God without Parts

Divine Simplicity and the Metaphysics
of God’s Absoluteness

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Foreword

Dr. James Dolezal’s treatment of divine simplicity, which provides a defense of this doctrine in perhaps its strongest form, is a first-rate piece of work. He shows himself to have a grasp not only of the primary and secondary intellectual sources but also of the arguments of contemporary critics as well as of defenders of the doctrine, especially those in analytic-style philosophical theology, “analytic theology” as it is coming to be called. He does not simply dust off the cobwebs of old ideas and rehearse antiquated positions. Not content with mere exposition, able as this is, the author likes to argue, presenting robust defenses of divine simplicity against some of its eminent detractors and modifiers—for example, Alvin Plantinga, Thomas Morris, and Eleonore Stump. He takes these on, utilizing some current arguments of Brian Leftow, William Mann, and others, but also offering arguments of his own. The result is the best full-length philosophical treatment of divine simplicity that I know.

God’s simplicity is a central element in the “grammar” of classical Christian theism. The data regarding the essence and nature of God, as revealed in Scripture, have by and large an occasional and unsystematic character to them. But because Scripture, as God’s word, is self-consistent, the varied data must be self-consistent, and when properly appreciated must also be seen to be. Or, at the very least, it may be recognized that alleged inconsistency cannot be proven. The classical conceptual shape of Christian theism offers a template in terms of which that consistency may be appreciated. For it provides rules, drawn from the varied data of Scripture, in terms of which the varied language of Scripture about God, not only in his unity but also in his trinitarian glory and in his actions in the economy of redemption, can be learned and used without falling into inconsistency or serious error. It is not so much an explanatory as a grammatical template.

So in thinking about divine simplicity as an account of divine unity we are not to think of it primarily as a description of that unity, much
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less as an explanation of it, but as offering rules for appreciating and employing the character of divine unity. This is a central part of the fuller grammar of Christian trinitarianism. It aims to bring together a way of thinking and speaking about divine unity—that God is one and that the Lord our God is one Lord—that does justice to the manifold witness of Scripture to that unity and to ways of handling its apparent references to divine complexity and disunity in a way that considering each isolated datum in turn could never do. Fundamental to that grammar is a conviction about God, made evident throughout the Scriptures, that he is the creator of space and time and all that it contains, existing at a point beyond space and time and not therefore subject to it. God is not spread out in space or in time, a creature among fellow-creatures. How then are we to think and speak of him?

Part of the answer to that question is that we are to think of God partly in negative terms, as we have just been doing: not in space, not in time. An account of divine unity must be consistent with such timelessness and spacelessness. But there is more. For in being the Creator, and not a creature, or creaturely, God does not depend for his existence on operations or forces working upon him. He is not fashioned or the product of parts forming themselves into a unity in an arbitrary fashion. He is necessary, self-existing. This means, for example, that God is not composed of elements that are more ultimate, in a logical or metaphysical sense, than he himself is. It is by attention to such considerations that the doctrine of simplicity has been developed, in order to safeguard that divine sovereignty and transcendence to which Scripture richly testifies. Divine simplicity is not the doctrine that God has no features, an infinite tabula rasa. Nevertheless he has no parts and so is not divisible.

But what of the Trinity? Christian theologians have routinely stated that the threefoldness of the Trinity—that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, each person being wholly divine—refers to distinctions in the Godhead, not to divisions in it. All divisions involve distinctions, but not vice versa. This distinction between distinctions and divisions has been in service in trinitarian thinking a long time; it can be found, for example, in Tertullian.

To suppose that the distinction between the Father and the Son, for example, is a division between them is to suppose that the terms "Father" and "Son" denote different parts in God, each of which is separable from the other. A triune Godhead that consists of a divisible threeness would
thus be made up of three parts—Father, Son, and Spirit—who together comprise it. The obvious problem with such a proposal is that it violates the biblical affirmation that God is one, which the doctrine of divine simplicity articulates. Another consequence of supposing a division between the persons is that Father, Son, and Spirit would each be part of God, and so not the whole God, and so not wholly divine.

