in Him<sup>47</sup> and united to each other.<sup>48</sup> For God, to be is to be everything predicated of Him because He is that by which He is everything.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, “The New Essays Concerning Human Understanding,” in *The Ontological Argument: From St. Anselm to Contemporary Philosophers*, ed. Alvin Plantinga, trans. A. G. Langley (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1965), 55.

<sup>45</sup> Augustine, “The City of God,” 11.10. Augustine here uses the illustration of a cup with liquid to demonstrate what he is opposing. A cup, though it contains the liquid, is not identical to it. God, however, does not contain His attributes.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Augustine, “On the Holy Trinity,” 6.7.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 6.4.6.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 7.1.2.

For Augustine, then, because God is identical to His attributes, God does not participate in morality the way humans do. Though he was heavily influenced by Platonism, Augustine had no problem molding Platonic categories to serve Christian goals. Plato argued that things on earth, whether material or conceptual, participate in eternal, universal Forms. Things are what they are by virtue of participation in these Forms. This was how he dealt with the problem of the one and many. However, this seems to lead to the conclusion that God is what He is by virtue of participation in such Forms as well, making them eternal and making God dependent. On the contrary, Augustine taught that God's attributes are not Platonic Forms in which God participates.<sup>50</sup> Rather, because God is pure form, He stands in the place of these Forms. In Augustine's model, God's attributes are not measured by external measures. Rather, the attributes we predicate of God are measured by God Himself.<sup>51</sup> God is the standard of what it is to be the moral qualities in which humans participate.

Based on this understanding of God's moral nature, Augustine used DDS against the paganism of the Roman Empire in his work *The City of God*. Augustine argued that the gods of the Romans are ever changing, fickle, and immoral. The Romans, he argued, worship gods who are morally corrupt while punishing their own people who do the same things or actors who portray the same vices.<sup>52</sup> However, the Christian God, who is simple and unchanging, is goodness and wisdom itself.<sup>53</sup> Thus,

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<sup>50</sup> John P. Rosheger, "Augustine and Divine Simplicity," *New Blackfriars* 77, no. 901 (1996): 76.

<sup>51</sup> Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, 3, 7-8.

<sup>52</sup> Augustine, "The City of God," 2.13.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.10.



the God worshipped by Christians is morally superior to the gods of the Romans because He does not depend upon creatures but remains constant and gives life to all.

Aquinas, though he would reject the ontological argument as such,<sup>54</sup> would go on to affirm that morality itself depends upon God's simplicity. With Augustine and Anselm, he affirmed that "each good thing that is not its goodness is called good by participation."<sup>55</sup> However, as with his cosmological argument, Aquinas argued that there cannot be an infinite regress of goodness, but rather there must be a first good that is good through itself and not through something else. God, being simple, lacks all potency and is pure act and perfect. Therefore, God is His own goodness and is the good that all things desire and is the cause of all goodness in creation.<sup>56</sup> As he writes, "Nothing, then, will be called good except in so far as it has a certain likeness of the divine goodness. Hence, God is the good of every good."<sup>57</sup> Whether goodness, or love, or truth, or justice, or any other moral attribute, God is identical with these attributes and thus is the ontological grounding for such properties and characteristics in creation.

In the Reformation era, Jacob Arminius (AD 1560–1609), who held firmly to simplicity, calling it the "pre-eminent mode of the essence of God,"<sup>58</sup> taught that God

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<sup>54</sup> Aquinas rejected this argument on the basis that one cannot have *a priori* knowledge of God but can only reason from effect to cause. The definition and existence of God are not self-evident in the sense that the human mind does not self-evidently conceive of the divine essence. See Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 1.11.2. Nevertheless, Anselm's doctrine of simplicity stands in strong continuity between Augustine and Aquinas.

<sup>55</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 1.38.4.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 1.37.5.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 1.40.2.

<sup>58</sup> John Wesley, *Works of John Wesley* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 2:115.

was the foundation of morality and goodness itself. He writes, “The Goodness of the Essence of God is that according to which it is, essentially in itself, the Supreme and very Good; from a participation in which all things have an existence and are good.”<sup>59</sup> God is good by virtue of God and all things that are good are good to the extent that they participate in God’s likeness.

Likewise, Charnock, another strong defender of DDS, argues that men, as creatures, are only capable of good by participation in goodness from another.<sup>60</sup> God, however, “is good, he is goodness, good in himself, good in his essence, good in the highest degree.”<sup>61</sup> God’s law does not come arbitrarily or from some external source, but from God’s very nature itself.<sup>62</sup> He writes:

God only is originally good, good of himself. All created goodness is a rivulet from this fountain, but Divine goodness hath no spring; God depends upon no other for his goodness; he hath it in, and of himself: man hath no goodness from himself, God hath no goodness from without himself: his goodness is no more derived from another than his being.<sup>63</sup>

Goodness, in Charnock’s view, is that which flows from God Himself. God is the standard of goodness because He is identical with all that He is.

For these writers, DDS serves to ground ontological arguments and reality. Because God is simple, He is identical with that which is predicated of Him. As a result, He is supreme and the supreme standard because He is not composed of God

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<sup>59</sup> Wesley, *Works of John Wesley*, 1:442.

<sup>60</sup> Stephen Charnock, *Discourses upon the Existence and Attributes of God*, 11th ed., vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993), 230.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:214.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:128.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:210-11.

and what is not God. He is the highest good, not because He does more good than creatures, but because He is goodness itself and creatures, when they show goodness, participate in that goodness.

### **Divine Simplicity and Anti-Gnostic Arguments**

In the early years of the Church, groups of Gnostics arose that challenged Christian orthodoxy. Gnosticism, in its various forms, emphasized a distinction between the creator and the means by which this ultimate creator created the material world, holding that material things are evil and so the highest god cannot be the direct creator of evil.<sup>64</sup> The early Christian apologists responded to these challenges by articulating an orthodox doctrine of God and by demonstrating the incoherence of Gnostic beliefs.

Among individuals writing during this time, Bishop Irenaeus of Lyons (AD 130–202) stands out for his use of DDS.<sup>65</sup> He is best known for his work *Against Heresies*, in which he responds to various forms of Gnosticism, cults, and pagan beliefs, primarily Valentinus.<sup>66</sup> These Gnostics taught that there was a sequence of intermediate and descending deities (Aeons) emanating from the first god until creation itself.<sup>67</sup> This first god, Bythus, “deposited” into a contemporary Aeon (Sige),

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<sup>64</sup> Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2003), 300.

<sup>65</sup> Depending on dating, either he or Athenagoras are said to have been the first Christians to use this terminology. Jordan Barrett, *Divine Simplicity*, 38.

<sup>66</sup> Irenaeus, “Against Heresies,” in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. A. Cleveland Coxe, vol. 1 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2012), 1.1.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.1.1.

who gave birth to Nous (mind), and all manner of lesser gods called Aletheia (truth), Logos (word), Zoe (life), and so on. In this view, the highest god created lesser gods that created lesser gods, and so on because, they reasoned, creation, which contains evil, cannot ultimately be created by a perfect being. These lesser gods emanate from the one eternal god as lesser beings but not truly separated.

On the contrary, Irenaeus argues, a perfect being is not composed of parts upon which He depends to be or to act. He writes:

For the Father of all is at a vast distance from those affections and passions which operate among men. He is a simple, uncompounded Being, without diverse members, and altogether like, and equal to Himself, since He is wholly understanding, and wholly spirit, and wholly thought, and wholly, intelligence, and wholly reason, and wholly hearing, and wholly seeing, and wholly light, and the whole source of all that is good.<sup>68</sup>

Irenaeus affirms that God is simple, without composition, and that His attributes are not parts of Him but describe the whole of His essence. He does not act out of passions, as do men, but rather, He acts from His simple, undivided nature. Irenaeus is emphatic in declaring that there is only one God<sup>69</sup> and that the single name of God “harmonizes” all the predicates that might be said of Him.<sup>70</sup> He argues that God is not like men who operate from affections and passions. The Gnostics separated God from His mind and word, “compounding” God, as if His mind and His word were each one thing and God Himself were something else.<sup>71</sup> However, because God is simple, He is

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<sup>68</sup> Irenaeus, “Against Heresies,” 2.13.3.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 1.10.1.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 2.13.9.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 2.28.5.

His mind and word which are none other than the Son of God who is the Wisdom and Word of God.

In holding to simplicity, Irenaeus was able to affirm that the Son is He through whom God made all things,<sup>72</sup> and yet He and the Father (with the Spirit), are the one God.<sup>73</sup> This is because the Son is generated from the Father and is thus of the same nature. If God is truly simple, then that which He generates will be of the same nature and one with Him.<sup>74</sup> Irenaeus' entire defense of the claim that there is only one God hinges on DDS. By holding to DDS, Irenaeus shows the error of the Gnostics in creating an incoherently compound God who depends upon lesser gods to be and to function and the superiority of the Christian faith, which demonstrates the glory of the one, uncreated God who creates all things by His Son and Spirit.

Clement of Alexandria (AD 150–215) also utilized DDS against various heretical movements. Not only did the early Christians combat Gnosticism, but they also had to contend with many other cults and heresies that claimed to be Christian but denied key Christian doctrines. In his fifth book of *The Stromata*, though he did not use the word “simple” per se, he nevertheless used the ideas of simplicity to formulate an argument against the heretical movements that were splitting the Church. Clement writes that God is the first principle and cause of all things. He is unbegotten and there is nothing before Him. In God, there is “neither genus, nor difference, nor species, nor

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<sup>72</sup> Irenaeus, “Against Heresies,” 1.22.1.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 4.5.2, 46.

<sup>74</sup> Pui Him Ip, *Origen and the Emergence of Divine Simplicity before Nicaea* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 2022), 61.

individual, nor number.”<sup>75</sup> He argues that being itself is in God, who is eternal, incorporeal, infinite, and causes everything else to exist.<sup>76</sup> Further, God does what He does out of His nature. God is good so He does good.<sup>77</sup> And since God and the Word are one, what God is, the Word is.<sup>78</sup>

Given this understanding of God, Clement uses simplicity to make a very short but specific argument. He argues that, because God is one and undivided, there can be only one faith and one true Church.<sup>79</sup> After all, if God is one and single, this should mark the one true Church, which is the body of Christ. Heresies, however, preach false doctrines that divide the Church. In doing so, these heretics contradict the nature of God. Therefore, Clement reasons, heresies that contradict and divide the body of Christ cannot be true.

### **Divine Simplicity and Trinitarian Arguments**

Perhaps the most well-known way in which DDS was used in history was to defend the coherence of the doctrine of the Trinity. In fact, in many cases, the doctrine of the Trinity itself was developed apologetically and polemically in the face of various attacks. By appealing to DDS, apologists throughout history were able to

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<sup>75</sup> Clement of Alexandria, “The Stromata,” in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 2, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2012), 5.12.

<sup>76</sup> Clement of Alexandria, “The Book on Providence,” in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 2, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2012), 580.

<sup>77</sup> Clement of Alexandria, “The Instructor,” in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 2, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2012), 1.8.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Clement of Alexandria, “The Stromata,” 7.17.

counter claims against polytheism and trinitarian heresies and were able to present a coherent doctrine.

Beginning in the second century, Justin Martyr (AD 100-165), one of the earliest apologists of the Church, is well known for his interaction with Greek philosophy and religion. Throughout his writings, he engages the Greek and early Gnostic cults, the pantheon of pagan gods, and the philosophical ideas of the various philosophers held in high esteem by the Greeks, especially Plato and Aristotle. Throughout his apologetic and polemic works, Justin affirmed the simplicity of God, though he does not use the word *per se*.

In his work, the *Dialogue with Trypho*, he writes, “But just as your teachers suppose, fancying that the Father of all, the unbegotten God, has hands and feet, and fingers, and a soul, like a composite being; and they for this reason teach that it was the Father Himself who appeared to Abraham.”<sup>80</sup> Further, when discussing the nature of the Son as begotten, Justin writes, “This power was begotten from the Father, by His power and will, but not by abscission, as if the essence of the Father were divided; as all other things partitioned and divided are not the same after as before they were divided.”<sup>81</sup>

In these statements, Justin affirmed several basic elements of DDS. God, unlike creatures, is without composition, division, or change. His divine nature is unbegotten (though Justin affirmed that the Son as Son was eternally begotten) and

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<sup>80</sup> Justin Martyr, “Dialogue with Trypho,” in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, ed. A. Cleveland Coxe (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2012), 256.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 264.

impassible.<sup>82</sup> Unlike the immoral gods of the Greeks, Justin argued, the true God is not overrun by passions. God cannot be named in any proper sense because names apply to the division of subject and matter, but God is one and He is not like creatures, nor is He material. Rather, He is “the Being.”<sup>83</sup>

This affirmation of God’s nature as uncompounded and without division enabled Justin to respond to Plato himself, in spite of Justin’s appreciation for his thinking.<sup>84</sup> While Plato spoke of multiple, created gods, Justin argued that he did so out of fear, given what happened to Socrates, who was charged with denying the gods.<sup>85</sup> Justin argued that Plato himself truly believed in one ultimate God who was the maker of all other gods. However, this put Plato into an unwinnable situation. If, as Plato taught, these gods were made of matter, which Plato allowed to be uncreated and eternal, and everything that is material and produced is perishable, how can he avoid the conclusion that these gods are perishable?<sup>86</sup> However, the true God is not Himself composed of matter, as are created things. Therefore, per Justin’s logic, there is only one true God who is eternal and uncompounded.

Tertullian, the first to use the word Trinity, also developed his doctrine of the Trinity in response to apologetic and polemic concerns. In “Against Marcion,” he

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<sup>82</sup> Justin Martyr, “The First Apology,” in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, ed. A. Cleveland Coxe (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2012), 171.

<sup>83</sup> Justin Martyr, “Justin’s Hortatory Address to the Greeks,” in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, ed. A. Cleveland Coxe (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2012), 281.

<sup>84</sup> Justin argued that Plato received his inspiration for much of his teaching from Moses and the prophets. See Justin Martyr, “Justin’s Hortatory Address to the Greeks,” 283-85.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 281.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 282-83.



responded to the belief that there are two gods: one evil and one good.<sup>87</sup> He argued instead that God is one and the eternal, unbegotten, unmade, supreme ruler of all. He is unique without equal. He states, “God is not, if He is not one.”<sup>88</sup> While he is here simply speaking of God’s numerical oneness, he went on to argue against the idea of two or more gods by stating “God is one thing and what belongs to God is another thing.”<sup>89</sup>

Unlike humans, which can be multiple, God cannot be duplicated. Tertullian argued that Marcion cannot have it both ways. There cannot be two Supremes,<sup>90</sup> so there cannot be two equal gods. If there were two gods, they could not be diverse and still be equal.<sup>91</sup> Maricon, while claiming that one God is good and one God is just, divided God. Tertullian, however, argues that, in God, goodness and justice are united.<sup>92</sup> Whereas humans are affected by emotions, God, who shows emotions in a way fitting of His nature, has them incorruptibly.<sup>93</sup>

In “Against Praxeas,” Tertullian defended the concept of the true distinction among the persons of the Trinity while also upholding the union therein. From the writings of Praxeas, the doctrine came to Rome that there is only one God, Lord, and

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<sup>87</sup> Tertullian, “Against Marcion,” in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, vol. 3 (Peabody, MA: Hackett, 2012), 272.

<sup>88</sup> Tertullian, “Against Marcion,” 3:273.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 3:274.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 3:275.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 3:307.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 3:310.

creator; namely, the Father, who Himself was born of a virgin and died on the cross as Jesus Christ, committing patripassianism. In response, Tertullian affirmed the doctrine that God is one and unified in regard to His substance and Trinity in regard to the three Persons.<sup>94</sup> The Father, Son, and Spirit are inseparable from one another, not according to distinction, but according to division, differing by “mode of being.”<sup>95</sup> Only the Son suffered because He suffered in the flesh, while God as God is impassible.<sup>96</sup> The heresy of Praxeas, then, is refuted by distinguishing between the simple essence<sup>97</sup> and the persons.

Origen of Alexandria (AD 185–253) represents an example of an early synthesis of Christian thought through the lens of Platonism. His account of simplicity is the most developed of the early Church and becomes foundational for the Nicene era.<sup>98</sup> He writes:

Wherefore that simple and wholly intellectual nature can admit of no delay or hesitation in its movements or operations, lest the simplicity of the divine nature should appear to be circumscribed or in some degree hampered by such adjuncts, and lest that which is the beginning of all things should be found composite and differing, and that which ought to be free from all bodily

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<sup>94</sup> Tertullian, “Against Praxeas,” in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, vol. 3 (Peabody, MA: Hackett, 2012), 598. This is the first credible reference to the word Trinity in history.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 3:603.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 3:626.

<sup>97</sup> It is true that Tertullian, in one place, wrote that “the Father is the entire substance, but the Son is a derivation and portion of the whole.” Ibid., 3:603-4. This seems to imply that the Son is a part of God. However, to clarify his point, he uses the illustration of the tree coming from the root in which both are the tree, but one comes from the substance of the other (3:8, 3:603). While not precise and still problematic, this does not indicate the idea of partialism or the Arianism that would later be condemned at Nicaea, though later Arians would appeal to this writing.

<sup>98</sup> Ip, *Origen and the Emergence of Divine Simplicity before Nicaea*, 10.

intermixture, in virtue of being the one sole species of Deity, so to speak, should prove, instead of being one, to consist of many things.<sup>99</sup>

Origen's doctrine of the Trinity, though it is complicated and has several elements later writers and creeds would come to question or reject,<sup>100</sup> was built upon his doctrine of simplicity.<sup>101</sup> Origen taught that the Trinity is eternally Father, Son, and Holy Spirit<sup>102</sup> who are three hypostases (persons).<sup>103</sup> He argued that, because God is simple and is not a body, things that are predicated of the deity of the divine nature are common to them all.<sup>104</sup> The Son and Spirit are united in nature and substance with the Father,<sup>105</sup> as well as in unity and harmony of thought and will.<sup>106</sup>

To blend the unity and trinity of God, Origen relied on his doctrine of eternal generation, which would become a staple of Nicene theology. This is not a "prolation"

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<sup>99</sup> Origen, "Origen de Principiis," in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, trans. Frederick Crombie, vol. 4 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2012), 1.1.6.

<sup>100</sup> Though he affirmed that the Persons of the Trinity could have no degrees of greatness because they come from the same divine fountain, Origen nevertheless elevated the Father above the Son as source, declaring the Son to be inferior to the Father, leading to him often being labeled as subordinationist. Taking his cue from John 1:1 and 1 Cor 8:5-6, Origen argued that the Father is True God and the Son is God derivatively by participation and is thus "God" with no article. See Origen, "Commentary on John," in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, trans. Frederick Crombie, vol. 9 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2012), 2.2.

<sup>101</sup> On this point, there is controversy. Franz Dünzl and others argue that Origen used *ousia* and *hypostasis* interchangeably and that he spoke of each person having their own *ousia*. Thus, Dünzl argues, "Origen did not succeed in grasping the unity of the three conceptually." Franz Dünzl, *A Brief History of the Doctrine of the Trinity in the Early Church*, trans. John Bowden (New York: T&T Clark, 2007), 35. However, Stephen Holmes argues that Origen was quite comfortable using *ousia* to refer to the common nature between Father, Son, and Spirit. He writes, "That said, there is no doubt at all that Origen is committed to the unity of the Trinity, and the distinction of Father, Son, and Spirit from every creature." Holmes, *The Quest for the Trinity*, 77.

<sup>102</sup> Origen, "Origen de Principiis," 1.2.4.

<sup>103</sup> Origen, "Commentary on John," 2.6.

<sup>104</sup> Origen, "Origen de Principiis," 1.1.8.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.2.6.

<sup>106</sup> Origen, "Against Celsus," in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, trans. Frederick Crombie, vol. 4 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2012), 8.12.

of the Father in the sense of when creatures beget after their natures, for this would require a body, which God does not have, and change, which God does not do. Therefore, the substance of God did not convert into parts to form the Triune persons.<sup>107</sup> Rather, the Son is eternally begotten of the Father hypostatically.<sup>108</sup> If the Son, as He is called in Scripture, is the image, wisdom, and word of God, then the Son must be eternal, for God cannot be without His image, wisdom, and word.