God the Creator is one God, and not creaturely. Because God is timeless he is changeless, immutable. Not simply in the sense that he has chosen to be so, or covenanted this, proposals which offer a rather unstable account of God's changelessness and are probably incoherent. He is *metaphysically* changeless. Such changelessness in turn entails divine impassibility, an idea frequently misunderstood and derided. But impassibility is not to be confused, as it often is, with impassivity or with dispassion. Although it may seem paradoxical, the stress on impassibility is meant to safeguard the fullness of God's character. He is eternally impassioned, unwaveringly good, not moody or fitful as he is buffeted by the changes of his life, some of them, perhaps, unexpected changes.

Another way of entering this territory, a way which is quite consistent with what we have been thinking about, is via the idea of God as the most perfect being. God is a being than which no greater can be conceived. This is not a piece of metaphysical speculation, but is clearly stated or implied in Scripture, as in Hebrews 6:13–14, which refers to God as one besides which there is none greater. For had there been a greater than God then in establishing his covenant God would have sworn by that greater. But he swears by himself and so establishes a covenant that is immutable and which for that reason is utterly trustworthy.

Of course, there are other biblical data to support the wonderful verses of Hebrews in their assertion about God's unsurpassable greatness. David refers to the greatness of God and the fact that there is no God besides him (2 Sam 7:22); Nehemiah refers to the great, the mighty God (Neh 9:32; also Jer 32:18; Titus 2:13). Besides, the Lord is a great God and a great King above all gods (Ps 95:3); he is to be feared above all gods (Ps 96:4; 77:13); he is greater than all gods (Exod 18:11); his greatness is unsearchable (Ps 145:3). It is hardly plausible to suppose that God's kingship over other gods is a mere contingent matter of fact. Paul's "golden chain" (Rom 8:31–39) is mere rhetoric if is not supported by a view of God who necessarily transcends his creation. And so on.
It is not that these biblical writers suppose that there could be a greater than the God of Israel, and that one day there might be. The God who is the creator of the heavens and the earth is one than which no greater can be conceived. How could God be worshipful if he could have been greater than in fact he is? If there is a being greater than God then why is that being not God instead? So, all the grammatical features of the doctrine of God that we have mentioned express metaphysically necessary truths.

James Dolezal’s favored way of approaching divine simplicity is through the distinction between act and potency. He offers a close and careful reading of Thomas Aquinas. A subject’s potency or potentiality expresses its liability to change and develop, or to be changed. So it is a sign of compositeness. Every creature in space and time has such potency. By contrast, a simple God does not develop by acting, much less by being acted upon. He does not develop at all. His actions express his perfection; they do not contribute to its attainment. I think it is fair to say it is in this area, of God’s freely expressing his perfection in creation and in human redemption, that the sense of ineffability and incomprehension of the doctrine of God’s absoluteness is at its highest.

Noting the author’s close adherence to Thomas’s approach to divine simplicity, some may think that this book is a work of “Catholic” theology, meaning by this an exclusively Roman Catholic theology. But this judgment would be seriously mistaken. Dr. Dolezal is at pains to show that adherence to the doctrine, and an appreciation of both its strengths and of its profundities, is the property of the entire “catholic” church. He draws the reader’s attention to Stephen Charnock, John Owen, and other Reformed and Puritan theologians, to Reformed confessional statements, as well as to their present-day expositors, notably Richard Muller. He flags up the thought of a notable Dutch Reformed theologian who straddled the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Herman Bavinck. The work deliberately reinforces the view that divine simplicity is the property of truly “catholic” Christian theology.

It might be objected that if an argument for some fundamental feature of God’s existence, such as divine simplicity, concludes in emphasizing the ineffability and incomprehensibility of the life of the Creator, we ought to suspect its premises. Dr. Dolezal touches on such matters in his fascinating dialogue with a contemporary evangelical philosophical theologian, Jay Richards, over the conflict, or apparent conflict, between
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divine simplicity and divine freedom to create worlds other than our world, or to refrain from creating any world at all. This is, in effect, a debate about a concept of God who is first and foremost anthropomorphic and anthropopathic, and, on the other hand, of a God who creates and upholds everything that exists in space and time, as their transcendent Creator and Lord, while working immanently within the creation.