Origen's apologetic endeavors, using simplicity, argued against several positions. The Stoics, in Origen's writing, taught that God has a body and is capable of change and even corruption.<sup>109</sup> They taught that, to exist, one must, in some sense, inhabit a corporeal body.<sup>110</sup> Likewise, the Epicureans argued that gods are composed of atoms and capable of not only change, but dissolution.<sup>111</sup> In response, Origen argued that God is immutable and unalterable and thus has no body that is changeable. God is not a part of something because He would not be perfect, as parts, by definition, are imperfect. Nor is God a whole collection of parts. God is sovereign over all and thus cannot be composed of things over which He rules.<sup>112</sup> He is invisible by nature and is an intellectual being.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Origen, "Origen de Principiis," 4.1.28.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 1.2.2.

<sup>109</sup> Origen, "Against Celsus," 1.21. They argue this assuming that God is not corrupted because He has no equal to corrupt Him.

<sup>110</sup> Ip, *Origen and the Emergence of Divine Simplicity before Nicaea*, 90.

<sup>111</sup> Origen, "Against Celsus," 4.14.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 1.23.

<sup>113</sup> Origen, "Origen de Principiis," 1.2.8.

Celsus argued that Christians are hypocrites for criticizing the pagans while also worshipping multiple deities; namely, God and His servant (the Son).<sup>114</sup> However, Origen maintains, Celsus did not understand the Christian position. As Jesus says, “I and My Father are one.”<sup>115</sup> They are one “in unity of thought, in harmony and in identity of will.”<sup>116</sup> The Son is the image of God Himself, so to see the Son is to see God. On the other side of the issue, the Monarchians argued that God’s simplicity means that the Son is divine, but not distinct from the Father, affirming only one *hypostasis*.<sup>117</sup> Origen responded that, though they are one, they are distinct as three hypostases or subsistences. The Son is Son by generation from the Father and thus is what the Father is.

However, the Valentinians and Gnostics object: if the Son proceeds from God by generation or emanation, as one who gives birth to another, this is done in time and thus the Son is a created being. Here is where things get historically and theologically complicated. Though at times, as shown previously, Origen affirmed that the Son and the Father were of the same nature and substance, he also rejected the use of “out of the *ousia*” to describe the Son’s generational relation to the Father<sup>118</sup> because, for Origen, to beget out of the Father’s essence would divide the Father and compromise

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<sup>114</sup> Origen, “Against Celsus,” 8.12.

<sup>115</sup> Origen, “Against Celsus,” 8.12.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Ip, *Origen and the Emergence of Divine Simplicity before Nicaea*, 123.

<sup>118</sup> Origen, “Commentary on John,” xx.

simplicity.<sup>119</sup> Instead, he argued that the Son was generated as the will of God. While in humans, mind and will are distinguished by the body, God is spirit and has no body but is pure intellect and, thus, will acts inseparably from mind.<sup>120</sup> In God, then, the Son is generated as the Father's act of willing.<sup>121</sup>

The Nicene era was marked by trinitarian debate. The Nicene Creed (AD 325) affirmed the unity and identity of the divine substance, the co-equal status of those persons (affirming that the Son is of the same substance, *homoousios*, with the Father as opposed to being of similar substance, *homoiousios*), and the eternal generation of the Son.<sup>122</sup> In the later Constantinopolitan Creed (AD 381), the full deity and equality of the Holy Spirit was also explicitly affirmed.<sup>123</sup> Lewis Ayres identifies three characteristics of pro-Nicene theology: “a clear version of the person and nature distinction . . . ; clear expression that the eternal generation of the Son occurs within the unitary and incomprehensible divine being; [and] clear expression of the doctrine that the persons work inseparably.”<sup>124</sup> In this discussion, DDS proved to be essential for rooting all three key characteristics.

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<sup>119</sup> Origen, “Origen de Principiis,” 1.2.6. See also Ip, *Origen and the Emergence of Divine Simplicity before Nicaea*, 162.

<sup>120</sup> Origen, “Origen de Principiis,” 1.1.7.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 1.2.6.

<sup>122</sup> Leith, *Creeds of the Churches*, 31.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>124</sup> Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 236.

Athanasius of Alexandria (AD 296–373) was a theologian and apologist in the era of the first Nicene Council. His commitment to simplicity is among the most explicit of the patristic period. Athanasius argued that God is simple, without parts, composition, divisions, change, or passions.<sup>125</sup> He does not depend upon creation, but rather all creation depends upon Him.<sup>126</sup> He does not have a body,<sup>127</sup> except by the incarnation of Jesus.<sup>128</sup> God possesses true existence by virtue of this simplicity because He alone is not composite.<sup>129</sup> Our descriptions of God, in His simplicity, are therefore describing nothing but the essence of God itself.<sup>130</sup>

DDS became vital for Athanasius' doctrine of the Trinity. The Son is Son because He is begotten of the Father.<sup>131</sup> However, unlike with men, because God is simple and without parts or division, this eternal generation is not a passionate creation of the Son in which God divides Himself or loses some of Himself, nor does this result in the creation of the Son as a second or lesser being. Rather, this generation is eternal

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<sup>125</sup> Athanasius, "Four Discourses against the Arians," in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Archibald Robertson, vol. 4, 2 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2012), 1.28.

<sup>126</sup> Athanasius, "Against the Heathen," in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Archibald Robertson, vol. 4, 2 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2012), 28.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>128</sup> Athanasius, "Statement of Faith," in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Archibald Robertson, vol. 4, 2 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2012), 2.

<sup>129</sup> Athanasius, "Against the Heathen," 42.

<sup>130</sup> Athanasius, "Defence of the Nicene Definition," in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Archibald Robertson, vol. 4, 2 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2012), 22.

<sup>131</sup> Athanasius, "Four Discourses against the Arians," 1.4.

and uncompounded.<sup>132</sup> The Son is of the essence of the Father but is distinct by virtue of begottenness.<sup>133</sup>

Athanasius used DDS to make several arguments in favor of the Trinity. Against Sabellianism, which collapses the persons into one, he argued that the Son's begottenness distinguishes Him from the Father.<sup>134</sup> But against polytheism, he argued that these three subsistences are not so separated as to render the persons as a plurality of gods.<sup>135</sup> He argued that simplicity rules out multiple gods. If there were multiple gods, there would likely be multiple universes, for it is absurd to believe that it took multiple gods to create one universe. If this were the case, these gods would not be all powerful. This does not mean that one God cannot create multiple universes, but since there is only one universe, there can be only one God who is complete and lacking all deficiency of parts.<sup>136</sup>

However, Athanasius' most well-known use of simplicity is in his polemics against the Arians,<sup>137</sup> who believed that the Father is solely God and became Father and that the Son is a creature who began to exist in time. Arius himself wrote:

What is it that we say, and think, and have taught, and teach? That the Son is not unbegotten, nor a part of the unbegotten in any way, nor [formed out] of any substratum, but that he was constituted by [God's] will and counsel, before

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<sup>132</sup> Athanasius, "Defence of the Nicene Definition," 11.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>134</sup> Athanasius, "Statement of Faith," 1.

<sup>135</sup> Athanasius, "Statement of Faith," 2.

<sup>136</sup> Athanasius, "Against the Heathen," 39.

<sup>137</sup> Or, as Athanasius calls pejoratively, the "Ario-maniacs." Athanasius, "Discourses against the Arians," 3.23.1.



times and before ages, full (of grace and truth), divine, unique, unchangeable. And before he was begotten or created or ordained or founded, he was not.<sup>138</sup>

Arius used simplicity to argue that while Jesus is called the Son, simplicity rules out eternal generation because it would create parts and divisions in God. However, Athanasius responds, this destroys any real meaning to the term “Son.” If the Son is a created being, He is not Son, but creature.<sup>139</sup> Rather, without parts or passions, eternal generation renders the Son of the same nature as the Father.<sup>140</sup> The generation of the Son is not like that of men as men beget from passions and time and weakness. God has no weakness, is eternal, and is simple. Therefore, the Son, who is the Word and Wisdom of the Father, is begotten eternally, impassibly, and indivisibly.<sup>141</sup> Instead of rejecting simplicity for the sake of Trinity, Athanasius appeals to it and uses it to guide his understanding of the Triune persons.

Gregory of Nyssa (AD 335–395) was one of the Cappadocian fathers of the Nicene era and was the younger brother of Basil of Caesarea. Many of his writings are polemic in nature, responding to the works and teachings of his contemporary, Eunomius of Cyzicus. Eunomius, who held firmly to what he thought of as divine simplicity, taught that since God is simple and God is unbegotten (ingenerate), then to be God is to be unbegotten.<sup>142</sup> After all, he reasoned, if God is simple then names of

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<sup>138</sup> Arius, “The Letter of Arius to Eusebius,” in *Documents of the Christian Church*, ed. Henry Bettenson, 2 (Oxford University Press, 1963), 330.

<sup>139</sup> Athanasius, “Discourses against the Arians,” 1.5.15.

<sup>140</sup> Athanasius, “Defence of the Nicene Definition,” 11.

<sup>141</sup> Athanasius, “Discourses against the Arians,” 1.8.28.

<sup>142</sup> Eunomius, *Eunomius: The First Apology*, trans. William Whiston, [https://www.tertullian.org/fathers/eunomius\\_apology01.htm](https://www.tertullian.org/fathers/eunomius_apology01.htm), VII.

God describe the essence and substance of God.<sup>143</sup> Therefore, the Son, who is begotten, is not of the same essence as the Father, who is unbegotten.<sup>144</sup> In Eunomius' version of simplicity, there can be no distinctions, only monism.<sup>145</sup> "Unbegotten" becomes the principle and only "normative description" and direct revelation of God's essence to creatures in that it names the divine essence directly.<sup>146</sup> Each of the divine beings are themselves simple and ranked.<sup>147</sup> Gregory's brother, Basil, responded to Eunomius' view, but Gregory, after the death of his brother, developed these themes more fully.

In his critique of Eunomius, and throughout his own theology, Gregory affirmed that God is simple in that He lacks all composition.<sup>148</sup> Gregory also strongly upheld the incomprehensibility of God's divine essence.<sup>149</sup> The names by which God is named are conceptions on the part of the creature of His works or are apophatic descriptions of what God is not.<sup>150</sup> There is no single suitable name for the divine

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid., XII.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., IX.

<sup>145</sup> Jordan Barrett, *Divine Simplicity*, 2017.

<sup>146</sup> Khaled Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea: The Development and Meaning of Trinitarian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 161.

<sup>147</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, "Against Eunomius," in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, vol. 5, 2 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2012), 10.4.

<sup>148</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, "Answer to Eunomius's Second Book," in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, vol. 5, 2 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2012), 253.

<sup>149</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, "Against Eunomius," 2.3.

<sup>150</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, "Answer to Eunomius's Second Book," 264. There is considerable debate as to what Gregory thought of the so-called Identity Thesis; namely, that God's attributes are identical to the divine essence and identical to one another. Andrew Radde-Gallwitz argues that, unlike

nature and thus it is addressed by many names. God is named by many attributes that “touch” Him and add, not to God, but to our notions of Him,<sup>151</sup> not as comprehending the divine nature itself, but as approaching it in humility, worship, and awe in itself full and self-disclosure.<sup>152</sup>

Further, for Gregory, all God’s attributes apply with equal force to the divine nature.<sup>153</sup> As Khaled Anatolios writes:

Gregory insists that each scriptural name and presentation of God has its distinct, irreducible meaning. Yet they all genuinely refer to the divine being, who “has something in common with all these notions. . . . The divine attributions are genuinely different and distinctly meaningful. . . . At the same time, Gregory is clear that the epistemological validity of the multiplicity of divine names does not consist in directly mirroring differentiation within the divine essence. The divine essence is itself simple, but its infinite depths and riches can only be grasped by human creatures through complex predication.”<sup>154</sup>

Gregory also affirmed that God does not Himself participate in attributes, such as goodness, but is unlimited goodness itself, along with wisdom, power, and the like.<sup>155</sup> This view of simplicity grounded Gregory’s affirmation of the Trinity. He

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Augustine, who held that the divine names name the essence, Gregory strongly opposed this idea. Andrew Raddle-Gallwitz, *Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, and the Transformation of Divine Simplicity*, Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 5-7. Jordan Barrett, however, argues that Augustine was not arguing that the divine names fully capture the essence, nor was Gregory arguing that the divine names say nothing of the essence. If the names do not describe the essence of God, but only His works, how do they constitute true knowledge of God? Jordan Barrett, *Divine Simplicity*, 67-68. This author’s view is that Gregory was denying that the divine names are synonymous with each other and that they name the essence as essence. But this is not inconsistent with Augustine or the later tradition of Aquinas.

<sup>151</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, “Answer to Eunomius’s Second Book,” 264.

<sup>152</sup> Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea*, 164.

<sup>153</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, “On the Holy Trinity,” in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, vol. 5, 2 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2012). 327.

<sup>154</sup> Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea*, 164.

<sup>155</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, “Against Eunomius,” 9.2.

stated, with Nicene orthodoxy, that the Trinity is one essence (*ousia*) but three distinct persons (*hypostasis*) in the Father, Son, and Spirit. These persons are subsistences of the one undivided nature.<sup>156</sup> He taught that the Son is Son by virtue of generation and is so eternally. Since the Father is always Father, He must always have a Son, otherwise the title is meaningless. Because the Son is eternal, this generation is eternal, flowing from the Father's ungeneracy.<sup>157</sup> The Son is from the Father but with the Father eternally, as is the Spirit.<sup>158</sup> Unlike, to use the social analogy, three persons that share human nature, the Trinity is properly said to be singular, and the persons work inseparably *ad extra* in creation.<sup>159</sup>

Gregory's doctrine of simplicity enabled him to refute the errors of Eunomius and to affirm the full deity of the Son and the Spirit. Gregory argued that terms like 'ungenerate' do not describe the essence of God as essence but are apophatic predications of God. To be God is to have no source beyond God.<sup>160</sup> Indeed, he argued, incomposite and ungenerate are not the same thing. Incomposite "represents the simplicity of the subject, the other its being without origin."<sup>161</sup> God is simple because He is indivisible and without composition, and He is ungenerate because He was not generated as a being. But this does not mean that within God there can be no

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<sup>156</sup> Ibid., 2.2.

<sup>157</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, "Against Eunomius," 1.42.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid., 1.26.

<sup>159</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, "On 'Not Three Gods,'" in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, vol. 5, 2 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2012), 334-35.

<sup>160</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, "Against Eunomius," 1.42.

<sup>161</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, "Answer to Eunomius's Second Book," 252.

generation. In fact, simplicity guards the equality and deity of the Son because the Father, being simple, cannot generate other than Himself.<sup>162</sup> Further, Eunomius erred in dividing the essence among individual beings. If God is simple, God's essence must be wholly present to be truly divine and thus the Son and Spirit cannot be lesser, but divine beings.<sup>163</sup> If God is good, He is good by virtue of His wisdom, power, and light, which Scripture all ascribes to the Son.<sup>164</sup>

After Gregory came the work of Augustine. Augustine's account of the Trinity, perhaps the most well-developed up to his time, represents classic Nicene orthodoxy. Augustine utilized simplicity as a starting assumption and interpreted God's attributes and the triune persons in the light of this assumption. His robust doctrine of simplicity allowed him to respond polemically against several key anti-Trinitarian ideas. Augustine's book on the Trinity was itself intended as a polemic against false understandings of the Trinity.<sup>165</sup>

In Augustine's theology, because God is simple and unchanging, there is only one essence, substance (*ousia*),<sup>166</sup> and nature and the three persons (*hypostases*) of Father, Son, and Spirit persons subsist in that one essence and work indivisibly in the world.<sup>167</sup> These three persons are nothing but the divine essence and are not accidents

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<sup>162</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, "Against Eunomius," 2.7.

<sup>163</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Holy Spirit," in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, vol. 5, 2 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2012), 316.

<sup>164</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, "Against Eunomius," 1.24. See also Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea*, 186.

<sup>165</sup> Augustine, "On the Holy Trinity," 1.1.1.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.2.3.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.21.

to it, because what is simple and unchanging can have no accidents.<sup>168</sup> Rather, these three persons are relations of the simple essence.<sup>169</sup> Therefore, there are not three Gods, three greats, or three goods, or three parts, but one God who is three eternal relations.<sup>170</sup> The things that are said of God concerning nature apply to all three persons and the things said concerning relation apply to the persons individually.<sup>171</sup> These three are not greater than each other in nature and the three are not greater together than distinctly, but are the one simple substance.<sup>172</sup>

Augustine used an analogy for these relations, often referred to as a psychological analogy.<sup>173</sup> He compares the mind, knowledge, and love with the three persons and yet identifies all three as one thing. In this analogy, the mind (the Father) begets knowledge (the Son) and love (the Spirit), which must be shared between the mind and knowledge. Therefore, the Son is said to be the wisdom and knowledge of God, and the Spirit is said to be the gift of love between Father and Son. And yet, there is no separation between the mind and its knowledge or love, only distinction.

Regarding the words of Scripture in which Jesus is said to be less than the Father or to submit to the Father, Augustine is very careful hermeneutically, in the spirit of Philippians 2, to distinguish between Jesus in the form of God (divinity), in

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<sup>168</sup> Ibid., 5.4.5.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid., 5.5.8.

<sup>170</sup> Augustine, "On the Holy Trinity," 5.8.9, and the preface to book 8.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid., and 5.5.6.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid., 7.6.11.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid., 9.2.2.

the form of a servant (humanity), and as from God (mission).<sup>174</sup> In the form of God, the Son is equal in every aspect to the Father. He is begotten, not made, and is therefore of the same substance with the Father.<sup>175</sup> After all, Augustine reasons, “all substance that is not God is creature; and all that is not creature is God.”<sup>176</sup> The Son, as the power and wisdom of God, must be co-eternal with God or else God is without His power and wisdom.<sup>177</sup> However, in the form of a servant, the Son submits to the Father for the Son’s mission.

Likewise, the Spirit is not less than the Father. The Spirit is not a creature, and therefore is God, co-eternal and consubstantial with the Father and Son.<sup>178</sup> However, unlike the Son, who is distinguished from the Father as begotten, and hence Son,<sup>179</sup> the Spirit proceeds eternally from the Father and Son as the love between them and as the gift of God to the world.<sup>180</sup>

Augustine’s view of the Trinity, as seen through his doctrine of simplicity, enabled him to maintain the equality and unity of the persons while also maintaining their distinction. Against the Arians, Sabellians, Modalists, and the like, he was able to affirm that God is one in essence, while three in eternal relations. In other works,

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<sup>174</sup> Ibid., 1.7.14. and 1.11.22.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid., 1.4.7.

<sup>176</sup> Augustine, “On the Holy Trinity,” 1.6.9.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid., 6.1.1.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid., 1.6.13.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid., 5.14.15.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid., 5.15.16.

Augustine also wrote against the Manicheans. This group taught that there were actually two gods, one good and one evil, in order to account for why there would be evil and corruption in creation.<sup>181</sup> Though he had once identified with their doctrine, Augustine now, through simplicity, engaged them polemically. Evil, Augustine taught, is not from a second god but is a corruption of the good. In order to posit that God is evil, He must be capable of corruption, which is what the Manichaeans proposed.<sup>182</sup> However, God is the highest good and goodness itself and so only creates good things.<sup>183</sup> Evil is a corruption, not of God, but of God's creation because creation, which is not simple, can change and be injured, whereas God, who is simple, cannot change.

After the Nicene era, the focus of apologetics began to change. With the rise of Islam, Christianity had to face the challenge of a rival, monotheistic faith that called the monotheism of Christianity into question.<sup>184</sup> Divine simplicity became a tool to affirm the coherence of the Trinity and even the existence of the Christian God. In a very real sense, John of Damascus was the “first apologist to the Muslims.”<sup>185</sup> His doctrine of the Trinity, with its strong commitment to DDS, allowed him to respond

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<sup>181</sup> Augustine, “On the Morals of the Catholic Church,” in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff, vol. 4, 2 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 10.16.

<sup>182</sup> Augustine, “On the Morals of the Catholic Church,” 11.21.

<sup>183</sup> Augustine, “Concerning the Nature of Good against the Manichaeans,” in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff, vol. 4, 2 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 350.

<sup>184</sup> Benjamin K. Forrest, Joshua D. Chatraw, and Alister E. McGrath, eds., *The History of Apologetics: A Biographical and Methodological Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 159-60.

<sup>185</sup> Daniel J. Janosik, *John of Damascus: First Apologist to the Muslims: The Trinity and Christian Apologetics in the Early Islamic Period* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2016).



apologetically and polemically to Islam. Apologetically, it allowed Him to defend the doctrine of the Trinity. The Trinity is not one by mere commonality of natures, as if each person were an instance of the divine nature, or by mere harmony of will, as if oneness were mere agreement.<sup>186</sup> Rather, these three persons are “one essence, one divinity, one power, one will, one energy, one beginning, one authority, one dominion, one sovereignty, made known in three perfect subsistences . . . united without confusion and divided without separation.”<sup>187</sup> John insisted that the three Persons are the one essence and are differentiated only by their relations of origin. The persons, through John’s doctrine of perichoresis, mutually indwell one another, not without simplicity, but because of it.<sup>188</sup> The divine names, therefore, refer to the whole of God.<sup>189</sup>

To demonstrate the doctrine of the Trinity, John first argued that God is one and not many. After all, if God is perfect, there cannot be two perfect beings, for one would have or be something the other does not or is not in order to be different, which, as shown earlier, would require accidental attributes and would violate simplicity.<sup>190</sup> However, this one God “is not Wordless,”<sup>191</sup> nor is He without Spirit.<sup>192</sup> The Word

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<sup>186</sup> John of Damascus, *An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, 1.8.

<sup>187</sup> John of Damascus, *An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, 1.8.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid., 1.14.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid., 1.10.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid., 1.5.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid., 1.6.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid., 1.7.

and Spirit of God are identical with God as His Word and Spirit and thus share all that God is. God is eternal, and therefore His Word and Spirit are eternal. Yet, the Word and the Spirit are distinct as subsistences. The Word is the Son who is begotten eternally. If the Son were not eternal, God would not eternally be Father. Because God is simple, this generation is without division or passion in God, and so the Son is of the same essence.<sup>193</sup> As a result of this generation, the Son is not a creature, but is the Word of God, equal in nature and identical to, but distinct from the Father and yet existing as a subsistence of God, rather than as a separate being.

In *The Heresy of the Ishmaelites* and in *Disputation between a Christian and a Saracen*,<sup>194</sup> John argued polemically against the Muslim conception of God's relationship to the Word. He presented the Islamic view that there is only one God and that this God has not begotten and does not beget, while also affirming that Jesus Christ was the Word of God.<sup>195</sup> This, John argued, forces his opponent into a fatal dilemma. If the Word is in God, as God's Word, then it follows that the Word is God. But if the Word is not in God, then it follows that, until Jesus, God was without His Word.<sup>196</sup>

Likewise, John asked whether the Son, and the Spirit, are created or uncreated. If created, then God was without His Spirit or Word. But if uncreated, they must be God. Though John does not use the word "simple" explicitly in these letters, his arguments should be read against the backdrop of his doctrine of simplicity in his

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<sup>193</sup> John of Damascus, *An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, 1.8.

<sup>194</sup> As obtained from the appendices in Janosik, *John of Damascus*, 260-76.

<sup>195</sup> Janosik, *John of Damascus*, 261.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*, 264.

works. Because God is simple, the Word and the Spirit are not parts of God but are the one God begotten and proceeding. But this does not, as the Muslim charges, lead to tri-theism because it is an eternal begetting and proceeding within God, not a creation through passion and change.

Timothy I of Baghdad, or Timothy the Patriarch (AD 727–823), was a pastor and apologist in the Middle East. His view and use of simplicity can be seen in his work “The Apology of Timothy the Patriarch before the Caliph Mahdi.” Timothy is alleged to have had a two-day dialogue with this Muslim spiritual leader in which he responded to numerous questions, ranging from the doctrine of the Trinity and the deity of Christ to the role of Muhammed. Timothy affirmed several key components of DDS. He affirmed that God is:

simple in His nature and one in His essence and remote from all division and bodily composition. . . . In His essence He is one, but He is three because of His Word and His Spirit. This Word and this Spirit are living beings [by which He simply means there are true alive] and are of His nature, as the word and the spirit of our victorious King [referring to the Caliph] are of his nature, and he is one King with his word and spirit, which are constantly with him without cessation, without division, and without displacement.<sup>197</sup>

Timothy affirmed that the Father, with the Son (His Word) and Spirit, are three Persons and not three Gods.<sup>198</sup> These three are inseparable as the sun is inseparable from light. However, they are distinguishable by the Son being begotten and the Spirit proceeding, each from the Father. This does not lead to composition because God is

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<sup>197</sup> Alphonse Mingana, trans., “The Apology of Timothy the Patriarch before the Caliph Mahdi,” *Woodbrooke Studies* 2 (1928), RUcore: Rutgers University Community Repository, <https://rucore.libraries.rutgers.edu/rutgers-lib/40326/PDF/1/play/>, 66.

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

not a body and cannot be composite,<sup>199</sup> and is utterly unique and not one in a species of like beings.<sup>200</sup> Timothy writes, “I believe in one God in three, and three in one, but not in three different Godheads, however, but in the persons of God’s Word and His Spirit. I believe that these three constitute one God, not in their person, but in their nature.”<sup>201</sup> Though God is ultimately, in His essence and in this begetting and proceeding, incomprehensible, there is but one divine nature with three persons.<sup>202</sup>

Timothy employed his doctrine of simplicity to make at least three arguments. First, he used simplicity to argue against the assertion by the Caliph that the promised paraclete (helper) of John 14 referred to Muhammed.<sup>203</sup> If, Timothy reasoned, Muhammed was this paraclete, who is called the Spirit of God, Muhammed would have to be the Spirit of God and thus be uncircumcised (as God is), invisible, without human body, and uncomposed. After all, the Spirit is simple and has no body. Clearly, Muhammed is not those things and so he is not this paraclete. Rather, the paraclete is of the same substance as the Father and Son.

Second, Timothy used simplicity to argue for the coherence of the unity of God in the generation and procession of the Son and Spirit. How can the begetting of the Word and the proceeding of the Spirit not result in a separation of beings from the one God? He reasoned that, because God is not composite and has no body, there is no

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<sup>199</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>201</sup> Mingana, “The Apology of Timothy the Patriarch,” 62.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid., 33-34.

separation in begetting and proceeding.<sup>204</sup> Rather, like with an apple in which the whole of the apple begets and proceeds the scent and taste, the whole divine essence is communicated in these conceptions.<sup>205</sup>

Third, Timothy used simplicity to argue against the idea that the Trinity represents three gods. How, the Caliph asks, are the Father, the Word, and the Spirit not three gods? “The number one,” Timothy responds, “refers to nature and Godhead, and the number three to God, His Word and His Spirit, because God has never been, is not, and will never be, without Word and Spirit.”<sup>206</sup> Ultimately, though this distinction is incomprehensible, the distinction is not according to body or numbers.<sup>207</sup> On this account, the persons do not contradict but rather confirm one another as Fatherhood, filiation, and procession.<sup>208</sup>

Aquinas’ view of DDS was also foundational for his apologetic for the Trinity. While his *Summa Theologica* expounded his doctrine, his *Summa Contra Gentiles* was written as an apologetic resource. In this work, he covered many of the same subjects but with the specific intent of creating a resource of theology for those engaged in missionary endeavor.<sup>209</sup> He specifically mentioned arguments from the Jews and the

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<sup>204</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>206</sup> Mingana, “The Apology of Timothy the Patriarch,” 65.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>209</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 1.21.

Muhammedeans (Muslims),<sup>210</sup> as well as various Christian heterodox groups such as the Arians and Sabellians.

Aquinas taught there is one divine essence and yet there are three Persons existing as subsisting relations of the one essence. He writes:

Now in all the persons of men there is unity in the specific nature; there is, nevertheless, a plurality of persons simply because men are distinguished in

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<sup>210</sup> Ibid., 1.2.3.

these things which are adjoined to the nature. In divinity, therefore, one must not speak of one Person by reason of unity of the subsisting essence, but of many Persons by reason of the relations.<sup>211</sup>

In Aquinas' thought, the Son is Son by virtue of generation and not creation.<sup>212</sup> He is the intellectual emanation of the divine essence from the Father.<sup>213</sup> The Spirit, likewise, is a subsistence of the divine nature,<sup>214</sup> but He proceeds and is not begotten.<sup>215</sup>

Aquinas employed his doctrine of simplicity to argue for both monotheism and Trinitarianism. Because God is simple, there can only be one God.<sup>216</sup> If God is goodness itself, and thus the highest good, there cannot be two highest goods, just like there cannot be two perfect beings because there would have to be something accidental distinguishing them as separate beings. But a simple being has no accidents. Therefore, there cannot be multiple gods. By appealing to simplicity, Aquinas was able to differentiate the persons, contrary to the Sabellians, but in a way that does not lead to tri-theism.<sup>217</sup> Because the essence of God cannot be divided, there is numerical identity in nature, essence, and power of the Father and Son.<sup>218</sup> However, the Persons

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<sup>211</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 4.14.6.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid., 4.7.5.8.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid., 4.11.8-10.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid., 4.18.6.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid., 4.19.9.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid., 1.42. 1, 2, 8.

<sup>217</sup> Long, *The Perfectly Simple Triune God*, 22-23.

<sup>218</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 4.6.20.

are distinguished relatively, not substantially, avoiding composition.<sup>219</sup> The Persons are the one essence communicated from Father to Son and from Father and Son to Spirit. In this way, there are multiple persons in the one simple essence.

Further, by appealing to simplicity, Aquinas defended the full divinity of the Son and Spirit, contrary to the Arians. The Arians held that if the Father was the source of the Son, the Son must have been a created being in time and thus of a different nature than the Father. However, Aquinas appeals to generation, rather than creation, to explain how the Son is able to be numerically one in essence and being with the Father while being distinct. Creation, as in the case with the Arians, would result in a lesser and distinct being. However, generation produces like with like, communicating the nature of one to the other. He writes, “Everything which is generated receives from the generator the nature of the generator.”<sup>220</sup> In generation, the Father communicates the eternal, divine, and immutable simple nature to the Son, and thus the Son is what the Father is: God. Further, the Son’s generation does not indicate potency to act, violating simplicity, in God because it is not a material generation but an intelligible one as the Word is an emanation of the intellect.<sup>221</sup> Since God is simple, and is identical to His essence, the nature of the Father and Son are the same.<sup>222</sup>

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<sup>219</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 4.10.9.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid., 4.8.5.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid., 4.14.4.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid., 4.7.11.



In the late Medieval era, DDS continued to be used and assumed with very little revision.<sup>223</sup> Even into the era of the Reformation, simplicity was a normative assumption in trinitarian theology, and trinitarian theology itself experienced little new development but stood in continuity with the received tradition. John Calvin's main use of simplicity was to argue for the doctrine of the Trinity. He insisted that God is "simple and undivided, and contained in himself entire, in full perfection, without partition or diminution."<sup>224</sup> The persons of the Trinity, then, are eternal and equal hypostases, subsistences, or persons, but not three distinct beings. He writes, "When we profess to believe in one God, by the name of God is understood the one simple essence, comprehending three persons or hypostases; and, accordingly, whenever the name of God is used indefinitely, the Son and Spirit, not less than the Father, is meant."<sup>225</sup>

In what manner the Father and Son are Father and Son is a complicated question in Calvin. On the one hand, Calvin strongly affirms the Son is eternal and eternally Son. On the other hand, Calvin went to great pains to affirm the full deity of the Son in arguing that the Son is God of Himself (*autotheos*). But Calvin himself reconciles these when he states that the Son, as God, is *autotheos*, but in relation to the Father, He is Son. So, Calvin, contrary to the concerns of some, does not deny eternal generation but affirms that the Son is *autotheos* as God and relationally Son.<sup>226</sup>

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<sup>223</sup> Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:53.

<sup>224</sup> Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 110.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid., 127.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid.

Calvin intentionally developed his doctrine of the Trinity against critics of Christianity.<sup>227</sup> Simplicity guarantees that the Son is consubstantial and *homoousios* with the Father (against Arianism), that the persons are genuinely distinct (against Sabellianism), and that they are distinct as subsistences in God, rather than as three distinct beings (against tri-theism). Simplicity, he argued, contradicts those who would posit multiple beings or three gods. Since there is one simple essence, the Persons do not multiply it or divide it.<sup>228</sup>

John Owen's doctrine of the Trinity also had much continuity with that of the Medieval scholastics who came before him. Like those who came before, Owen was deeply dependent upon his doctrine of simplicity to formulate a coherent trinitarianism and, also like those who came before, his statements regarding simplicity were developed in a polemic context. Owen developed many of his statements on God's triunity as a point-by-point response against the doctrine of the Socinians, a broad term for a group who rejected the doctrine of the Trinity, as well as simplicity.<sup>229</sup>

The Socinians had an affinity for "scripture only" language, a biblicism of sorts that rejected philosophical language about God and contended that only the express words of Scripture can be utilized.<sup>230</sup> Kelly Kapic writes that such an approach was characterized by "a thorough going biblicism that joined with an unflinching rationalism. They just wanted to follow the scriptures wherever they led, allowing

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<sup>227</sup> Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 109.

<sup>228</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>229</sup> Owen, "The Mystery of the Gospel Vindicated," 3.

<sup>230</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

‘unbiased’ human reason to illumine the path.”<sup>231</sup> This led to, among other things, a denial of trinitarianism for Unitarianism and a denial of the deity of Christ.<sup>232</sup> As their Racovian Catechism states, “the essence of God is one, not in kind, but in number. Wherefore it cannot, in any way, contain a plurality of persons, since a person is nothing else than an individual intelligent essence.”<sup>233</sup> They argued that an essence can only admit of one person and they rejected the consubstantial language of the Nicene Creed and other formulations, including the concepts of the trinity, God’s incomprehensibility, God’s simplicity, and the Son’s eternal generation.<sup>234</sup>

For the Socinians, then, only God the Father is truly God. He is located physically, with body and shape, and limitedly in heaven.<sup>235</sup> Therefore, if only the Father is God and is in heaven, Christ was, for them, not an eternal being, but a creature, God in title as begotten by God only in the incarnation and as the Father’s messiah, but not God in essence, in spite of the scriptural affirmations of His divine attributes.<sup>236</sup> It was in light of these attributes attributed to Christ, which are clearly divine, that the Socinians denied simplicity and argued that God’s attributes are not

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<sup>231</sup> Kelly M. Kapic, “The Spirit as Gift: Exploration in John Owen’s Pneumatology,” in *The Ashgate Research Companion to John Owen’s Theology*, ed. Kelly M. Kapic and Mark Jones (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012), 116.

<sup>232</sup> Willem J. Van Asselt, *Introduction to Reformed Scholasticism* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2011), 136.

<sup>233</sup> Thomas Rees, trans., *The Racovian Catechism* (London, UK: Longman, 1818), 33.

<sup>234</sup> Owen, “The Mystery of the Gospel Vindicated,” 57-58.

<sup>235</sup> Petrus Van Mastricht, *Theoretical-Practical Theology: Faith in the Triune God*, vol. 2, ed. Joel R. Beeke and Michael T. Spangler, trans. Todd M. Rester (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2019), 145.

<sup>236</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:176-77.

identical to His essence, but distinct and communicable, and that God can change in taking on new attributes.<sup>237</sup>

In response, Owen affirmed that God is absolutely simple.<sup>238</sup> Only in this way can God be first, supreme, and independent. The attributes of God are not additions to God or compositions in Him, nor are they distinct from His divine essence.<sup>239</sup> Further, because Scripture identifies the Son as God, He must then subsist as God and God subsists in Him. But if He is not the Father or the Spirit, then this one God must subsist in three persons rather than there being three gods. The same is true of the Father and the Spirit.<sup>240</sup> God is one in respect to “nature, substance, essence, Godhead, or divine being”; but He subsists as three persons (hypostases): the Father, Son, and Spirit.<sup>241</sup>

This simple essence unites the persons, who are “nothing but the divine essence, upon the account of an especial property, subsisting in an especial manner.”<sup>242</sup> The Father is Father by virtue of begetting, the Son by virtue of being begotten, and the Spirit by virtue of proceeding from Father and Son.<sup>243</sup> These three persons share all the divine attributes by virtue of the divine essence and act *ad extra*

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<sup>237</sup> Van Mastricht, *Theoretical-Practical Theology*, 2:122. See also Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:255.

<sup>238</sup> Owen, “The Mystery of the Gospel Vindicated,” 72.

<sup>239</sup> Ibid.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid., 72-73.

<sup>241</sup> Owen, “The Doctrine of the Holy Trinity Explained and Vindicated,” 378.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid., 407.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid., 405.

in creation distinctly according to a particular manner, but without division. Thus, simplicity helps the exegete understand the totality of what Scripture says rather than seeking verses in isolation.

Owen also went to great lengths to affirm the eternal generation of the Son over and against the Socinians. While they contended that the Father beget the Son by the Spirit in the incarnation alone, Owen argued that this generation must reflect eternal relations of origin. Not only is this, in truth, the plain teaching of Scripture, he argued, but without an eternal Son, the Father is not eternally Father.<sup>244</sup>

Finally, in Francis Turretin's *Elenctic Theology*, a work focused on defending the claims of the Christian faith, he relied heavily upon DDS in his formulation of the Trinity as well. Turretin taught that God is one in simple being and three in persons. These persons are distinct and yet are identical in nature.<sup>245</sup> These persons are not parts of the whole, a species of a genus, or multiple substances; rather, they are modes of subsisting and are distinguished by their personal modes of begetting, being begotten, or proceeding.<sup>246</sup>

Turretin's understanding of the Trinity, much like Owen before him, was developed in direct opposition to critics like polytheists, the Socinians, and the tritheists. Against those who would posit multiple gods, he reasoned that simplicity ensures God's perfection. Two beings cannot be perfect because they would both be

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<sup>244</sup> Owen, "The Doctrine of the Holy Trinity Explained and Vindicated," 382.

<sup>245</sup> Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 1:265.

<sup>246</sup> Ibid., 1:272.

infinite and all powerful, which would contradict each other.<sup>247</sup> Against the tri-theists, he argued that, because God is simple, He cannot be three beings. Rather, each person partakes of the same simple divine essence.<sup>248</sup> Against the Socinians, Turretin affirmed the eternal reality, deity, and distinction of the Father, Son, and Spirit. Because God is simple, all that God is is shared among these three so that, with the exemption of their personal mode of subsistence, they are identical.<sup>249</sup>

For each of these apologists, DDS was necessary to safeguard Christianity's monotheism against polytheism and tri-theism on the one hand and against denials of the reality of the distinction of the persons on the other. It is no overstatement to say that without DDS, the Church would not have a meaningful doctrine of the Trinity today.

### **Divine Simplicity and Anti-Pantheistic Arguments**

A final argument to be considered in this survey is the use of DDS against pantheism, the belief that equates God with creation, elevating creation to the status of divinity. Norman Geisler lists five specific versions of pantheism that have been affirmed through history: absolute pantheism, emanational pantheism, multilevel pantheism, modal pantheism, and developmental pantheism.<sup>250</sup> These groups include thinkers such as Parmenides, Plotinus, Spinoza, and Hegel, and philosophies and

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<sup>247</sup> Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 1:183.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid., 1:265.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid.

<sup>250</sup> Norman L. Geisler and Paul D. Feinberg, *Introduction to Philosophy: A Christian Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1980), 278-79.

theologies such as Stoicism, Taoism, and process theology. To varying degrees, they emphasized the connection, and even identity, of God with creation, collapsing the creator/creature distinction and often taught that creation was the body of God's form.

However, apologists responded by denying the identification of God with creation on the grounds of simplicity. Augustine, for example, argued against those who worship parts of creation or creation as a whole, turning creation into an idol.<sup>251</sup> But because God has no parts and is simple, eternal, and unchanging, creation's elements cannot be parts of God. Creation, rather, consisting of parts, was made by God; it is not identified with Him.

Likewise, Aquinas argued that, though God is the necessary cause of all being, He is not the formal being of all things.<sup>252</sup> Against those who would argue that God is Himself the being of all creation, which would equate creation with God, Aquinas argued there is distinction between God and creatures and the two are not identical. Though God is the cause and ground of creation and though He sustains and works in creation, He is not identical with it. Aquinas' argument for this assertion, following Aristotle, is that creation, which can be differentiated, is divided into substance and accidents. Creation begins, changes, becomes, and dissolves. God, however, being simple, lacks all accidents and is pure form, substance, and essence. God does not begin, change, become, or dissolve. Therefore, God is not identified with His creation.

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<sup>251</sup> Augustine, *Of True Religion*, trans. J. H. S. Burleigh (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 259-60.

<sup>252</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 1.26.