It is God’s transcendent will, the expression of his simple nature, that generates in the most acute way in the creatures’ apprehension the sense of incomprehensibility and ineffability. This is hardly surprising. Indeed, it would be surprising if such bafflement were not felt. Yet its presence hardly amounts to a reason for denying or attenuating God’s absoluteness, central to which is his simplicity.

Such debates will be taken further, and without doubt Dr. Dolezal’s work deserves to be an impressive and powerful stimulus to them.

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Orthodox Christians are universally committed to the confession that God is absolute but they are not always agreed on how to characterize this absoluteness. Historically the doctrine of divine simplicity (DDS) has been regarded as indispensable for establishing the sufficient ontological condition for divine absoluteness. Accordingly, the Westminster Confession of Faith 2.1 confesses both that God is “without parts” and is “most absolute.” But there no longer seems to be a broad consensus on the truth or usefulness of the doctrine of God’s simplicity. Indeed, the doctrine has been criticized and dismissed by many recent Christian philosophers and theologians alike on the grounds that its supposed theological benefits can be preserved by less recondite doctrines. Moreover, many are convinced that the classical form of the doctrine is simply incoherent. It is the contention of this study that to forfeit the doctrine of divine simplicity is to jettison the requisite ontological framework for divine absoluteness.

The classical doctrine of simplicity, as espoused by both traditional Thomists and the Reformed scholastics, famously holds forth the maxim that there is nothing in God that is not God. If there were, that is, if God were not ontologically identical with all that is in him, then something other than God himself would be needed to account for his existence, essence, and attributes. But nothing that is not God can sufficiently account for God. He exists in all his perfection entirely in and through himself. At the heart of the classical DDS is the concern to uphold God’s absolute self-sufficiency as well as his ultimate sufficiency for the existence of the created universe.

The pages that follow set forth both metaphysical and theological arguments in favor of divine simplicity. Along the way I seek to answer some of the leading recent critics of the doctrine—most notably those objecting from within the modern school of analytic philosophy. The assumption that God and creatures are correlatives within a univocal
order of being dominates this school of philosophy and is arguably the
chief reason why their criticisms of the DDS fail to hit the mark. By
appealing to God’s simplicity I aim to show that God and the world are
related analogically and that the world in no sense explains or accounts
for God’s existence and essence. If God were yet another being in the
world, even if the highest and most excellent, then the world itself would
be the framework within which he must be ontologically explained. But
as Creator, God is the sufficient reason for the world’s existence and thus
cannot be evaluated as if he stood together with it in the same order of
being. It follows from this that God can neither be measured, nor his
simplicity refuted, according to the modalities unique to created beings.

Throughout the volume I make extensive use of both classic
Thomist and Reformed sources. It should not be thought that this study
offers a proper historical or philosophical analysis of the critical texts
of Thomas Aquinas or his Protestant successors. I deploy these older
writers simply in order to rehabilitate the power and subtlety of their
insights for our modern philosophical-theological milieu. In addition
to the older sources I also utilize the recent expositions of Aquinas and
the Reformed scholastics by scholars such as John Wippel and Richard
Muller. Undoubtedly, some will think that this harkening back to the
metaphysics and theology of pre-Enlightenment Christians betrays
nothing more than nostalgia for a golden age that has been forever de-
stroyed by Kantian philosophy and the rise of modern science. But this
is not the case. The return to Thomistic metaphysics, and to the classical
orthodox understanding of God’s simplicity, is taking place today not
only among historical scholars and theologians, but also among philoso-
phers such as David Oderberg and Jeffrey Brower. Just as older Reformed
accounts of God’s simplicity benefited from many of the insights of the
medieval scholastic philosophers, it my persuasion that the modern
Reformed account of the DDS can be similarly bolstered by some of the
newer contributions of certain analytic Thomists. I trust that this study
will show how even recent philosophical contributions can still be put
into the service of classical theology.