In fact, Aquinas argues that, of the four kinds of causes (material, efficient, final, and formal), God is everything except our material cause. Creation is made by God, through God, and for God, but not out of God.<sup>253</sup> For Aquinas, God is that which is not only a being, but truly is being itself. All creation depends upon God through participation. Creation is what it is by and in imitation of God, yet it is not God. In this way, Aquinas is able to attribute, in true Colossians 1:17 fashion, both initial and continual causation to God, while also distinguishing creator from creation.

### **Conclusion**

DDS enabled historical theologians to engage their opponents apologetically and polemically. Though not every apologist utilized simplicity explicitly or even at all, those who did were able to ground their arguments for the existence and nature of God, the coherence of the Trinity, and the separation of God from creation. However, with the rise of rationalism, nominalism, process theism, theistic personalism/mutualism, and social and relational trinitarianisms from the late Medieval period into the modern era came redefinitions and rejections of DDS and a rejection of classical theology, but at great cost. Theology was separated from metaphysics, and faith was often separated from reason.<sup>254</sup>

This, then, is the argument of this chapter: Modern apologists who reject or redefine DDS are out of step with the history of apologetics and undermine their own arguments. The arguments that modern apologetics seek to use, historically, relied on

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<sup>253</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.44.4.

<sup>254</sup> Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:66.



DDS to work. By denying DDS, these apologists are rejecting a crucial link in the chain that made these arguments successful. Without DDS, apologists from the early Church through the Reformation lose the force of many arguments. Without DDS, God is not the first cause but stands in need of a cause because He is dependent upon external, abstract objects or concepts to be what He is. Without DDS, God is not goodness itself, but is simply the one who does more good things than creatures. Without DDS, the Trinity is not one Being that is God, but inescapably becomes three beings/gods and we are left without the ability to understand the eternal relations of Father, Son, and Spirit.

The denial of a classical model of simplicity leaves apologists with a God who is far more understandable, relatable, and creaturely, but it also destroys the foundation of classical apologetics. On the contrary, a robust, deep commitment to DDS enabled historical apologists to defend the claims of Christianity and to polemically engage their opponents. Simplicity was not a hindrance to their apologetics; something to be apologized for. Rather, simplicity grounded their apologetics. To borrow the arguments of history while denying the commitment to DDS that grounded them is to cut one's legs out from under them. In the chapters to come, this idea will be presented in various case studies. The next chapters will examine two contemporary arguments for the Christian faith and will show, first, how such arguments struggle or fail when they deny DDS and, second, how a commitment to DDS serves to strengthen such arguments.

## CHAPTER 5

### DIVINE SIMPLICITY AND COSMOLOGICAL ARGUMENTS: A TEST CASE

#### **Introduction**

This dissertation has argued that a classical understanding of divine simplicity provides an essential foundation for apologetic and polemic arguments for the Christian faith. The previous chapters argued for the truth of DDS and presented a historical case that this doctrine was used polemically and apologetically in the history of the Church. Apologists throughout history relied on DDS, explicitly or implicitly, as an essential link in the chain of many classical arguments for the Christian faith and against non-Christian religions. This chapter will be the first of two case studies demonstrating how contemporary polemics and apologetics might be grounded in a classical DDS. In this first case study, the implications of DDS for an argument against atheism will be shown.

Christianity declares unequivocally that God is the first cause and creator of all; that all things depend upon God and He depends upon nothing. Genesis 1, John 1:1-3, and Romans 1 are clear that God is the creator of all that exists, and that all creation depends upon God. Paul is explicit in affirming God's status as creator when, in Romans 11:36, he states, "For from Him, and through Him, and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen." The ancient creeds also affirmed God's status as creator as well. The Apostle's Creed, for instance, states, "I believe in God

the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.”<sup>1</sup> Historically, to be a Christian meant to affirm the dependence of creation upon God while affirming God’s independence as creator.

As shown in the previous chapter, classical apologetics and polemics against atheism, particularly in regard to first cause arguments, historically relied heavily upon DDS to succeed. For God to be the first cause required that He be non-composite so as not to depend upon anything outside of Himself to be or to be what He is. Only in this way, it was thought, could God truly be first, necessary, and non-contingent. Edward Feser writes concerning simplicity and first cause arguments: “Those arguments all entail that there must be a cause which is in no way a mixture of actuality and potentiality or of essence and existence, or in any other way composite. As arguments for a First Cause, they are *ipso facto* arguments for an absolutely simple or noncomposite cause.”<sup>2</sup> For God to be God, He cannot depend upon that which is not God to be. Likewise, David Bentley Hart states confidently concerning DDS, “it seems obvious to me that a denial of divine simplicity is tantamount to atheism, and the vast preponderance of metaphysical tradition concurs with that judgment.”<sup>3</sup> If God is not simple, He is not God above creation but is a creature within.

However, though DDS was a firmly held belief in historical apologetics, many contemporary philosophers, theologians, and apologists are attempting to use

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<sup>1</sup> Leith, *Creeds of the Churches*, 24.

<sup>2</sup> Feser, *Five Proofs for the Existence of God*, 195.

<sup>3</sup> David Bentley Hart, *The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), 128.

historical cosmological arguments without DDS. Hart goes on to state that, in spite of the traditional use of DDS, “there are today Christian philosophers of an analytic bent who are quite content to cast the doctrine aside, either in whole or in part.”<sup>4</sup> Numerous contemporary apologists have formulated various versions of first cause arguments without the assumption of DDS because they see serious problems with the doctrine itself and because they believe that the doctrine is unnecessary to the arguments.

This chapter will argue that DDS is a necessary component of successful cosmological arguments.<sup>5</sup> In order to demonstrate this thesis, first, this chapter will present a contemporary version of a cosmological argument offered by William Lane Craig, who emphatically rejects a classical understanding of DDS. Second, it will present objections to the argument relevant to this discussion to show how, without DDS, the argument struggles to succeed. Third, it will present a presentation of Thomas Aquinas’ cosmological arguments, rooted in simplicity. Finally, it will present a synthesis of Craig and Aquinas that strengthens both and successfully argues for the existence of a divine first cause.

### **William Lane Craig’s *Kalam* Cosmological Argument**

William Lane Craig, arguably the most well-known living apologist, has made his mark on the world of apologetics largely due to his formulation of the *Kalam* Cosmological Argument. This argument was the subject of his doctorate in philosophy under John Hick at the University of Birmingham, and he has used and defended it in

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<sup>4</sup> Hart, *The Experience of God*, 128.

<sup>5</sup> Numerous other scholars have recognized this point in recent years with several important publications. For example, see O’Conner, “Simplicity and Creation.”

numerous books and articles and in many debates.<sup>6</sup> This *Kalam* version, from the Arabic word for speech, is rooted in many historical forms, particularly Islamic formulations such as that from Al-Ghazali, who states, “Every being which begins has a cause for its beginning; now the world is a being which begins; therefore, it possesses a cause for its beginning.”<sup>7</sup> Essentially, the argument is a case for a transcendent cause beyond the universe. Craig’s presentation of the argument proceeds as follows.

### 1. Everything that Begins to Exist Has a Cause

The major premise of the *Kalam* is that everything that begins to exist, that is, that comes into being from non-being, is caused to be by something else.<sup>8</sup> All things that begin to exist (i.e., contingent things) must have a sufficient reason for their existence. Things cannot come into existence out of nothing because nothing has no causal powers or properties. For something to come into being and to be a certain thing, there must be an explanation of why that thing came into being and why it is that kind of thing.

Craig argues that this first principle is intuitively true.<sup>9</sup> When a magician pulls a rabbit out of a hat, he has argued, the audience knows something sneaky is going on.

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<sup>6</sup> Forrest, Chatraw, and McGrath, *The History of Apologetics*, 755. A list of the most important works by him on this subject include William Lane Craig, *The Kalam Cosmological Argument*, ed. John Hick (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1979); William Lane Craig, *The Cosmological Argument from Plato to Leibniz* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1980); Craig, *Reasonable Faith*; William Lane Craig and J. P. Moreland, eds., *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012); and Moreland and Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*.

<sup>7</sup> Craig and Moreland, *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology*, 101-2.

<sup>8</sup> Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 111.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

That rabbit did not truly come out of nothing. Rather, a trick has been played. This principle is foundational for science itself. Science is a search for causes and it assumes this philosophical principle. If this principle is denied, science itself breaks down and there is no explanation for why anything and everything cannot come into existence uncaused. Even the empiricist David Hume, who rejected certainty regarding causation on the grounds that causation is not observed but inductively inferred, acknowledged that this did not mean that causation was not still at work. He states, “But allow me to tell you that I never asserted so absurd a proposition as that anything might arise without a cause: I only maintained that our certainty of the falsehood of that proposition proceeded neither from intuition nor demonstration; but from another source.”<sup>10</sup>

Though this principle seems philosophically self-evident, various objections have been offered. Craig generally responds to three. First, some argue that this principle of causation applies to material objects in the universe but not necessarily or self-evidently to the universe itself.<sup>11</sup> In response, Craig points out that his premise is not a scientific one, but a metaphysical one. It is not a scientific law that applies only within a set of particular conditions. Rather, it is a universal, philosophical principle that being does not, and cannot in principle, come from non-being because non-being, literally nothing, has no power to produce or to actualize anything.

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<sup>10</sup> David Hume, *The Letters of David Hume*, ed. J. Y. T. Greig, vol. 1 (Clarendon: Oxford University Press, 1932), 1:187.

<sup>11</sup> Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 113-14.

Others argue that if everything needs a cause, then the first cause (presumably God) would need a cause as well.<sup>12</sup> However, this objection misunderstands the premise. It is not the case that all things have a cause, for some things, Craig will argue, are metaphysically necessary. What is intuitively correct, then, is that things that begin to exist are contingent and therefore cannot be metaphysically necessary. Such things must have a cause to bring them into existence and to determine their essence.

Craig also responds to the challenge from quantum physics. On certain interpretations of quantum physics, such as the Copenhagen Interpretation,<sup>13</sup> particles at the quantum, sub-atomic levels are said to come in and out of existence out of a quantum vacuum, seemingly and unintuitively at random and uncaused. Such particles are then said to be evidence that at least some things can begin to exist without a cause. But this objection, Craig maintains, is to misunderstand the issue.<sup>14</sup> First, such indeterministic interpretations of quantum particles are by no means proven or universally held. There are many interpretations that are offered to understand these mechanics that do not rule out causation, even if such causes are not fully known or understood.

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<sup>12</sup> Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 112-14. Bertrand Russell asserted this proposition as the basis of his own rejection of First Cause arguments. See Bertrand Russell, "Why I Am Not a Christian," in *Why I Am Not a Christian and Other Essays on Religion and Related Subjects* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957), 6-7.

<sup>13</sup> In this interpretation of quantum physics, events at the quantum, sub-atomic level are said to be indeterministic and governed by probabilities. See Jan Faye, "Copenhagen Interpretation of Quantum Mechanics," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy Archive*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Winter 2019, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2019/entries/qm-copenhagen>.

<sup>14</sup> Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 114-16.

Second, even if such interpretations were correct, quantum vacuums are not nothing in the absolute sense used by philosophers and in the sense necessary to account for the emergence of all matter, time, and space. Rather, Craig writes, on such interpretations, particles are said to “arise as spontaneous fluctuations of the energy contained in the sub-atomic vacuum, which constitutes an indeterministic cause of their origin.”<sup>15</sup> As physicist Lawrence Krauss admits after declaring that quantum physics gives us something from nothing, “‘nothing’ means empty but preexisting space combined with fixed and well-known laws of physics.”<sup>16</sup> In other words, the nothing that produced everything is not really nothing, it is something; namely, space and energy. Such events are not something from nothing but are the result of unknown processes of energy in space.

## 2. The Universe Began to Exist

The minor premise of this argument, though it occupies the most space in his writings, is that the universe is a contingent thing that came into existence.<sup>17</sup> The *Kalam* version argues explicitly that the universe is temporal and therefore needs a sufficient cause.<sup>18</sup> Craig uses two lines of evidence to support this premise, one philosophical and one scientific. First, philosophically, he argues from the impossibility of an actual infinite number of things and an infinite number of events.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 114-15.

<sup>16</sup> Lawrence M. Krauss, *A Universe from Nothing: Why There Is Something Rather than Nothing* (New York: Atria Books, 2012), 170.

<sup>17</sup> Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 116-50.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 96-97.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.



While infinity is certainly a mathematically intelligible concept, it fails in the actual world. An infinite series of events, for example, would lead to the conclusion that the present moment could never come to pass because such a moment would have to cross infinity to arrive.<sup>20</sup>

Craig's second line of arguments for the beginning of the universe are taken from modern physics. He argues that both the expansion of the universe and the second law of thermodynamics point to a beginning of all matter, time, and space from nothing: a creation *ex nihilo*.<sup>21</sup> The expansion of the universe, evidenced from things like red-shift in distant galaxies with the principles of General Relativity, shows that space itself, with all its matter, is in a state of expansion. Since, according to General Relativity, time and space are relatively related, reversing such an expansion would lead to increasing density to the point of a singularity that marks an absolute edge to space and time as well as matter and energy. Craig cites John Barrow and Frank Tipler when they state, "At this singularity, space and time came into existence; literally nothing existed before the singularity, so, if the Universe originated at such a singularity, we would truly have a creation *ex nihilo*."<sup>22</sup>

This model, usually referred to as the Big Bang, but more technically called the Friedman-Lemaitre model, has become the standard model in cosmology. Though many other models, such as steady-state models, oscillating universe models, and

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<sup>20</sup> Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 124.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 126-27.

<sup>22</sup> John Barrow and Frank Tipler, *The Anthropic Cosmological Principle* (Clarendon: Oxford University Press, 1986), 442.

multiverse models such as string theory, attempt to avoid this conclusion, Craig demonstrates that they all fail to avoid this singularity and the conclusion that the universe had an absolute beginning. He states, “The history of twentieth-century cosmogony has, in one sense, been a series of failed attempts to craft acceptable non-standard models of the expanding universe in such a way to avert the absolute beginning predicated by the Standard Model.”<sup>23</sup>

The second law of thermodynamics, the second of Craig’s scientific supports, also points to a beginning to the universe.<sup>24</sup> Craig summarizes the law as follows: “Processes taking place in a closed system always tend toward a state of equilibrium.”<sup>25</sup> Given that the universe is a gigantic closed system, with nothing outside of the universe to increase the energy inside of it, this process of energy conversion cannot continue indefinitely. Much like a bank account will eventually spend all its money if spending is happening and no money is added, or a cup of coffee will reach room temperature if heat is not added to the cup, the universe will die of heat death eventually by entering a state of equilibrium at which no change, life, or processes are possible because no usable energy is available to convert. However, given that the universe does not currently exist in a state of equilibrium, the past cannot be eternal.

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<sup>23</sup> Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 139.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 140-44.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

### 3. Therefore, the Universe Has a Cause

Given the prior two premises, the conclusion logically follows that there is a cause to the universe, and thus to all matter, time, space, and energy.<sup>26</sup> But what could possibly cause the universe? Here, many atheists and materialist philosophers argue that the universe may just be a brute fact that, ultimately, caused itself. Daniel Dennett argues that the universe created itself in the “ultimate bootstrapping trick.”<sup>27</sup> Likewise, Stephen Hawking contends that, given physical laws like gravity, “the universe can, and will, create itself out of nothing.”<sup>28</sup> In response, Craig, citing agreement with Aquinas, points out the absurdity of self-creation.<sup>29</sup> A thing has to exist to have casual properties to create anything. One is then back at the beginning of positing an uncaused universe from nothing or a transcendentally caused universe from nothing.

### 4. The Divine Nature of the First Cause

Many critics of the *Kalam* version of cosmological arguments will reason that all this argument does is point to a cause to the universe, but not necessarily to God. This is, of course, true on the face of it, but Craig takes the next step by asking what properties a cause must possess to be sufficient for causing the universe.<sup>30</sup> As the cause of all matter, time, space, and energy, the first cause exists without reference to

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<sup>26</sup> Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 150-52.

<sup>27</sup> Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (New York: Viking, 2006), 244.

<sup>28</sup> Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow, *The Grand Design* (New York: Bantam Books Trade, 2012), 180.

<sup>29</sup> Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 152.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 152-54.

matter, time, or space, and thus must be immaterial, timeless and eternal, changeless, spaceless, powerful, and uncaused, otherwise there would be an infinite regress of causes and the universe would never be caused.

Further, Craig argues, the first cause must be personal for at least three reasons. First, the cause cannot be a scientific, impersonal force for there are no scientific laws to govern that which caused all scientific laws and forces and exists outside of and before space and time. Second, only minds and abstract objects exist independently of matter, but abstract objects (like concepts or mathematical objects) are not causal (nor does Craig think they exist in the proper sense, which will be discussed later). Third, because the effect of the universe is temporal and the cause must be eternal, the cause existed without the effect and thus possessed the power of choice rather than being merely an impersonal effect in a series of effects.

Last, Craig also argues that the cause must be singular because the universe, though including many parts, is one effect from the Big Bang.<sup>31</sup> Utilizing Ockham's Razor, Craig argues that more than one cause is unnecessarily complicated. Like Aquinas, Craig ends his investigation of first cause properties with the conclusion that these properties are possessed by what we commonly understand to be God: a personal being who is the first and ultimate cause and ground of all.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 155.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 154-56.

## An Atheistic Objection

After his cosmological argument, Craig argues for God as not only creator, but designer. The universe demonstrates incredible fine-tuning in terms of physical laws for life to be possible. Hawking, for example, states, “The remarkable fact is that the values of these numbers (i.e, the constants of physics) seem to have been very finely adjusted to make possible the development of life.”<sup>33</sup> This fine-tuning, Craig argues, is either due to physical necessity, chance, or design.<sup>34</sup> This apparent design would be due to physical necessity if, and only if, the physical laws that exist could not have been different. But it is obvious that they could have been other than they are. Further, the extreme improbability of a life-permitting universe, widely acknowledged by physicists,<sup>35</sup> makes chance entirely implausible.<sup>36</sup> Craig infers, then, that these laws are most plausibly the result of actual design and are evidence for a cosmic designer.

However, Craig notes, atheist and scientist Richard Dawkins, in his book *The God Delusion*, objects that God cannot be the kind of designer necessary for such fine-tuning, nor can He be the kind of first cause necessary for the universe we

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<sup>33</sup> Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to Black Holes* (New York: Bantam Books, 1988), 125.

<sup>34</sup> Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 161-71.

<sup>35</sup> Physicist Lee Smolin estimates that the likelihood of the physical constants in the universe producing life is something like 1 in  $10^{229}$ . Lee Smolin, *The Life of the Cosmos* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 325.

<sup>36</sup> To support the idea of chance, many cosmologists have appealed to the concept of a multiverse. If there are an infinite number of universes, it is argued, the likelihood of a life-permitting universe grows. However, a multiverse is in no way incompatible with a theistic view of creation *ex nihilo* because God would be in the position of creating such multiverses and fine-tuning them. Further, Craig argues that there is no actual evidence for such other universes; indeed, in principle, there could not be. He also contends that if this universe were part of a multiverse ensemble, it would be far more probable that this world would be ordered very differently. See Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 166-70.

observe.<sup>37</sup> He argues that God is much too complex a figure to be a designing first cause. Dawkins concedes that, for anything to exist, there must have been a simple cause, but he does so through his evolutionary filter. All things have come about through natural processes in which simple things grow in complexity through natural selection, which is “genuinely simple.”<sup>38</sup>

By contrast, Dawkins maintains that God cannot be a simple being, given all that He is said to be and do. He writes, “A God capable of continuously monitoring and controlling the individual status of every particle in the universe *cannot* be simple. His existence is going to need a mammoth explanation in its own right.”<sup>39</sup> Given all that this designer is said to be doing, such as creating, designing, sustaining, supervising, doing miracles, answering prayers, dying for sins, and so on, He cannot be a simple being, for such a being would need to be incredibly advanced and complex to do so many things. So, while Dawkins agrees that the first cause must be simple, he argues that this cause cannot be God because a simple entity cannot do all that God is said to do and, if God is complex, He Himself needs a designer, leading to the “What caused God?” objection.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 171.

<sup>38</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 150-51. The incoherence of such a statement should be noted. A process like natural selection does not, itself, generate complexity. Such selection favors complex organisms in particular environments but does not create them.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

Though Dawkins is not a philosopher, he echoes various philosophers. Hume argues against the idea of design by arguing that a designer would itself need a designer, leading to an infinite regress.<sup>41</sup> Likewise, philosopher Colin McGinn writes:

The divine creator must himself exhibit design; he is the complex being *par excellence*. He certainly cannot have arisen by chance. But then, since design requires a designer, we need a being who can create God! Very well, let us postulate such a being, a super-God. But wait, this super-God himself exhibits design, and hence requires a super-super-God to create *him*. And so it goes on, *ad infinitum*. The hypothesis of God simply pushes the question back, either because he himself has complex design or because he is himself a conscious being. The proposed explanation simply presupposes what it was intended to explain.<sup>42</sup>

Further, Hume argues that there is no reason to only posit one designer.<sup>43</sup> Michael Martin also argues this point against Craig's view that there is only one personal agent, stating, "For all he shows, there may have been trillions of personal agents involved in the creation."<sup>44</sup>

Craig responds to Dawkins' argument by first pointing out that, to be the best inductive explanation of some phenomena, an explanation does not need to itself have an explanation.<sup>45</sup> He uses the illustration of archaeology to demonstrate his point. If an archaeologist were to find something in the dirt that was clearly produced by some human, they would not need to explain how that human came to be to recognize the

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<sup>41</sup> David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Richard H. Popkin, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998), 29-31. Hume rejected the idea of God's simplicity because it made God unknowable, making such affirmations indistinguishable from atheism.

<sup>42</sup> Colin McGinn, *The Mysterious Flame: Conscious Minds in a Material World* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 86-87.

<sup>43</sup> Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, 36.

<sup>44</sup> Michael Martin, *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 103.

<sup>45</sup> Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 171.

work of design. Thus, Dawkins' contention that the design argument fails because it does not explain the Designer fails.

Second, Craig concedes the principle of simplicity to Dawkins in affirming that the cause of the complexity of the universe must be simple. However, unlike Dawkins, he denies that God is complex.<sup>46</sup> Craig affirms that God, as an immaterial being, lacks all physical complexity and exists as an unembodied mind. God may have knowledge of complex ideas and entities, but that does not mean that God Himself must be complex. Dawkins, Craig maintains, gets confused on this point in conflating a simple mind with simple ideas.

### **The Simple Hole in Craig's Argument**

Craig's *Kalam* argument, in many ways, created a renaissance of interest in Christian apologetics, combining philosophical deduction with scientific induction. His first premise, that everything that begins to exist has a cause, is obvious and self-evident, and those who deny it seem to do so for theistic, or rather anti-theistic, reasons. Even the objection of quantum physics fails to undermine this premise because causation still applies at the sub-atomic level even if such causes are statistical and based upon probabilities.<sup>47</sup> The second premise, that the universe began to exist, seems to be philosophically and scientifically justified.<sup>48</sup> Despite protests and speculations that an actual infinite number of events in the past is potentially possible,

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<sup>46</sup> Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 171-72.

<sup>47</sup> Feser, *Five Proofs for the Existence of God*, 262-64.

<sup>48</sup> This author recognizes that he is not a scientist by training and so he evaluates scientific claims as a layman. However, Craig's claims build upon what mainstream scientists have presented and therefore, to this layman, seem justified.



but just odd,<sup>49</sup> such a hypothesis strains credulity past the breaking point. An actual infinite series of events in the past would be impossible because there could never be a beginning point and thus no starting point. Nothing could begin if there was no beginning. Therefore, his conclusion, that the universe has a cause, follows logically and inescapably.

However, it is Craig's fourth step that creates a significant problem. He argues that the cause of all matter, time, and space must be immaterial, timeless and eternal, changeless, spaceless, powerful, uncaused, personal, and singular. Therefore, with Aquinas and others, he argues the cause is who is called "God." This step is justified and important. To make inferences from effect back to cause, contra Hume, is philosophically warranted in the absence of some defeater and each of these attributes seem to follow logically from the nature of the universe. The problem is that Craig, in his writings, rejects DDS and cannot successfully support these contentions, given his Theology Proper. By arguing for God's physical simplicity, Craig is able to avoid most of Dawkins' objection to God as the designer. But while affirming aspects of simplicity, Craig denies the metaphysical aspects of this doctrine that make many of these first cause properties possible.

Craig has a nuanced relationship with DDS. On the one hand, he is not shy about rejecting the doctrine, arguing that it has no biblical support or philosophical

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<sup>49</sup> Martin, *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification*, 104. Oppy, in his responses to Craig's argument, argues that we have no reason to suppose that actual infinities do not exist and even argues that Craig's argument would make the concept of God incoherent because God is supposed to be infinite in power and to know an infinite number of things. See Graham Oppy, *Arguing about Gods* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 140. However, this confuses the point. Craig has not argued that infinity is not possible, but that an actual infinite series of events in the past is impossible.

coherence.<sup>50</sup> Yet, though he is opposed to DDS in one sense, in another sense, he admits that there are aspects of the doctrine that are important.<sup>51</sup> He states, “Far from being a misguided attempt to save the cosmological and design arguments, simplicity is one of the classic attributes of God!”<sup>52</sup> A few words later, Craig is explicit in explaining which aspects of DDS he affirms or rejects. He states:

Thomas upholds an extraordinarily strong doctrine of divine simplicity, arguing that God is utterly without composition of any sort. . . . I reject Thomas’s very strong view in favor of a weaker form of divine simplicity. I see no reason, for example, to think that God’s essence and existence are the same. Still, as a mind without a body, God is amazingly simple.<sup>53</sup>

Craig’s contention is not with simplicity *per se*, but with a Thomistic understanding of simplicity. While Craig affirms God’s physical simplicity, that God lacks physical parts, he rejects a commitment to metaphysical simplicity. This is because Craig is an anti-realist in his metaphysic, and he rejects constituent ontologies.<sup>54</sup> He does not believe that properties are actually existing things of which a being is composed. In this sense, all beings are metaphysically simple. His motivation for this is to avoid the problem that abstract objects create for God’s aseity. If some abstract objects, properties, and concepts—such as numbers, moral qualities, colors, or ideas—really exist as eternal and uncreated things, can God exist as the independent, sovereign creator of all? How should their relation to God be understood?

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<sup>50</sup> Moreland and Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*, 524.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 525-26.

<sup>52</sup> Craig and Gorra, *A Reasonable Response*, 173.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> Craig, *God over All*, 7-8. Also see Craig, *God and Abstract Objects*, 116.

First, one could argue, as Peter Van Inwagen<sup>55</sup> and Alvin Plantinga do,<sup>56</sup> that such uncreated abstract objects and properties are Platonic Forms that exist eternally and independently of God. However, Craig rightly sees that this really does lead to problems for aseity.<sup>57</sup> If abstract objects really exist as truly as physical objects, and yet they are uncreated, God is not the creator of all things, and one must ask from where these abstract objects have come and how God can exist *a se* while being defined by them.

Second, one could argue that God created these abstract objects. Moral qualities, numbers, colors, and ideas are what they are because God created them that way. This view would maintain God's aseity and sovereignty, but it is incoherent. If these objects and properties exist as abstract created objects, they would not exist unless God created them. But then, at least in the case of moral and ontological properties, God becomes the creator of His own properties (self-creation and the bootstrapping problem).<sup>58</sup>

Third, God could be identical with His properties (i.e., be metaphysically simple) and so abstract objects really exist but exist in the mind of God (conceptualism) and God's properties are just the essence of God. Craig rejects this premise, however, because he thinks this leads to the various problems of DDS,

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<sup>55</sup> Peter Van Inwagen, "A Theory of Properties," in *Oxford Studies in Metaphysics*, vol. 1, ed. Dean W. Zimmerman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 107-38.

<sup>56</sup> Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?*, 35.

<sup>57</sup> Copan and Craig, *Creation out of Nothing*, 172-73.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

including making God a property, equating various properties with one another, and making God's action necessary rather than free, a conclusion he finds unacceptable.<sup>59</sup>

Given that he thinks these previous options are incoherent or unintelligible, Craig offers another option: anti-realism. In his view, abstract objects and properties are nominal ideas that have no ontology in themselves and do not exist apart from concrete particulars.<sup>60</sup> He believes that what others see as abstract objects are actually useful concepts that do not exist ontologically independently of things.<sup>61</sup> If properties and concepts are not abstract objects but merely nominal concepts, God does not need to create them and they do not compose Him. Craig believes this approach “evaporates” the objection of aseity.<sup>62</sup>

By holding to physical simplicity, Craig is able to answer part of Dawkins' objection. However, while Craig casts off metaphysical simplicity with little remorse, such a rejection creates significant problems for his argument. While several could be mentioned,<sup>63</sup> this chapter will focus on one primary point: by rejecting metaphysical

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<sup>59</sup> Copan and Craig, *Creation out of Nothing*, 177-80.

<sup>60</sup> Craig, *God and Abstract Objects*, 116.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 200-201.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, x.

<sup>63</sup> Among the problems with Craig's rejection of DDS are his anti-realist commitments that universals do not exist in the proper sense. Rather, they are useful ways of talking about objects. But this destroys any ability to speak meaningfully of universals, such that even humanity itself cannot be a universal idea to which all humans properly belong. That universals exist truly in some sense is surely true. There is something really common to human nature, red objects, the number 2, goodness, justice, matter, and so on. These are not just scientific descriptions, nor are they simply human concepts. Feser has presented several arguments for a version of realism about universals, including the argument that universals exist because even if every red object in the universe were to be eradicated, redness would still be real and would be exemplified as soon as a red object was brought into existence. See Feser, *Five Proofs for the Existence of God*, 90. The same is true with other abstract objects and concepts. Further,

simplicity, Craig undermines his ability to ground the first cause attributes he wishes to affirm. As discussed in chapters 3 and 4, DDS is not only biblically and logically coherent, but throughout the history of the Church it was the foundation for arguing for the very attributes of God that Craig clearly wants to maintain.

God is simple without physical or metaphysical parts of which He is composed or upon which He depends. On this basis, the attributes Craig wishes to affirm are possible.<sup>64</sup> Because God is form without matter, He is immaterial and spaceless. Because, in Him, essence and existence are identical, such that He is that by which He exists, He exists necessarily and uncaused. Because He is act without potency and substance without accident, He does not change, become, or depend on anything external to Himself. His nature is therefore complete and *a se* and His power is without limit. Further, because He is pure act without potential, the personal nature of the first cause that Craig wishes to affirm is possible. God is not acted upon or forced to act or to be by an external force or thing, and so He is not a mere conduit of some other cause but is truly personal and acts from within rather than from without. Finally, because the cause is simple, there cannot be multiple first causes. Simple things, by definition, lack parts that can differ from other simple things. Therefore, there cannot be two first causes because there cannot be two simple beings.

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by rejecting a constituency model of ontology and arguing that, essentially, all living things are simple, Craig creates a problem for the Creator/creature distinction. If simplicity entails the various attributes mentioned in the following paragraph of this chapter, and all creatures are simple, then all creatures would possess these attributes.

<sup>64</sup> Feser notes these attributes to be true as well, arguing that if God is simple, He is singular, immutable, immaterial, eternal, non-abstract, purely actual, perfect, good, omnipotent, and omniscient. See Feser, *Five Proofs of the Existence of God*, 74-77.

Craig argues that each of these properties are essential to God. However, because he is an anti-realist and because he rejects constituent ontologies, what he does not mean is that they are identical to the essence of God or that God is somehow composed of them. Rather, he means that, for God to be God, it is essential that He have these properties. He argues that these are univocal concepts that apply to creature and God alike but at a much higher level in the case of God. It is, therefore, this chapter's contention that, by denying the metaphysical aspects of DDS, Craig's theology proper cannot consistently affirm the first cause attributes he wishes to (rightly) ascribe to God. Without DDS, Craig's affirmations of the attributes of the divine first cause are without foundation. It may be that God has each of these attributes essentially, but these attributes are not identical to God's essence. Craig's model still posits properties in God that are not identical to God and thus he defines God by what is not God.<sup>65</sup>

While it is true that such a first cause must demonstrate these attributes, Craig has no consistent way of affirming them. If God is not simple, then God is not pure act and His existence and essence are not identical, requiring someone or something to explain God's existence or to bring it about. If God is not simple, He cannot be changeless, timeless, or immaterial, for He would be a combination of act and potential (with aspects that are permanent and aspects that change), substance and accident, form and matter. By denying DDS, Craig's step from 3 to 4 in his argument

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<sup>65</sup> Duby, *Divine Simplicity: A Dogmatic Account*, 173.

is missing an essential chain link that enables the attributes he affirms. Simplicity requires these attributes, but these attributes also require simplicity.

All this, of course, is not to imply that if Craig merely tweaked his doctrine of simplicity, everything would be fine. While the classical version of DDS enables one to affirm many attributes that Craig also wishes to affirm, there are other attributes and realities that DDS entails, which, if affirmed, would turn Craig's entire system inside out. Craig's doctrine of simplicity flows out of his general theology, and if he were to affirm the strong (classical) version of DDS, he would have to affirm the other doctrines that flow from it and are entailed by it (God's pure actuality, eternity, impassibility, and the like). Further, he could no longer hold to his nominalism, relational ontology, or univocal predication, which is why Craig rejects a strong DDS in the first place, and would have to adopt, like Aquinas and others, a metaphysic of participation in which God and creature are related analogically and God is not only the temporal grounding of creation, but the continual grounding of it as well as being itself.

In fact, because he denies metaphysical simplicity, Craig redefines several of the very attributes he wishes to affirm. For example, though he affirms that the first cause is changeless and timeless, he argues that post-creation, God enters into time. In this, He does not change intrinsically or essentially, but He does take on extrinsic change.<sup>66</sup> Classical models of DDS would affirm that God is eternally Creator, Redeemer, and Actor because He is identical with His eternal decree and that such temporal effects do not represent change in God, either intrinsically or extrinsically.

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<sup>66</sup> William Lane Craig, "Timelessness and Omnitemporality," in *God and Time: Four Views*, ed. Gregory E. Ganssle (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2001), 156. See also Moreland and Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*, 526-27.

Rather, they represent the temporal effects of God's eternal nature and eternal act.<sup>67</sup> However, Craig argues that time changes God's relation to creatures and thus God becomes things He was not before.

### **Aquinas' Cosmological Arguments**

Craig presents his argument in contrast to that of Leibniz and Aquinas. He prefers Leibniz' argument for sufficient reason<sup>68</sup> and sees his own argument as something of a supplement to it.<sup>69</sup> He agrees with Aquinas that the attributes of the first cause are divine and belong properly to God.<sup>70</sup> He also agrees with him that the idea of a self-caused first cause is "metaphysically absurd."<sup>71</sup> A being, object, or law cannot create itself because it would have to have creative properties to be able to create, which would require it, in some sense, to already exist. He even affirms that Aquinas' argument would be more powerful if Aquinas had made explicit use of arguments against an eternal universe, for then God would not only be first in terms of explanatory power, but in terms of chronology as well.<sup>72</sup> However, while he has some affinities with Aquinas, Craig is sharply opposed to Thomas' reliance on DDS to formulate his cosmological argument.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> See Dolezal, *All That Is in God*, 98-104.

<sup>68</sup> Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, "On the Ultimate Origin of Things," in *Philosophical Essays*, trans. Roger Ariew and Daniel Garber (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989), 149-55.

<sup>69</sup> Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 111.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 154.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> Moreland and Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*, 468.



Aquinas presents his cosmological argument in various forms and writings. He is famous for his so-called “five ways,” developed in his *Summa Theologica*, which he claims demonstrate the existence of God. These arguments move from effect to cause, which is central for Aquinas’ theology that God is known through His works.<sup>74</sup> The first three of these ways—the argument from motion, the argument from efficient causes, and the argument from necessity—all constitute first cause arguments. In his *Summa Contra Gentiles*, explored in chapter 4 of this dissertation, Aquinas focused on his argument from motion. Whereas Craig’s argument explicitly assumes a temporal cause to the universe and argues from successive temporal causation, the Thomistic cosmological arguments argue for simultaneous causation (essentially ordered) rather than temporal causation (accidentally ordered)<sup>75</sup> and even allows for an eternal universe, though he himself rejects its eternality.<sup>76</sup>

Aquinas’ first way, his argument from motion, argues that there must be an unmoved first mover.<sup>77</sup> Some things are in motion, that is, some things move and change from potentiality to actuality. However, a thing cannot put itself in motion because a thing cannot be in both potentiality and in actuality in the same sense.

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<sup>74</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.2.2.2.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 1.46.2.7. This difference in causes might be compared to the difference between a chair being the cause of the one sitting (essentially ordered) and a chair maker in a factory (accidental cause).

<sup>76</sup> Aquinas acknowledges that a beginning to the universe would make God’s existence much more probable. He further argues explicitly that the universe is not eternal and cannot be on theological grounds. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.46.1. However, given that he did not think the beginning of the universe could be effectively demonstrated, his argument allowed for the eternality of the universe *for the sake of argument*. See Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 1.13.30.

<sup>77</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.2.3.

Rather, all things that are moved from potentiality to actuality are put into motion by another (i.e., are acted upon). As an illustration, he uses fire and wood. Wood is potentially hot but is made actually hot by fire. Given that things are in motion and states of becoming, there must be a first mover who is itself unmoved, being pure actuality. Otherwise, there would be an infinite regression of movers, and nothing would be in motion. Therefore, Aquinas concluded, an unmoved mover, God, exists.

Aquinas' second way, his argument from efficient causation, posits that nothing can be the efficient cause of itself.<sup>78</sup> This model rests on Aquinas' agreement with Aristotle's understanding and taxonomy of causes. There are material causes (that of which a thing is composed, such as wood for a desk), formal causes (that after which a thing is composed, such as the idea of a desk), efficient causes (that which composes a thing, such as the desk builder), and final causes (that for which a thing is composed, such as a desk being built for writing).<sup>79</sup> Efficient causes, then, are instrumental causes that bring other things into existence and move things from potential to actuality. Efficient causes can be proper (as in a person creating a desk) or intermediate (as in a saw to cut the wood). However, while we observe that all things in creation have efficient causes, nothing can, even in principle, be the efficient cause of itself, for it would have to exist to have causal powers. There cannot be an infinite regression of efficient causes, or nothing would exist. Therefore, there must be some first cause, which has no efficient cause.

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<sup>78</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.2.3.

<sup>79</sup> Aristotle, "Metaphysics," 1600.

Finally, Aquinas' third way, his argument from necessity, argues that there must be a necessary being.<sup>80</sup> In creation there are contingent things; things for which it is possible not to exist. Such things are generated, changeable, and corruptible. However, if everything is contingent, if it is possible for everything not to exist, nothing would ever exist. Therefore, there must be something for which it is impossible not to exist in order for any contingent things to exist. Such a being would be necessary. Necessary things either are necessary of themselves, or they receive their necessity from another (for instance, goodness is a necessary thing but it derives its necessity from God). There cannot be an infinite regression of necessary things receiving their necessity from another. Therefore, there must be a necessary being whose necessity rests in itself.

Aquinas' cosmological arguments demonstrate the existence of an unmoved mover that is the efficient and necessary cause of all. Aquinas then, like Craig, moved to discuss the attributes such a cause must possess. However, Aquinas takes a step that Craig does not. After discussing his five ways in the *Summa Theologica*, and after discussing the unmoved mover in *Summa Contra Gentiles* as well, Aquinas moved straight to God's simplicity. He argued that, for God to be the first unmoved mover, the first efficient cause, or the first necessary being, He must be simple, entirely without composition. Composed things require composers. He states, "Because every composite has a cause, for things in themselves different cannot unite unless something else causes them to unite. But God is uncaused . . . since He is the first

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<sup>80</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.2.3.

efficient cause.”<sup>81</sup> For God to be the first cause, He cannot be composed of potency and act, essence and existence, substance and accident, or anything else that would require Him to be or to be what He is through something else. If He were, Aquinas reasoned, He would need to be explained by some external cause and could not truly be God or a first cause.

Aquinas understands what Craig does not. Physical simplicity cannot be divorced from metaphysical simplicity, as if DDS can truly be itself divided into parts that can be affirmed or revised without the rest. Aquinas utilized DDS as the link between his first cause arguments and the attributes Craig wishes to affirm. First, God’s simplicity grounds His aseity. Because God is simple, He is not a composition of essence and existence.<sup>82</sup> He does not owe His existence to something else, nor is He self-caused. Nothing can be added to the essence of God or cause it to be. Rather, God is His essence, and it is the essence of God to exist. He is Being itself.<sup>83</sup> Second, His

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<sup>81</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.3.7.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.3.3-4.