The chapters of this volume are logically arranged so as to make the
claims and conclusions of the classical DDS clear. Chapter 1 introduces
the basic argument of the volume and seeks to orient the reader to both
the traditional Christian witness to divine simplicity as well as the main
lines of argumentation currently leveled against the doctrine. Chapter
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2 sets forth an extended consideration of precisely what is meant by denying composition in God. In this connection I offer a brief survey of act-potency metaphysics and then proceed to examine six different variations of act-potency composition and the reason why each is denied of God. One needs a fixed idea of what is meant by “simple,” “composite,” and “parts” before considering the theological motivations for the doctrine or precisely how it enables one to account for God’s absoluteness. Chapter 3 lays out the dogmatic motivations for the traditional DDS. Many have criticized the doctrine as being overly speculative and insufficiently biblical. Thus, I intend to show how various other doctrines require adherence to the classical DDS as a good and necessary consequence, including: divine aseity, unity, infinity, immutability, and eternity. The claims of the DDS are indispensable to the classical formulation of each of these doctrines.

In chapters 4 and 5 I aim to apply the conclusions of the previous two chapters to the questions of God’s existence and essence respectively. Chapter 4 examines the significance of the claim that God is subsistent existence itself (ipsam esse subsistens). In particular, the importance of Thomas Aquinas’s insistence upon the real distinction between existence and essence in all creatures is explained as well as his understanding of God’s relation to “being in general.” Divine simplicity is necessary for a proper understanding of the distinction between the being of God and the being of creatures and for understanding the absolute self-sufficiency of God’s existence. Chapter 5 is concerned to explain how it is that God has his attributes such that he depends upon nothing in order to be what he is. The central claim is that God is what he is in virtue of his Godhead and not by virtue of properties inhering in him. This stands in contrast to the contingency that marks all creaturely property bearers. I conclude the chapter by arguing that the “truthmaker” theory of divine predication is one way in which the classical claims of divine simplicity can overcome many of the popular “property” criticisms propounded by certain analytic philosophers.

In chapters 6 and 7 I turn my attention to the implications of the DDS for our understanding of God’s knowledge, will, and freedom. Chapter 6 considers how it is that God can be simple given the fact that he both knows and wills many different things. Would not the knowledge of multiple things entail that God have multiple ideas and that he is therefore intellectually composite? I first endeavor to show that God’s
knowledge is simple because, though he knows many things, he does not know them through multiple intelligible species, but rather through his own nature as imitable. Next, I argue that God is really identical with his will and its primary object. Inasmuch as God's has only one ultimate end, namely, himself, he has only a single act of will. What's more, his act of will is not in him as an accident, determining him to be in some volitional sense. Rather, the very act by which he wills himself and all things is identical with the act by which he exists. Finally, chapter 7 explores the knotty question of how a simple God can be free with respect to creation. Many regard this difficulty as the Achilles heel of divine simplicity. Does simplicity leave God sufficiently free in his creation of the world? I consider various recent attempts to rescue divine simplicity and freedom. In the end I propose that God's freedom cannot be modally characterized as passive counterfactual openness; in fact, the modality of divine freedom is entirely beyond our grasp. It is concluded that while simplicity roots the absoluteness of God's freedom, neither of these divine characteristics is comprehensible to us though both are indispensable to the confession that God is most absolute.

It is my hope that this volume will revitalize the confession and defense of divine simplicity among orthodox Christians and will be a serviceable introduction to the doctrine for those who have hitherto found it elusive or impenetrable.
Friends and Foes of the Classical Doctrine of Divine Simplicity

There is but one only, living, and true God, who is infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions; immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty, most wise, most holy, most free, most absolute.