<sup>83</sup> In so far as God is not a composite of essence and existence and is not self-caused but uncaused, Aquinas argues that God is being itself. However, this has led some to charge him with some kind of pantheism or panentheism. But Aquinas himself specifically responded to this charge. He argues that God exists as His own being, and thus being itself, but is not the formal being of creation. Creation would amount to accidental properties to God’s formal essence, which would destroy simplicity. Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 1.26.3. Instead, Aquinas sought to avoid classifying God as just one example of being among others, as if God was a species of being. Yes, God is a being in the sense that He is a singular, personal entity, but He is not a being among many that needs an explanation. Rather, He is the ground of all being. As Norman Geisler states of Aquinas’ theology “Only One *is* Being; everything else *has* being.” Norman L. Geisler, *Thomas Aquinas: An Evangelical Appraisal* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1991), 101. For Aquinas, then, God is both essence/being itself (*esse*) and a being (*id quod est*). See Eleonore Stump, “God’s Simplicity,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Aquinas*, ed. Brian Davies and Eleonore Stump (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 140-41. Therefore, God’s nature as a being is analogical to the being of created things. He exists as an individual entity, but as one that is beyond classification. Dolezal, *God without Parts*, 58. Also see Thomas Joseph White, ed., *The Analogy of Being: Invention of the Antichrist or Wisdom of God?* (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2010); and John R. Betz, *Christ the Logos of Creation: An Essay in Analogical Metaphysics* (Steunbenville, OH: Emmaus Academic, 2023).

simplicity grounds His infinity.<sup>84</sup> Because God is form without matter, He is not limited by material constraints. Third, simplicity grounds God's immutability. Because God is simple, as the first cause, He is pure act without potential.<sup>85</sup> He cannot change or be moved because He is fully active. Fourth, because God is simple, and thus immutable, He is eternal.<sup>86</sup> Time is connected to movement and God is the unmoved mover. Therefore, He is without change and without time. Fifth, His simplicity guarantees His unity.<sup>87</sup> If God is simple, He is perfect. There cannot be multiple perfect beings, for they would have to have parts that differ.

Aquinas also used simplicity to argue for many of God's other attributes. God is perfect because He lacks parts upon which He depends. He is complete in Himself.<sup>88</sup> Further, if God is His essence and existence, if He has no accidents that can be added to His substance, if He is form without matter, then He has no end or need higher than Himself to seek. Therefore, He is the highest good and, because He is that by which He is everything, He is goodness itself.<sup>89</sup>

For Aquinas, DDS is not a mere doctrine among others, but is an essential grammar for understanding the attributes of God and is an essential link between arguments for God's existence and arguments for God's nature. He sees that DDS is a necessary way of viewing the first cause of all and that the attributes Craig wishes to

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<sup>84</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.7.1.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 1.9.1.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 1.10.2.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 1.11.3.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 1.4.1.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 1.6.3.

affirm flow from it. While both Craig and Aquinas end at the same place of affirming the existence of God, Aquinas' version helps to alleviate the problems created by Craig's denial of DDS. Aquinas was able to avoid the "what caused God" objection and affirm that the first cause is God because the first cause is physically and metaphysically simple, and simplicity entails the divine attributes. As Feser states, in light of DDS:

So, to ask "What caused God?" far from being the devastating retort New Atheist writers suppose it to be, is in fact painfully inept. When interpreted in light of what the various arguments actually meant by "cause," and "God," it really amounts to asking "What caused the thing that cannot in principle have a cause?" . . . "What actualized the potentials in that thing which is pure actuality and thus never had any potentials of any sort needing to be actualized in the first place?"; or "What principle accounts for the composition of the parts in that which has no parts but is absolutely simple or noncomposite?"; or "What unites the distinct essence and existence in that which has no essence distinct from its existence?"; or "What imparted a sufficient reason for existence to that thing which has its sufficient reasons for existence within itself and did not derive it from something else?" And none of these questions makes any sense.<sup>90</sup>

But what of Craig's opposition to Aquinas' version of DDS? Should such objections disqualify DDS as an essential link in cosmological arguments? Craig's objections are not insurmountable and are often the result of a different understanding of ontology. As argued in chapter 3, in terms of its coherence with the biblical text, DDS is both driven by and consistent with scriptural statements. Further, philosophically, there are many plausible and convincing ways of approaching his objections. None of his concerns alleviate the burden placed upon him by his denial of DDS.

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<sup>90</sup> Feser, *Five Proofs for the Existence of God*, 251.

## A Synthetic Cosmological Argument

This chapter has argued that Craig's *Kalam* Cosmological Argument is fundamentally sound in its premises and conclusion and in affirming the various attributes of the first cause. However, by denying the metaphysical aspect of DDS, Craig is unable to ground and maintain such attributes. The attributes he rightly wishes to attribute to the first cause (i.e., God) depend upon DDS to be possible. By contrast, the various cosmological arguments found in Aquinas, grounded in DDS, are able to connect the first cause to theistic attributes. However, Craig's argument, grounded in temporal causation, provides an empirical grounding that is not inherent in Aquinas' argument, giving it a falsifiable aspect.

On this basis, a synthesis of Craig and Aquinas' argument is not only possible, but advantageous in advancing a convincing and sound argument. Such a synthesis can build upon the strengths of both arguments and fill the void left by Craig. Such a synthesis includes the following points.

1. Everything that begins to exist has a cause.
2. The universe began to exist.
3. Therefore, the universe has a cause.
4. The first cause of the universe must be simple.
5. A simple first cause necessarily entails certain attributes.
6. Since these attributes can only be possessed by the first cause, this cause is God.
7. Therefore, God exists.

First, everything that begins to exist has a cause. This principle is self-evident and cannot be denied without destroying all scientific endeavor. Things cannot come

to be out of nothing because nothing has no creative or causal properties to create anything. Second, the universe began to exist. Based upon both the impossibility of an infinite series of events in the past and the claims of General Relativity in which time itself is related to matter and space, and upon the laws of thermodynamics and the expansion of the space of the universe itself, extrapolating back to a point of absolute density, it is philosophically certain and empirically probable that the universe, with time, matter, and space, had an absolute beginning. Therefore, third, the universe has a cause.

Fourth, the cause of the universe must be simple. A complex (physically or metaphysically) cause would itself require a cause or explanation to bring it to be or to determine what kind of being it is. Fifth, a simple first cause necessarily entails certain attributes. A simple cause must be *a se* (a simple cause is wholly in act and independent of any other cause), immaterial (a simple cause cannot be made of physical parts upon which it depends), immutable and eternal (a simple cause wholly in act has no potentiality), infinite and powerful (a simple cause is wholly in act without potential and is not dependent upon lesser parts or upon external sources), singular (two entities would be distinguished by differences, requiring parts that can differ, but a simple cause has no parts that can differ), and personal (a simple first cause is wholly in act and alone and therefore acts without being acted upon).

Sixth, since these attributes can only be possessed in these ways by the first cause, this cause is God. The attributes cannot be possessed in the same way by creatures who are themselves caused. Thus, there is only one simple being whose



essence is immaterial, immutable, eternal, powerful, *a se*, and personal. Therefore, seventh, God exists.

### **Conclusion**

William Lane Craig's *Kalam* Cosmological Argument is an important argument for the Christian faith. The first three points of the argument are sound and effective. However, his fourth point, which assigns specific attributes to the first cause, fails because he denies the metaphysical aspect of DDS. These aspects are necessary to affirm the attributes which Craig (rightly) affirms of the first cause. However, this chapter has shown that, by supplementing his argument with that of Aquinas' understanding of DDS, the argument is able to cogently apply these attributes to the first cause, demonstrating deductively that the first cause is God.

## CHAPTER 6

### DIVINE SIMPLICITY AND ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENTS: A TEST CASE

#### **Introduction**

This chapter will present the second of two case studies applying the thesis of this dissertation. Throughout the history of the Church, DDS was an essential component of many classical apologetic and polemic arguments. However, many theologians, philosophers, and apologists in the modern era, believing DDS to be either too philosophically incoherent or too dependent upon alien metaphysics, have rejected DDS and have attempted to formulate these arguments without a commitment to the same Theology Proper. This dissertation has argued that such a rejection of a classical Theology Proper, especially regarding DDS, leads to weaker and even unsound arguments. While the first case study examined a contemporary cosmological argument, this present chapter will examine a contemporary ontological argument.

The ontological argument, named such by Immanuel Kant but most famously developed by St. Anselm in the Middle Ages, argues that there exists a being than which none greater can be conceived (BNGC). While there have been numerous ontological arguments, they have at least two points in common. First, if God exists, by definition, He is the BNGC. As Augustine writes: “For when the one supreme God of gods is thought of, even by those who believe that there are other gods, and who call them by that name, and worship them as gods, their thought takes the form of an

endeavor to reach the conception of a nature, than which nothing more excellent or more exalted exists.”<sup>1</sup>

To make this argument work, as will be demonstrated later in this chapter, Anselm relies heavily upon DDS to establish the greatness of this being. He argues that the BNGC must be a simple being whose attributes are identical to His essence. Only in this way could the being be what it is through itself instead of through some other thing, grounding its greatness in its own nature.

Second, it is greater to exist than not to exist. Anselm argues that, since it is greater to exist in reality than to exist merely in the mind, the BNGC must, by *a priori* definition, exist in reality.<sup>2</sup> If existence is a property, it is a property that is greater to have than not to have. As William Lane Craig has summarized the argument, “Anselm argued that once a person truly understands the notion of a greatest conceivable being, then he will see that such a being must exist, since if it did not, it would not be the greatest conceivable being.”<sup>3</sup> The conclusion, then, is that God, as the BNGC, must exist.

The ontological argument has been utilized in ancient and modern times by Jewish, Christian, and Muslim apologists and has been critiqued by believers and nonbelievers alike. Bertrand Russell once wrote of this argument, “The argument does not, to a modern mind, seem very convincing, but it is easier to feel convinced that it

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<sup>1</sup> Augustine, “On Christian Doctrine,” in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff, vol. 2, 1 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 1.7.

<sup>2</sup> Anselm, “Proslogion,” 93-94.

<sup>3</sup> William Lane Craig, “The Ontological Argument,” in *To Everyone an Answer: A Case for the Christian Worldview*, ed. Francis J. Beckwith, J. P. Moreland, and William Lane Craig (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004), 124.

must be fallacious than it is to find out precisely where the fallacy lies.”<sup>4</sup> Even in Anselm’s own day, his version was critiqued by Gaunilo of Marmoutiers, the priest who argued that it failed because people are able to imagine all sorts of greatest things that do not in fact exist, such as an island than which none greater can be conceived.<sup>5</sup>

Thomas Aquinas also critiqued the argument. Though he affirms that God is the BNGC, his objection is against the *a priori* nature of the argument. While the statement “God exists” is self-evident because God is His own existence, the essence, and therefore existence, of God is not self-evident *to creatures*.<sup>6</sup> Rather, all that is available to creatures are effects by which to infer analogous properties of God, though God is much greater than the properties creatures can conceive.<sup>7</sup>

In the modern period, however, the ontological argument has received a renewal of attention, thanks in large part to the work of Alvin Plantinga. Plantinga, using modal logic, has constructed a version of the argument to demonstrate that God, as a maximally great being, must exist in all possible worlds, including the actual world. However, unlike Anselm, Plantinga rejects DDS on the grounds that it makes

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<sup>4</sup> Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Touchstone, 1972), 586.

<sup>5</sup> Gaunilo, “On Behalf of the Fool,” in *Anselm: Complete Philosophical and Theological Treatises*, ed. Joseph Saint-George, trans. Jasper Hopkins and Herbert Richardson (Jackson, MI: Ex Fontibus, 2016), 117. This criticism, however, makes a category mistake. Unlike with a BNGC, there are no objective great-making properties that a maximally great island must have. Anselm himself responds by arguing that Gaunilo’s argument is not analogous. The BNGC is not a being among beings as an island is an island among islands. The BNGC is not merely a most excellent being, but a being that cannot fail to exist as the ground and source of all qualities it is better to be than not to be. See Anselm of Canterbury, “Reply to Gaunilo by Anselm,” in *Anselm: Complete Philosophical and Theological Treatises*, ed. Joseph Saint-George, trans. Jasper Hopkins and Herbert Richardson (Jackson, MI: Ex-Fontibus, 2016), 119-31.

<sup>6</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 11.

<sup>7</sup> Diogenes Allen and Eric O. Springsted, *Philosophy for Understanding Theology*, 2nd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 103.

God a property. Plantinga's argument, therefore, formulates its premises without the assumption of DDS.

The aim of this chapter is not to show that the ontological argument succeeds. Rather, the aim of this chapter is to show that the first premise, that God is, by definition, the BNGC, is dependent upon DDS to succeed. This chapter will argue this, first, by showing the shortcoming of Plantinga's model. Second, it will show how Anselm utilized DDS to establish the coherence of a BNGC. Finally, it will use a synthetic model polemically against the Islamic conception of God to demonstrate the superiority of Anselm's version.

### **Alvin Plantinga's Ontological Argument**

Alvin Plantinga is widely acknowledged as one of the greatest living philosophers. He spent his career teaching at both the University of Notre Dame and at Calvin College teaching philosophy, and he has written several books that have shifted the paradigm of the philosophy of religion in favor of Christian theism. He has written extensively on the ontological argument and has developed a version of the ontological argument that builds upon the premises of Anselm and utilizes the language of modal logic and possible worlds.<sup>8</sup>

Plantinga's argument includes several steps. First, he writes, "It is possible that there be a being that has maximal greatness."<sup>9</sup> When he argues that it is possible

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<sup>8</sup> Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*; Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974); Alvin Plantinga, ed., *The Ontological Argument: From St. Anselm to Contemporary Philosophers* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1965).

<sup>9</sup> Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, 108.

for such a being to exist, he means there is nothing incoherent about a maximally great being. Second, “So there is a possible being that in some world *W* has maximal greatness.”<sup>10</sup> This restatement of the previous premise adds the language of possible worlds. If it is logically possible for a maximally great being to exist, then such a being is said to exist in a possible world. This is not the same idea as the multiverse of physicists, but it is a modal expression in philosophy to indicate a possible reality. Third, “Necessarily, a being is maximally great only if it has maximal excellence in every world.”<sup>11</sup> Plantinga draws a distinction here between greatness and excellence. A being may be maximally excellent in a particular world, but a maximally great being must be maximally excellent in every possible world. A being that is maximally excellent in only some possible worlds is a being that could be greater if it were maximally excellent in all possible worlds.<sup>12</sup>

Next, Plantinga gives his criteria for what would constitute a maximally excellent being. He states, fourth, “Necessarily, a being has maximal excellence in every world only if it has omniscience, omnipotence, and moral perfection in every world.”<sup>13</sup> For a being to be maximally excellent, it must minimally be all-knowing, all-powerful, and all moral. Plantinga is emphatic that it is not enough for such a being to know more than others or be able to do more than others. This would make a being

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<sup>10</sup> Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, 108.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 107-8.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

more excellent, but not maximally excellent. Rather, such a being must be omniscient and omnipotent because these are degrees “that can’t possibly be excelled.”<sup>14</sup>

In regard to moral qualities, however, Plantinga takes a different approach. In his view, moral excellence is possessed in the sense that one always does what is right, “so that it would not be possible for it to be exceeded along those lines.”<sup>15</sup> In other words, moral excellence is possessed by such a being in the same way that it is possessed by creatures, but to the highest possible degree and without possibility of deviation. Only in this way, Plantinga maintains, can God be maximally excellent.

Plantinga builds his understanding of these maximally excellent qualities upon his Platonist understanding of properties. Beings are concrete particulars that have properties.<sup>16</sup> Properties, he argues, are universal, uncreated, eternal abstract objects.<sup>17</sup> God did not create these properties and He does not control them.<sup>18</sup> Rather, He, as a being, participates in them, albeit in a maximally excellent way. In various worlds, a being might have property  $P_1$ , while in another world, such a being might not have  $P_1$  but might have property  $P_2$ . Therefore, for Plantinga, to be a maximally excellent being, God must have the properties of being omniscient and omnipotent and must have the property of always doing what is right.

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<sup>14</sup> Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, 91.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity*, 47.

<sup>17</sup> Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?*, 9.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 35.

The argument from Plantinga is that if a being possesses these properties in every possible world, one of which is the actual world, such a being must possess such properties in the actual world. The argument concludes, then, that there exists a being that is maximally great in the actual world and, therefore, God exists. Craig provides a slightly modified, but succinct, summary of Plantinga's argument<sup>19</sup>:

1. It is possible that a maximally great being exists.
2. If it is possible that a maximally great being exists, then a maximally great being exists in some possible world.
3. If a maximally great being exists in some possible world, then it exists in every possible world.
4. If a maximally great being exists in every possible world, then it exists in the actual world.
5. If a maximally great being exists in the actual world, then a maximally great being exists.

Though Plantinga himself does not believe the argument is a proof in the sense that it would be universally convincing, he nevertheless argues that this form makes the argument rationally acceptable.<sup>20</sup> He has even stated that the argument "provides as good grounds for the existence of God as does any serious philosophical argument for an important philosophical conclusion."<sup>21</sup>

### **The Simple Hole in Plantinga's Argument**

Plantinga's version of the ontological argument makes the idea of necessary existence more plausible. However, his understanding of God's relationship to great-

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<sup>19</sup> Craig, "The Ontological Argument," 128.

<sup>20</sup> Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, 112.

<sup>21</sup> Craig, "The Ontological Argument," 128.



making properties leads to a serious problem. Plantinga rightly affirms that God is a maximally excellent being, possessing all knowledge, power, and goodness. The God he describes is the greatest being of all, as great as a being can be. But therein lies the problem: Plantinga's God is a being among beings. The God of Plantinga's argument participates in univocal concepts of knowledge, power, and goodness.

As shown in chapter 4 of this dissertation, historically, DDS was seen as the way to affirm that God is the BNGC, as even Plantinga recognizes.<sup>22</sup> God was identified with that which was predicated of Him. For Plantinga, however, these properties are not identical to God but are abstract properties that exist independently of Him, properties that He neither creates nor controls. This is especially the case in regard to moral properties. Moral properties, such as goodness, justice, and love, are univocal concepts in which God participates to the highest possible degree.

The problem with this view is that it holds that moral virtues exist independently of God. God is not the standard in the sense that He grounds morality, but in the sense that He best exemplifies it. But this view leaves God subservient to moral categories and leaves morality without an objective referent. Without simplicity, God participates in moral categories that have no ultimate personal grounding.

In fact, Craig falls into the same trap. He argues that God is the standard of morality in order to escape the Euthyphro dilemma. In this famous ethical conundrum, the question is asked if God wills something because it is good, in which case goodness exists independently of God and God is not necessary for moral value

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<sup>22</sup> Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?*, 26.

statements, or if what God wills becomes good, in which case goodness seems arbitrary and could have been otherwise. Both outcomes are problematic for the Christian theist, who wishes to affirm that God is sovereign and that objective moral views are real and obligatory.

Craig believes he has found the solution. He states that God wills what He wills because He is good.<sup>23</sup> By this, Craig does not mean that God is identified with goodness itself *per se*, but that, to be God, His nature is essentially good. God can only will what is good because His goodness is essential to Him. Unlike humans, who sometimes will evil and sometimes will good, God is essentially good. As such, God is the “least arbitrary standard.”<sup>24</sup> Because God is essentially good, His commands become normative and prescriptive for ethics.<sup>25</sup>

Once again, however, on these understandings, goodness, and even morality itself, is something different than God in which God must participate, even if at the highest possible level. If this is the case, at least three problems arise. First, moral categories have no objective referent. They are what they are, in Plantinga’s model, as eternal Forms. But moral statements are inherently personal. Moral laws and obligations require moral lawgivers. They cannot be rooted in impersonal Forms. But they cannot simply be fiat dictates either, as if they were some sort of morality *ex nihilo*. Such a situation makes moral values arbitrary. In another possible world, they

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<sup>23</sup> Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 181-82.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> As cited in R. Scott Smith, “Craig, Anti-Platonism, and Objective Morality,” *Philosophia Christi* 19, no. 2 (2017): 335, <https://rscottsmithphd.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Smith-Objective-Morality-PC-19-2.pdf>.

could have possibly been different. Even in Craig's model, morality is a univocal concept that remains ungrounded in any ontological sense.

Second, Plantinga's God, who participates in moral properties, is not the BNGC. This God may be the greatest of all beings, but He is not greater than can be conceived. Rather, a being who is power itself, goodness itself, justice itself, and love itself is greater than a being who merely demonstrates or participates in these qualities. Such a being is greater because He is the referent for these moral properties and is what He is through Himself, rather than merely by participating in such properties. Such a being would be greater in quality, not simply quantity.