With these words the Westminster Confession of Faith begins its chapter, “Of God, and of the Holy Trinity” (WCF 2.1). The plain intention of the authors is to express those ways in which God is distinct from and superior to all creatures. This distinction is most broadly summarized in the affirmation that God is “most absolute.” This means that no principle or power stands back of or alongside God by which he instantiates or understands his existence and essence. He alone is the sufficient reason for his own existence, essence, and attributes. He does not possess his perfections by relation to anything or anyone other than himself.

But the question is asked: What is the ontological condition by which such absoluteness is ascribed to God? Or, put differently, what is it about God’s existence and essence that permits one to say that he is the entirely sufficient explanation for himself? The same article of the Westminster Confession supplies the answer to these questions when it states that God is “without parts.” This curious verbiage signifies the Westminster divines’ commitment to the classical doctrine of divine simplicity (DDS). It is divine simplicity that enables the Christian to meaningfully confess that God is most absolute in his existence and attributes. Adherents to this doctrine reason that if God were composed of
parts in any sense he would be dependent upon those parts for his very being and thus the parts would be ontologically prior to him. If this were the case he would not be most absolute, that is, wholly self-sufficient and the first principle of all other things. Thus, only if God is “without parts” can he be “most absolute.” It is this argument that forms the central thesis of this volume: Simplicity is the ontologically sufficient condition for God’s absoluteness.

The doctrine of divine simplicity teaches that (1) God is identical with his existence and his essence and (2) that each of his attributes is ontologically identical with his existence and with every other one of his attributes. There is nothing in God that is not God. The Reformed theologian Stephen Charnock explains simplicity in terms of God’s supreme existence: “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 compounded, and so is not the first being: now God being infinitely simple, hath nothing in himself which is not himself, and therefore cannot will any change in himself, he being his own essence and existence.”

In similar fashion, the medieval theologian and philosopher Thomas Aquinas contends that, “every composite is posterior to its components: since the simpler exists in itself before anything is added to it for the composition of a third. But nothing is prior to the first. Therefore, since God is the first principle, He is not composite.” Again, the argument of both Charnock and Aquinas is that God cannot be the ultimate ontological explanation for himself or for anything else if he is composed of parts.

The theological value and implications of the doctrine of divine simplicity have been variously explained and applied throughout the history of the church, though in recent decades the classical version of the doctrine has fallen into disrepute. Many seek to banish it from Christian theology altogether while others aim to preserve it by softening its philosophical or theological austerity. It is my contention that God’s absoluteness is diminished to just the extent that one denies or softens the DDS. This argument is developed in various ways throughout the chapters of this book.

Before delving into the particular elements of my thesis, it is first crucial that we should have some sense both of the historical and present status of the doctrine of divine simplicity. My aim, then, in the remainder of this chapter is to briefly sketch the historical Christian witness to the DDS and after that to survey some of the recent criticisms of the doctrine. Following these two sections I will conclude with an initial response to the doctrine’s critics.

THE HISTORICAL WITNESS TO DIVINE SIMPLICITY

Historian Richard Muller informs us, “The doctrine of divine simplicity is among the normative 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.” The following is a brief sketch of what some of the church’s leading theologians have said about the DDS in the last two millennia.

Patristic Witness

The early church fathers first gave expression to the DDS in response to the classical Greeks’ philosophical quest for a single ultimate principle by which to account for the universe, that is, to discover the unity that lies back of all multiplicity. Wolfhart Pannenberg distills the basic logic of the Platonic and Aristotelian notion of simplicity that came to be appropriated by the early church fathers: “Everything composite can be divided again, and consequently is mutable . . . Everything composite necessarily has a ground of its composition outside itself, and therefore cannot be the ultimate origin. This origin must therefore be simple.” In his Against Heresies, Irenaeus appeals to divine simplicity in order to