By making a distinction between God and His properties, those who deny DDS, in a very real sense, elevate moral properties and lower God to the level of creature. Jordan Barrett's argument in his work on simplicity is instructive when he argues that positing properties in God that are not God Himself leads to the worship of these properties, not God.<sup>26</sup> God is worshipped because He demonstrates properties that humans find honorable. By denying the identity thesis of DDS, separating God's essence from His attributes, God Himself is not the BNGC; He is just the greatest being that exists.

Third, as Plantinga himself has noted, his view has massive implications for the doctrine of aseity. If properties, especially moral ones, exist as eternal and uncreated abstract objects, which God does not create, then God's nature is informed by these properties and thus God is dependent upon them to be and to be what He is.

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<sup>26</sup> Jordan Barrett, *Divine Simplicity*, 149-50.

Plantinga's solution is simply to accept this reality on the basis that God is not dependent upon the abstract object of, say, goodness, because abstract objects do not act, persons do.<sup>27</sup> However, as Dolezal argues, Plantinga misses the point by insisting that aseity is about control.<sup>28</sup> Rather, it affirms that God is not dependent on anything but God to be or to be what He is. To posit external abstract objects as something in which God participates is to make God dependent, definitionally, upon that which is not God, destroying aseity. God would need external, abstract objects to be defined.

By contrast, as Katherin Rogers states, "The doctrine of simplicity solves the problem [of the Euthyphro dilemma]. God neither obeys the moral order, nor does He invent it. He is Goodness Itself, and all else that is good is good in imitation of God's nature."<sup>29</sup> God, according to DDS, is the BNGC because, in principle, no one can conceivably be greater because God is the grounding of such properties. Humans can participate in such properties to various degrees, but God gives them their existence.

According to a classical DDS, as found in Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, and many others, God Himself stands in the place of moral Forms. Moral categories are what they are to the extent that they image the character of God. Morality, then, is not arbitrary, as God could not have been otherwise. Rather, morality has an objective, universal foundation in God. God does not participate in human morality, nor is He subject to the same moral judgments as humans because He and humans are good

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<sup>27</sup> Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?*, 74-75.

<sup>28</sup> Dolezal, *God without Parts*, 72-73.

<sup>29</sup> Rogers, *Perfect Being Theology, Reason and Religion*, 26.

analogically. God is good through His own nature, and humans are good through participation by imaging God.

Augustine argued that the very things Plantinga wants to argue are eternal, uncreated, abstract objects exist as God or in the mind of God.<sup>30</sup> With this, Augustine avoids the problem of uncreated, abstract objects in Platonism on the one hand, and nominalism on the other. These things really exist as concepts, but concepts that are in God. God, as a simple being, is identical to His attributes and to His act of knowing. Therefore, these abstract objects, like God, are real, eternal, and unchanging. Likewise, Aquinas taught that God avoids the problems that Plantinga and Craig create because He is Goodness, Power, Knowledge, and anything else predicated of Him. He does not participate in such realities, which would make Him dependent upon external objects or concepts, but is what He is through Himself.<sup>31</sup>

Of course, both Plantinga and Craig deny key elements of a classical DDS. Plantinga in particular argues that God cannot be simple. If God is identical with His properties, Plantinga reasons, and all God's properties are identical to one another, then God must in fact be a property rather than a person.<sup>32</sup> But properties do not act, persons do. Further, it is obvious that God takes on accidental properties, and so can change and become what He previously was not, a clear violation of simplicity.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Augustine, *Eighty-three Different Questions*, 81.

<sup>31</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 1.40.2

<sup>32</sup> Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?*, 49.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

Chapter 3 responded to these objections and others. However, two specific responses can be given here. First, as James Dolezal has argued, equating God with a property has the point completely backwards.<sup>34</sup> Though Plantinga argues that identifying God with properties makes God a property, DDS holds that identifying God with properties eliminates the need to posit properties in God at all because God is pure form.<sup>35</sup> Plantinga errs because of his univocal ontology, which he applies to God and creature alike. Rather, what is in God as God's essential nature is in creatures as properties in which their being analogically participates. Creatures experience, to various degrees, the perfections of God as constituent properties added because these properties do not belong to humans as humans as they do to God as God.

Second, the accidental properties Plantinga believes God takes on and becomes in time are relative properties. Such properties are more akin to Cambridge properties than essential ones. The change is a result of a change in the status or nature of the creature, not the Creator. Further, from the standpoint of God, He is eternally His relative properties because these changes in relation flow from His eternal decree.

### **Anselm's Ontological Argument**

As previously stated, Plantinga builds his argument upon the Anselmian ontological argument. St. Anselm of Canterbury, who lived from approximately 1033 to 1109 and has been called the "second Augustine," emphasized the importance of

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<sup>34</sup> Dolezal, *All That Is in God*, 71.

<sup>35</sup> Dolezal, *God without Parts*, 144-47.

having rational reasons for faith.<sup>36</sup> He sought to form one argument that would definitively prove, *a priori*, the necessary existence of God. Anselm hoped his argument would establish two points: that God exists and that He exists as the BNGC.<sup>37</sup> He writes:

So even the Fool is convinced that something than which nothing greater can be thought is at least in his understanding. . . . But surely that than which a greater cannot be thought cannot be only in the understanding. For it were only in the understanding, it could be thought to exist also in reality—something which is greater [than existing only in the understanding]. Therefore, if that than which a greater cannot be thought were only in the understanding, then that than which a greater *cannot* be thought would be that than which a greater *can* be thought! But surely this [conclusion] is impossible. Hence, without doubt, something than which a greater cannot be thought exists both in the understanding and in reality.<sup>38</sup>

Anselm argues that God, by definition, is the BNGC. Even a fool, he writes, understands the concept of a BNGC. However, a BNGC that exists solely in one's understanding, as an intellectual concept, is not as great as a being that exists in the actual world. Such a pure intellectual concept, then, is not a BNGC. Anselm's point is that if God's existence as the BNGC can be conceived in the mind, by definition, He must exist in the real world. He writes:

Indeed, no one who understands that which God is can think that God does not exist, even though he says these words [viz., 'God does not exist'] in his heart either without any signification or with some strange signification. For God is that than which a greater cannot be thought. Anyone who rightly understands this, surely understands that that [than which a greater cannot be thought] exists

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<sup>36</sup> Edward N. Martin and Steven B. Cowan, "Anselm of Canterbury: Apologetics and the Ratio Fidei," in *The History of Apologetics: A Biographical and Methodological Introduction*, ed. Benjamin K. Forrest, Joshua D. Chatraw, and Alister E. McGrath (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 210.

<sup>37</sup> Anselm, "Proslogion," 88.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 93-94.

in such a way that it cannot even conceivably not exist. Therefore, anyone who understands that God is such [a being] cannot think that He does not exist.<sup>39</sup>

This argument essentially posits that, for the BNGC, existence is a necessary attribute. Because God is, by definition, the BNGC, and existence is greater than nonexistence, God must necessarily exist. A BNGC cannot be greatest if it does not exist. As Richard Taylor writes, “that perfection implies existence” is the central idea of the argument.<sup>40</sup>

Whether Anselm’s argument succeeds or fails hinges, in large part, on what it means for God to be the BNGC. Anselm does not think that the concept of a BNGC is itself a difficult concept to grasp, as even the fool can understand it. He argues that the BNGC is that who possesses all qualities which it is better to have than not to have.<sup>41</sup> If God were to lack some good quality that is possessed by creatures, the creature would rise to supersede the Creator. Anselm developed this idea by arguing that God is every true good: life, wisdom, truth, goodness, blessedness, and eternity.<sup>42</sup>

So far, Plantinga would agree with what Anselm has said. However, the key for Anselm is that God does not participate in such properties. Rather, He is identical to them and grounds them. These attributes are not parts of God or conceptually external to Him. Anselm states, “You are Oneness itself, divisible in no respect. Therefore, life and wisdom and the other [characteristics] are not parts of You but are all one thing; and each one of them is the whole of what You are and the whole of

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<sup>39</sup> Anselm, “Proslogion,” 95.

<sup>40</sup> Richard Taylor, “Forward,” in Plantinga, *The Ontological Argument*, viii.

<sup>41</sup> Anselm, “Proslogion,” 95.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 105.



what all the others are.”<sup>43</sup> God is simple and cannot be divided into lesser parts.

Therefore, these attributes are identical to God’s essence, not parts of it.

This conviction is rooted in Anselm’s earlier work, the “Monologion.” In this work, Anselm describes God as the “one Nature, highest of all existing things, alone sufficient unto itself in its eternal beatitude, through its own omnipotent goodness granting and causing all other things to be something and in some respect to fare well.”<sup>44</sup> Anselm not only argues that God is the BNGC in terms of being the highest of all existing things, but he also argues that God is the BNGC in the way He is the highest of all existing things. God is the highest, not only in the degree to which He holds these attributes, but in the fact that He holds these attributes through Himself rather than through something else. Indeed, God is that by which God is anything.

Anselm writes:

Hence, only that which alone is good through itself is supremely good; for that is supreme which so excels others that it has neither an equal nor a superior. Now, what is supremely good is also supremely great. Therefore, there is one thing which is supremely good and supremely great—i.e., [which is] the highest of all existing things. . . . Now, since only what is supremely good can be supremely great, it is necessary that something be the greatest and the best, i.e., the highest, of all existing things.<sup>45</sup>

God is what He is through Himself rather than through external abstract objects or concepts. Created things, Anselm argues, are what they are through, or by means of, something else.<sup>46</sup> Created beings are, for example, good, just, powerful, and loving by

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<sup>43</sup> Anselm, “Proslogion,” 105.

<sup>44</sup> Anselm, “Monologion,” 7.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 7-9.

participation in goodness, justice, power, and love. In this, Anselm echoes the idea of the Good in Plato's idea of Forms. Created things can be better or worse to the extent that they participate in these eternal Forms of goodness, justice, and love.

Yet, Anselm does not tie these perfections to an abstract Form, but to the essence of God. God is supreme because He does not merely do more good than creatures or participate in goodness like creatures. God is supreme because He *is* goodness itself, just as 1 John 4:16 states that "God is love." God does not merely show love occasionally as if love, or any moral trait, is something that God simply does. Anselm writes:

What, then, are You, O Lord God, than whom nothing greater can be thought? What indeed are You except that which—as the highest of all things, alone existing through Himself—made all other things from nothing? For whatever is not this is less great than can be thought. But this [less greatness] cannot be thought of You. Therefore, what good is lacking to the Supreme Good, through whom every good exists? Consequently, You are just, truthful, blessed, and whatever it is better to be than not to be.<sup>47</sup>

God, for Anselm, is the BNGC because the very qualities, which are better to be than not to be, are not external properties for Him, as they are for creatures, but are identical to Him. There can only be One who is supremely good and this goodness is not something outside of God, but is identical to the one undivided, simple Nature.<sup>48</sup> Thus, creatures, in principle, could never be greater because they are only what they are through participation in that which is identical to God. For Plantinga, and Craig, God is perfect because He always measures up to morality. Morality is an external standard by which God can be measured and worshipped. Of course, the downside of

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47 Anselm, "Proslogion," 95.

48 Anselm, "Monologion," 28.

this is that God can be judged by these standards as well, whatever they are. Because these standards exist as uncreated, eternal objects, God and creature alike can be judged by some alleged standard of goodness, justice, or love. This, of course, has enormous implications for apologetics, especially in regard to God's actions in the Old Testament!

For Anselm, however, God is perfect because morality is that which measures up to Him. The universal standards of morality against which mankind's actions may be judged are not some Platonic abstract Forms but are truly eternal, objective, and personal because they flow from God Himself. What is in creation by participation is analogically in God as source, model, and standard. Further, because God is simple, God's will is identical to His nature and flows from it. God does not cycle between attributes but is what He is in everything He does. Though the essence of God is not known as essence, it is nevertheless truly known through its effects. What God does, He does from His nature and His nature cannot be divided. As a result of DDS, God's actions and nature are inseparable. All of God's actions reflect His goodness, justice, love, and power.

Aquinas, though he rejects Anselm's *a priori* argument for the existence of God, nevertheless agrees with Anselm on the necessity of God's simplicity to be the BNGC. He writes, "Moreover, since every agent acts in so far as it is in act, God, Who is pure act, must act through His essence. Willing, however, is a certain operation of God. Therefore, God must be endowed with will through His essence. Therefore, His

will is His essence.”<sup>49</sup> Thus, if God *acts* good, it is because His nature *is* good, even goodness itself. The same is true for all of God’s actions.

Anselm then takes this concept of God as the BNGC to its logical continuation by arguing that, for God to be the greatest in moral categories, God must have relations in which these moral attributes exist. For example, following Augustine, these relations must include the lover, the loved, and the love. Therefore, God as the BNGC, must be triune. Further, DDS not only gives the Trinity its rationale, but it guarantees the equality of the triune persons as well because, in the simple being, there cannot be anything that proceeds other than the being itself.<sup>50</sup>

While Plantinga’s God is the greatest being in the sense that He possesses knowledge, power, and moral goodness to the highest degree, Anselm’s God is greater than can be conceived because He *is* knowledge, power, and goodness. He grounds these realities and gives them their truth value and is that which all beings desire.<sup>51</sup> In principle, then, no being can be greater because no being is identified with such qualities. Therefore, an ontological argument grounded in DDS is superior to one that

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<sup>49</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, ch. 73.

<sup>50</sup> Anselm, “Proslogion,” 108. Anselm’s doctrine of the Trinity is very Augustinian (which is why he was not included in the representative survey of chapter 4 of this project). He affirmed the simplicity of the divine essence, the eternal begettingness of the Son who is the word and expression of the divine mind, and the eternal procession of the Spirit from Father and Son. He even used the same illustrations for the Trinity as Augustine. However, unlike Augustine, who emphasized that God was one essence, substance, and nature but three persons, Anselm was willing to use the term substance as a synonym for the persons. This was largely due to his concern that there be no accidents in God and substances are what they are without accident. Yet, he nevertheless maintained that God is yet one being while the persons may be substances. In the end, he means what Augustine means but differs semantically. See Anselm, “Monologion,” 85-86.

<sup>51</sup> Anselm, “Monologion,” 79.

rejects it because it identifies God with His attributes, rather than as merely a participant in them.

### **A Synthetic and DDS Dependent Ontological Argument**

The following points will synthesize, for the sake of demonstration, Anselm and Plantinga's versions of the ontological argument to show the superiority of the argument grounded in DDS to those that merely posit God as the highest of creatures in degree.<sup>52</sup>

1. God, if He exists, is by definition the BNGC.
2. In order to be the BNGC, God must be simple.
3. It is possible for a BNGC to exist in some possible world.
4. A BNGC would be greatest if, and only if, it existed in all possible worlds.
5. A BNGC that exists in all possible worlds exists in the actual world.
6. Therefore, God, as the BNGC, exists.

First, God, if He exists, is by definition the BNGC. A being that is greater in conception or reality would be more deserving of worship and would, by definition, be the supreme being (i.e., God).

Second, in order to be the BNGC, God must be simple. A being that is not simple may be the greatest being that exists but would not be a being than which none greater can be conceived. A being that is not simple would exemplify great making qualities to the highest possible degree, but a being that is simple would be greater

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<sup>52</sup> This chapter is not committed to the necessity of modal logic and the language of possible worlds. Rather, it merely seeks to show that an argument such as Plantinga's can be strengthened with a classical DDS. Nor is this chapter committed to the overall success of the ontological argument; it merely asserts that a commitment to DDS is a necessary component in order for the argument to succeed at all.

because such a being would be the source of such qualities. Such a being would not only be the greatest possible being but would also be a being than which none greater can be conceived.

Third, it is possible for a BNGC to exist in some possible world. This means that the concept of a BNGC is logically possible. Assuming that there is no internal contradiction in the idea of a supreme being, such a being is possible and, in the language of modal logic, would exist in some possible world. While various non-Christian groups would charge the idea of God with incoherence, there is nothing incoherent about a being that is the greatest being relative to others in knowledge, power, and moral character, as per Plantinga, and, as chapter 3 of this dissertation argued, there is nothing incoherent about the idea of God's simplicity, as per Anselm. Therefore, it is logically possible that a simple being who is goodness, justice, love, and truth exists in some possible world.

Fourth, a BNGC would be greatest if, and only if, it existed in all possible worlds. A being that only exists in some possible worlds is a being that, following Anselm, exists only in understanding (i.e., it exists only conceptually). However, a being that exists in every possible world would be the greatest possible being. No being could be greater in existence than a being who exists in all possible worlds.

Fifth, BNGC that exists in all possible worlds exists in the actual world. If a being exists in all possible worlds, including the actual world, then it necessarily exists in the actual world.

Sixth, therefore, God, as the BNGC, exists. On the basis of DDS, God is not merely the greatest being that exists. Rather, He is truly a being than which none greater can be conceived.

### **An Ontological Argument against the Muslim Conception of God**

Having argued for the superiority of an ontological argument grounded in DDS, this chapter will now give an example of the polemic use of this argument by using it to critique the Islamic conception of God. Islamic theology begins with the *tawhid*, the affirmation that “God is One.” As Muslim theologian Isma’il Raji al-Faruqi has written, “There can be no doubt that the essence of Islam is *al tawhid*, the act of affirming Allah to be the One, the Absolute, transcendent Creator, the Lord and Master of all that is.”<sup>53</sup> To be a Muslim is to elevate Allah above all. He is transcendent and limited by nothing. Seyyed Hossein Nasr also writes, “At the heart of Islam stands the reality of God, the One, the Absolute and the Infinite, the Infinitively Good and All Merciful.”<sup>54</sup> As such, Muslims understand Allah to be the BNGC, affirming *Allahu Akbar*, “God is most great.”<sup>55</sup> Like Christians, they affirm that God is omnipotent, omniscient, transcendent, and even moral.

However, the Islamic concept of Allah differs greatly from the Christian concept of God in regard to Allah’s relationship to moral qualities and attributes. The

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<sup>53</sup> Isma’il Raji al-Faruqi, *Al Tawhid: Its Implications for Thought and Life* (Herndon, VA: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1995), 17.

<sup>54</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Heart of Islam: Enduring Values for Humanity* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2002), 3.

<sup>55</sup> Ibn ‘Abd al-Salam, *The Belief of the People of Truth*, Islamic Doctrines and Beliefs, vol. 3, trans. Gibril Fouad Haddad (Fenton, MI: Islamic Supreme Council of America, 1999), 38.

Islamic conception is that Allah wills these things but is not himself these things. Everything Allah does is as a result of his will, but his will is not identical to his nature, for his nature cannot be known and he can will whatever he pleases. When the Muslim claims that God is something moral or relational, it is more accurate to say that God *does* these things, not that He *is* these things. It is within his power to do otherwise without consideration of nature. The so-called “Beautiful Names of Allah” do not actually describe Allah, but rather they describe Allah’s will and action.<sup>56</sup> The Christian concept of God agrees that the essence of God *as essence* cannot be known; nevertheless, God’s effects truly reflect His nature. On the contrary, in Islam, Allah could have chosen to do other than he is.

Various schools of Islamic theology have consequently drawn a distinction between attributes of action and attributes of essence.<sup>57</sup> Moral and relational attributes are attributes of action and do not reflect the essence of Allah, but rather his will. Allah’s essence itself is “beyond all categories and definitions.”<sup>58</sup> So, when the Quran states that Allah *is* such and such, it means that he *does* such and such and, it teaches, at a higher level than any creature does or can.

As such, though Islam may claim that Allah is a BNGC and may claim that this involves moral excellence, in reality, the Islamic conception of God undermines this very idea by its denial of the identification of God with His attributes. Islam’s

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<sup>56</sup> Imam al-Bayhaqi, *Allah’s Names and Attributes*, Islamic Doctrines and Beliefs, vol. 4, trans. Gibril Fouad Haddad (Fenton, MI: Islamic Supreme Council of America, 1999), 55-57.

<sup>57</sup> Tim Winter, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*, Cambridge Companions to Religion (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 128.

<sup>58</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islam: Religion, History, and Civilization* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2003), 60.



conception of Allah is one in which Allah is not truly simple because he takes on attributes and these attributes are external to him. This chapter will demonstrate that, because Allah's moral qualities are conditional and not essential, He cannot be a BNGC. The god of Islam could, however, in principle, be the ontologically greatest being in Plantinga's version, in which he is greatest by virtue of demonstrating moral qualities to the highest degree, but he could not, in principle, be the BNGC of Anselm. Specifically, this chapter will argue that Allah is not consistently relational, good, or loving.

### Allah Is Not Relational

Above all, Muslims stress the oneness and transcendence of Allah, as can be seen in the fundamental creed of *tawhid*. In Islam, Allah *has* certain kinds of relations, but he himself is not *relational*. In other words, it is not his nature to have relations. Allah has communion with no one and does not desire that his creation know him but only that they obey him. In the Trinitarian doctrine of Christianity, God exists eternally in relation as Father, Son, and Spirit, and therefore relationality is intrinsic to God. By contrast, Allah has no relations *sans* creation. In fact, the Quran explicitly denies the Trinity and the idea that God would have a son.<sup>59</sup>

As a unitary and singular being, one that has no one like him and only exists in relation to others once he creates, relation is not intrinsic to the nature of Allah. While the Quran is clear that Allah is creator,<sup>60</sup> his motivation for doing so is not to have

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<sup>59</sup> John Medows Rodwell, trans., *The Koran* (New York: Bantam Books, 2004), Sura 112.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., Sura 6:54.

relationship with creation, but to receive worship from creation. Sura 51:56-57 states, “I have not created Djinn and men, but that they should worship me: I require not sustenance from them, neither require I that they feed Me.”<sup>61</sup> While Allah is not thought to need anything from man, the sole purpose of creation is for man to worship him.<sup>62</sup> Allah is, ultimately, indifferent toward the fate of men.

Man does not exist to know Allah, but to obey his will.<sup>63</sup> Man can know the will of Allah, but not his true person. As al-Faruqi has written:

He (God) does not reveal Himself to anyone in any way. God reveals only His will. . . This is God’s will and that is all we have, and we have it in perfection in the Qur’an. But Islam does not equate the Qur’an with the nature or essence of God. It is the Word of God, the Commandment of God, the Will of God. But God does not reveal Himself to anyone. Christians talk about the revelation of God Himself—by God and of God—but that is the great difference between Christianity and Islam. God is transcendent, and once you talk about self-revelation you have hierophancy and immanence, and then the transcendence of God is compromised. You may not have complete transcendence and self-revelation at the same time.<sup>64</sup>

While the Christian God cannot be known exhaustively or univocally, He nevertheless reveals true things about Himself, such that Christians can know some things about what God is, not just what He is not.<sup>65</sup> However, in the case of Islam, the

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<sup>61</sup> Rodwell, *The Koran*, Sura 51:56.

<sup>62</sup> “Forty Hadith of an-Nawawi: Hadith 24,” *Sunnah.com*, <https://sunnah.com/nawawi40/24>.

<sup>63</sup> Norman L. Geisler and Abdul Saleeb, *Answering Islam: The Crescent in Light of the Cross*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2002), 49.

<sup>64</sup> Isma’il Raji al-Faruqi, *Christian Mission and Islamic Da’wah: Proceedings of the Chambesy Dialogue Consultation* (Leicester: The Islamic Foundation, 1982), 47-48.

<sup>65</sup> While Aquinas affirmed that God is known philosophically by negation, as in his *Summa Theologica*, 1.3; nevertheless, he also taught that, because of DDS, creatures can reason from effect to cause to posit true attributes of God, writing, “These names [such as good, wise, love, and so on] signify the divine substance, and are predicated substantially of God, although they fall short of a full representation of Him. . . . ‘Whatever good we attribute to creatures, pre-exists in God,’ and in a more excellent and higher way.” Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.13.2.

only relationship that exists between Allah and the Muslim is one of master and slave in which Allah makes his will known in the Quran. Man is responsible to submit, and man will be held accountable.<sup>66</sup> The Muslim may progress in faith, but not toward Allah himself. Even when the Quran affirms the closeness of Allah to man, “closer than his jugular vein,”<sup>67</sup> this closeness is only by knowledge of Allah’s will, not by relationship.

### Allah Is Not Good

The Quran teaches that Allah is merciful, forgiving, and gracious. For example, it states, “He is God beside whom there is no god. He knoweth things visible and invisible: He is the Compassionate, the Merciful. He is God beside whom there is no god: He is the King, the Holy, the Peaceful, the Faithful, the Guardian, the Mighty, the Strong, the Most High!”<sup>68</sup> However, because Allah’s moral attributes are not substantive or essential, it is more accurate to say that Allah *shows* goodness, mercy, and justice, not that he *is* goodness, mercy, or justice.

Once again, these attributes are not qualities of Allah, but of his will. Allah may be good to men at times, but this is solely because he chooses to do so, and he could have chosen to do otherwise. The Quran states, “Your Lord hath laid down for himself a law of mercy; so that if any one of you commit a fault through ignorance, and afterwards turn and amend, He surely will be gracious, merciful.”<sup>69</sup> Allah shows

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<sup>66</sup> Hammudah Abdalati, *Islam in Focus* (Indianapolis: American Trust, 1975), 9.

<sup>67</sup> Rodwell, *The Koran*, Sura 50:16.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., Sura 59:22-24.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., Sura 6:54.

mercy because he has chosen to, not because it is his nature. The result of this view is that goodness, mercy, and justice cannot truly be grounded in Allah's character but are ultimately concepts outside of Allah that he limits himself to at times.

In fact, the Quran is clear that Allah chooses not to be good at times. Allah is omnipotent and absolutely free to do good or evil. In Islam:

God's one possible quality is His power to create good or evil at any time He wishes, i.e. His decree. . . . Both good things and evil things are the result of God's decree. It is the duty of every Muslim to believe this. . . . When God rewards the pious, that is pure kindness and when He punishes the sinners, that is pure justice.<sup>70</sup>

Allah shows goodness to those who are righteous, but to those who are evil, he has no such goodness, but only punishment and evil. Ultimately, Allah is said to be good because he does good. But if this is the case, as Norman Geisler and Abdul Saleeb argue, why not call God "evil" since he ultimately causes evil?<sup>71</sup>

On the contrary, in the Christian conception of God, grounded in a classic DDS, God is goodness itself and so all that He does is good. This, of course, does not mean that He does not bring judgment, suffering, or pain, but that His purposes in such actions flow from His good intentions (Rom 8:28-29). Stephen Charnock made an important contribution in this regard when he argued that omnipotence itself is tied explicitly and irrevocably to goodness. The ability to do evil is not a feature of power but is actually a sign of a lack of power or knowledge. God can only be omnipotent if He is good, for willing evil necessitates willing something inferior to goodness. In a

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<sup>70</sup> Andrew Rippin and Jan Knappert, eds., *Textual Sources for the Study of Islam* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), 133.

<sup>71</sup> Geisler and Saleeb, *Answering Islam*, 143.

God who is all wise and holy, “God can do whatsoever he can will,” but what He wills is good and wise because God simply is His attributes.<sup>72</sup> This means that God cannot lie or do evil because “these things would be marks of weakness, and not characters of majesty.”<sup>73</sup>

Though Muslims claim that God is One, the Islamic conception of God is not one of divine simplicity because, by rooting goodness in will and not nature, Islam presents a division in God. Allah’s goodness is found in doing more good things than any creature. He does not act from nature and thus his actions may be good or evil. Further, the Muslim conception of God’s goodness puts Allah’s goodness and justice in opposition to one another, as if to do one is to refrain from the other.

#### Allah Is Not Love

Muslim theologians teach that Allah loves and that his love is a model for his creation. Amira Shamma Abdin writes, “God is so loving that He recreated His attribute of love as an instinct in us. Hence true love is part of God’s love, and it is our duty to love one another truly, as indeed He loves us. Without Divine Love there can be no human love.”<sup>74</sup> However, while this sounds like a description taken straight out of 1 John, the Muslim concept of God’s love is severely impaired. While love may be a created instinct in humans from Allah, Allah himself has no such natural instinct.

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<sup>72</sup> Charnock, *Discourses upon the Existence and Attributes of God*, 2:28.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Amira Shamma Abdin, “Love in Islam,” *European Judaism* 37, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 92.

In Islam, Allah *shows* love, but love is not identical to his essence. His love is conditional, and He is free to love or not to love as he wills. The Quran states, “Say: ‘If ye love God, then follow me: God will love you, and forgive your sins, for God is forgiving, merciful.’ Say: ‘Obey God and the Apostle,’ but if ye turn away, then verily, God loveth not the unbelievers.”<sup>75</sup> Allah only loves those who obey him, and he does not love those who do not love him. Allah does not give of himself to people and does not disclose himself to people. Though Allah is called loving, *Al-Wadud*, this attribute is, as in other cases, an aspect of his will, not his nature.<sup>76</sup> As Shabbir Akhtar states:

The Koran, unlike the Gospel, never comments on the essence of Allah. “Allah is wise” or “Allah is loving” may be pieces of revealed information but in contrast to Christianity, Muslims are not enticed to claims that “Allah is Love” or “Allah is Wisdom.” Only adjectival descriptions are attributed to the divine being and these merely as they bear on the revelation of God’s will for man. The rest remains mysterious.<sup>77</sup>

The love of Allah is not grounded in Allah’s nature and is based upon his changing passions and the merit of the object of love. By contrast, the God of Christianity is love itself (1 John 4:8) and shows love even to those who do not love Him. Jesus, in Matthew 5:44-45, calls on His followers to love even their enemies. In this way, He taught, they will be acting like sons of the Father, who Himself shows love to those who are doing evil by taking care of their needs, having the sun rise and rain fall on those who love Him and on those who do not. In His love for His creation, the God of

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<sup>75</sup> Rodwell, *The Koran*, Sura 3:31-32.

<sup>76</sup> Bruce A. McDowell and Anees Zaka, *Muslims and Christians at the Table: Promoting Biblical Understanding among North American Muslims* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1999), 104-5.

<sup>77</sup> Shabbir Akhtar, *A Faith for All Seasons* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1990), 180-81.

Christianity gives of Himself, even taking on humanity to suffer for His people (John 3:16; Rom 5:8; Phil 2:5-8; 1 John 4:10). This concept is entirely foreign to the Islamic conception of God, which sees Allah's love as his favor and willingness to bless.

The God of the Bible, however, because He is simple and His attributes truly describe His essence, *is* love and loves consistently, unconditionally, and impassibly. Thus, not only is He the unmoved mover, He is the unmoved lover. While some would argue this makes such love impersonal, nothing could be farther from the truth. It means that God's love is rooted in His nature rather than having to be manipulated, coerced, or moved. Further, because God is love, His love is the unchanging standard and model for humanity, as John writes in 1 John 4:8-12:

The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love. By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has seen God at any time; if we love one another, God abides in us, and His love is perfected in us.

Allah's relationality, goodness, and love do not flow from his nature. Rather, they are merely features of his will and could have been otherwise. These attributes are concepts that exist outside of Allah that he is free to show or not to show. However, in the Christian conception of God, God's will is identical to His essence. What He wills always flows from His nature. Therefore, the god of Islam is not the BNGC of the ontological argument. If goodness, kindness, and love are better to be than not to be, then a being who is always good, kind, and loving, and indeed grounds such concepts, is conceptually greater than a being who merely shows goodness, kindness, and love in the manner of creatures.

By extension, Plantinga and others who deny DDS fall into the same problem as the Muslim. Both posit a being whose greatness is determined by degrees and quantities in reference to properties that exist externally to God. However, an ontological argument such as Anselm's, one grounded in DDS, posits a being whose greatness is determined by quality as well. The God of Scripture not only does more good than creatures, but He *is* goodness itself. He not only shows more love than creatures, but He *is* love itself. His nature is relational, and He cares for all of His creation. Therefore, He is the BNGC because a being could not be, in principle, greater than a being who is, in essence, that which it is greater to be than not to be.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has provided a case study in using the ontological argument, grounded in DDS, to argue polemically against Islam. The chapter has argued two points. First, if the ontological argument is to succeed, it must be grounded in DDS. For God to be the BNGC, He must not only demonstrate certain properties, as Plantinga and Craig affirm, but He must be the basis for these properties in creation. Only then is He Himself greater than can be conceived.

Second, if the ontological argument succeeds, it is not the god of Islam that it proves. Islamic theology separates Allah's works from his nature. Allah's nature is not essentially good, loving, or relational. Rather, Allah chooses when to bring good and when to bring evil, when to love and when not to love, and when to relate and when not to relate. By contrast, the Christian God is goodness itself and love itself and eternally exists in relation as Father, Son, and Spirit. As such, He is that than which



none greater can be conceived, not merely in degree from all other creature, but as the ontological foundation of these attributes themselves.

## CHAPTER 7

### CONCLUSION

The doctrine of divine simplicity has been an essential aspect of Theology Proper throughout the history of the Church. Theologians and creeds across ages and denominational lines have affirmed that God is without physical or metaphysical parts, complexity, composition, or division. In God, existence and essence are one. He is form without matter, substance without accident, and act without potential. There is no distinction between God and anything in God. As many have said, all that is in God is God and all that is not God is creature.

This doctrine grounds the way the Church has spoken about God. Because God is simple, His essence cannot be known in the same way that the essences of created things can be known. God cannot be broken into parts to be analyzed and then assembled as created things can be. Further, God is not what He is in the same sense or in the same way as created things. He is what He is through Himself rather than by participation, and He is what He is with a different quality as well as quantity than created things. Therefore, the Church can speak truly about God but not univocally. Predicates about God must be analogical.

DDS also enables the Church to ground the various absolute attributes of God. Because God is simple, and therefore pure act without potential, He is incomprehensible, independent, immutable, impassible, eternal, infinite, and personal. He needs nothing to be or to be what He is. Without DDS, each of these divine truths must be rejected or redefined.

Further, DDS gives the Church a grammar for speaking about God. God does not have attributes, properties, or anything else that might conceivably be added to His essence or that might change it. Rather, God *is* His attributes. This means that God's knowledge, will, and attributes are identical to Him and, in God, identical to one another. What God does legitimately reveals what He is because He always acts identically with and from His nature. The distinction between attributes that is seen in Scripture is a result, not of genuine complexity or composition in God, but of genuine complexity in effects in creation.

Finally, in light of DDS, the persons of the Trinity are not individual beings or separate gods but are eternal relations of the one God within Himself. They are distinguished by their eternal relations of origin. The Father is unbegotten, the Son is begotten not made, and the Spirit proceeds from (and to) the Father and the Son. This means that the triune God is inherently relational and personal, and also that each of the persons are truly God.

However, while DDS has been a foundational doctrine for many of the most important theologians of church history, modern theologians and philosophers have looked on the doctrine with suspicion and even disgust. Many argue that DDS is not biblically justified and that it makes God an impersonal property, incoherently identifies properties with each other, removes God's free will, and makes a meaningful doctrine of the Trinity impossible. This aversion to the doctrine is especially present among contemporary apologists, who see the doctrine as something to apologize for rather than as something to apologize with.

On the contrary, this dissertation has argued that *a commitment to a classical understanding of divine simplicity provides an essential foundation for apologetic and polemic arguments for the Christian faith*. DDS is not a hinderance to effective apologetics or polemics. Rather, DDS is a necessary foundation for a consistent and coherent Theology Proper. Those who deny it when making a case for the Christian faith are, in truth, cutting their own legs out from under them. They are hindered in their apologetics by attempting to use classical arguments without a classical doctrine of God.

To argue this thesis, chapter 3 made a case for the truth of DDS, a necessary first step to demonstrate that DDS is not merely a pragmatic doctrine, as if one should only believe it because it is useful. This chapter argued that DDS is not a doctrine that has been imposed upon the biblical text but is an essential grammar drawn from it. DDS is biblical in the same way that other doctrines are biblical. Hermeneutically, this doctrine begins with the data of Scripture and seeks to form a coherent summary of its teaching. This doctrine is a way of making sense of the attributes ascribed to God and of the substantive predication of these attributes. DDS is also philosophically coherent. Specifically, this chapter defended the identity thesis of attributes, the freedom of God, and the necessity of DDS for true trinitarianism.

Chapter 4 demonstrated the thesis of this dissertation by surveying church history. Throughout history, cosmological, ontological, anti-Gnostic, trinitarian, and anti-patheistic arguments were grounded in a classical DDS. This doctrine was an essential link in the logical chain of arguments that enabled historical apologists to make a case for the Christian God. Because God is simple, lacking all composition

and being identical to His attributes, He does not stand in need of some other explanation and is truly the greatest conceivable being. Because God is simple, the persons are three relations rather than three beings. Therefore, Christianity is neither pantheistic nor pluralistic, but is truly monotheistic.

Finally, chapters 5 and 6 presented case studies to demonstrate how contemporary arguments that reject DDS fail. These chapters presented a contemporary cosmological argument from William Lane Craig and a contemporary ontological argument from Alvin Plantinga. In each case, the rejection of DDS leaves these important arguments impotent. However, as was shown, utilizing DDS strengthens both of these arguments against attacks and makes them powerful allies to the wise apologist.

While many theologians are recognizing the importance of DDS for doctrine, this project has been a voice to recognize the apologetic and polemic power of the simplicity of God. By exploring the implications of DDS for apologetics and polemics, this dissertation adds to the contemporary efforts at theological retrieval and renewal as the Church seeks to regain the classical theism upon which it has been built and upon which it has stood for its history.

However, there are still questions that remain to be answered that will make this case even stronger, questions that have not been adequately addressed in recent attempts at theological renewal. For example, in terms of the coherence of DDS itself, very little has been done to discuss the relationship of God's love to the Reformed doctrines of God's election, predestination, and reprobation. There seems to be an incoherence between the ideas that God is love itself and goodness itself and the idea

that God does not save all. If God has the ability to save all and does not, it seems irrational, and even disingenuous, to state that God *is* love.

Among those who affirm a classical DDS, many Arminians and moderate Calvinists argue that this problem is solved by affirming God's simplicity but denying that God's election is the basis of salvation. For example, Norman Geisler, a self-identified moderate Calvinist, argues that God's love is universal, but salvation is not because it is dependent upon people to freely choose God.<sup>1</sup> However, many passages in Scripture seem to strongly support the doctrine that mankind does not, and indeed cannot, respond to saving grace without the regenerative work of the Spirit in their hearts.<sup>2</sup>

Some contemporary Reformed writers have attempted to present a doctrine of election that coheres with DDS. For example, many argue that the dilemma is, essentially, above the paygrade of creatures.<sup>3</sup> God is free to show love, goodness, and grace to whom He will. Others have argued that the key to resolving the dilemma is in differentiating kinds of love.<sup>4</sup> God's love has a kind disposition to all creatures and a saving disposition to the elect. Both of these options seem to diminish the doctrine of simplicity. If God *is* love itself and goodness itself, all He does must be loving and good. Otherwise, God would act inconsistently with His own nature. And, yet, in Reformed theology, God can save whom He will, but He chooses not to save everyone.

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<sup>1</sup> Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, 380-81.

<sup>2</sup> For example, see John 6, Rom 8, Eph 1, Titus 1, and 1 Peter 1, to name a few.

<sup>3</sup> Beeke and Smalley, *Reformed Systematic Theology*, 392-94.

<sup>4</sup> R. C. Sproul, "Is It Biblical to Say That God Loves Everyone?," *Ligonier Ministries* (blog), June 28, 2017, <https://www.ligonier.org/posts/biblical-say-god-loves-everyone>.

While there are good reasons to affirm both DDS and Reformed theology, very little has been done to resolve this problem in the literature of those seeking to promote DDS. Yet, this problem leads to non-Christians charging Christianity with incoherence and God with injustice. Resolving such a problem will help Christians to apologetically avoid such criticisms.

Second, the implications of DDS for polemics against Eastern Religions is relatively unexplored. Some have begun to work in this area. For example, Tyler McNabb and Erick Baldwin have written a book exploring the relationship between classical theism and Buddhism.<sup>5</sup> Yet, this work does not seek to engage Buddhism polemically, but synthetically, arguing that such systems are not as incompatible as many believe. Very little work outside of this book has been done to demonstrate how DDS might establish the truth of Christianity against present day pantheism, panentheism, or polytheism. Work here can be done to show how classical theism, with its insistence that God is physically and metaphysically singular and that all that is not God is creature, can serve to show the incoherence of such Eastern viewpoints.

Resolving these dilemmas and answering these questions will provide further support for DDS and will encourage and enable apologists to defend God as He has revealed Himself: without parts, passions, or divisions. If classical arguments are to be effective, they must be grounded in a classical doctrine of God. May God be proclaimed in spirit and in truth (John 4:24)!

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<sup>5</sup> Tyler Dalton McNabb and Erik Baldwin, *Classical Theism and Buddhism: Connecting Metaphysical and Ethical Systems* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022).

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