3. Muller, Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics, III: 39. This is cited hereafter as PRRD.

4. Pannenberg, Basic Questions in Theology: Collected Essays, II: 131. See Plato, Republic B. 382e; Timaeus 41a, b; Aristotle, Metaphysics 1074a33–38; 1071b20f.; 1072a32f.; 1072b5–13; and 1015b11f. All citations from Aristotle are taken from The Complete Works of Aristotle. The Greeks never truly arrived at the notion of a simple God because they were committed to a dualistic conception of reality. The early Christians recognized that if one posited two first principles, such as God and matter, then neither principle could be absolutely simple or suffice as the absolute explanation of the universe. For a helpful summary of the views of Plato and Aristotle relevant to divine simplicity see Immink, Divine Simplicity, 51–73.
prove to certain Greek emanationists that God neither exhibited passions nor underwent a mental alteration in the production of the world: “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—even as the religious and pious are wont to speak concerning God.”

The DDS was quickly established as a central ingredient to the orthodox Christian understanding of the divine nature. Though it was initially expressed in the apologetical conflict with the Greeks, it soon came to be used to establish the full deity of the Son and the Holy Spirit and to defend the monotheistic credentials of orthodox trinitarianism. Gregory of Nyssa argues that the Son and the Holy Spirit could not be semi-divine, as some heretics insisted, because the DDS proves the indivisibility of the divine essence. Thus, wherever the divine essence is present it must be wholly present. As for the Trinity, the DDS was used to prove the indivisible singularity of the divine essence and thus refute the accusations of tri-theism. Lewis Ayres remarks, “[T]he deepest concern of pro-Nicene Trinitarian theology is shaping our attention to the union of the irreducible persons in the simple and unitary Godhead.” It is the DDS that ensures this is not a union of three gods.

Following the Cappadocian fathers, Augustine appeals to divine simplicity in his *De civitate Dei* to argue for the unchangeableness of each person of the Godhead: “It is for this reason, then, that the nature of the Trinity is called simple, because it has not anything which it can lose, and because it is not one thing and its contents another, as a cup and the liquor, or a body and its colour, or the air and the light or heat of it, or a mind and its wisdom. For none of these is what it has.” In *De

6. See the discussion on “Unity and Generality in God” in Stead, *Divine Substance*, 103–9.
he further elaborates on the DDS in his attempt to establish the uniqueness, independence, and singularity of the divine nature:

But it is impious to say that God subsists to and underlies his goodness, and that goodness is not his substance, or rather his being, nor is God his goodness, but it is in him as an underlying subject. So it is clear that God is improperly called substance, in order to signify being by a more usual word. He is called being truly and properly in such a way that perhaps only God ought to be called being . . . But in any case, whether he is called being, which he is called properly, or substance, which he is called improperly, either word is predicated with reference to self, not by way of relationship with reference to something else. So for God to be is the same as to subsist, and therefore if the Trinity is one being, it is also one substance.\textsuperscript{10}

This passage affirms the identity of God’s existence and essence and denies that God’s attributes are in any way separable from his essence. God simply is whatever is predicated of him and none of his essential attributes is really or conceptually separable from him. The denial that God is identified “with reference to something else” is surely calculated to express God’s absoluteness in contrast to those beings that have their existence and substance with reference to him. God is not correlative to any non-divine thing.

\textit{Medieval Witness}

This doctrine of the fathers and Augustine was later endorsed by Boethius and then by Anselm. Boethius uses the DDS to prove God’s immutability and independence:

But the Divine Substance is form without matter, and is therefore one, and is its own essence. But other things are not their own essences, for each thing has its being from the things of which it is composed, that is, from its parts. It is This \textit{and} That, \textit{i.e.}, it is its parts in conjunction; it is not This \textit{or} That taken apart. Earthly man, for instance, since he consists of soul and body, is body \textit{and} soul, not body \textit{or} soul, separately; therefore he is not

\textsuperscript{10} Augustine, \textit{The Trinity}, VII: 10. Augustine further affirms the identity of God’s existence and essence when he writes, “What is God’s knowledge is also his wisdom, and what is his wisdom is also his being or substance, because in the wonderful simplicity of that nature it is not one thing to be wise, another to be, but being wise is the same as being” (ibid., XV: 22). See also, Ayres, \textit{Augustine and the Trinity}, 208–11.